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Cumbria

How to get away from the crowds in the Lake District

Stephen McClarence

takes a trip into a quieter world on Britain's forgotten railway line

The train breezes down the Cumbrian coast, on one of Britain's most absorbing — and least known — rail journeys. The morning mists are lifting, the couple opposite are sharing their first Polos of the day and I'm studying a chart showing how many passengers use the two dozen stations along the line, which runs from Carlisle to Barrow-in-Furness.

Whitehaven, about halfway along, has 245,000 passengers a year. Maryport has

105,000. And Nethertown, a cluster of chalets and cottages, has 5,757. That's fewer than 20 people a day. So just who are they?

"Well," says Amanda McKeating, the affable guard, "there's an elderly chap and his wife who do their shopping every Friday. And there's another couple who go to a farmers' market every month; they get on with great big suitcases that they fill up with stuff. And there's a man who looks a bit like Father Christmas. And there are walkers..." The fells loom on the left, herons patrol the shore on the right, seals bob in the water... you can understand why McKeating says "I love my job".

The line covers the little-explored coastal rim beyond the Lake District. It's dotted with towns and villages that are practically pushed into the sea by the

mountains. Spending three days here feels like pioneering. It's not cosy; it's not Kendal Mint Cake. This is the North-West Frontier; Ultima Cumbria.

I'm doing it all on trains, topping and tailing the coastal part with two of Britain's great rail runs. From Leeds I take the Settle-Carlisle line, an everyday wonder that climbs steadily through a landscape that gets wilder with every passing mile. Bleak moorland stretches out and, just before Dent, England's highest station, we cross Ribbleshead Viaduct, so high that it's like flying. Ramblers down below raise their arms towards us, as though in worship. On closer inspection, they're taking photographs on digital cameras.

Carlisle, England's most northerly city, is an engaging place, full of pavement cafés and sturdy sandstone buildings with a strong hint of Scotland about them. I spend most of the afternoon in the award-winning Tullie House Museum. It covers an impressive range: Pre-Raphaelite portraits; a Roman gravestone of a woman holding a pet bird for her son to stroke; a 1959 copy of *Woman's Own*.

Next morning I take the first stretch of the coast line down to Whitehaven. A wind farm stretches across the horizon, its sails perfectly still, like a row of runes. I'm met by Trevor Lloyd, once in the motorbike

business, now running the wonderful

Lowther House "boutique B&B", which has antiques and luxury at every turn.

Lloyd is an ebullient ambassador for his home town. "I'm running a crusade here," he says. "I don't just offer accommodation; I make sure people go to the right places

and see the right things." He sketches me a walking tour of the centre of the town, once a more important port than Liverpool, now regenerating itself out of hard times and melancholy. And he waves me off: "If you're back by four or five, you can have tea and a bit of cake made by Cynthia of the WI."

His map guides me along street after street of stocky, brightly painted Georgian townhouses, to the Rum Story, which traces Whitehaven's rum trade and, un-

flinchingly, its darker side, the slave trade. A few stops down the line, past St Bees (the start of Alfred Wainwright's famous coast-to-coast walk) and Sellafield (no ornament to the landscape), is Ravenglass, whose big tourist draw is the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway. Its miniature steam engines, all pluming smoke and churning pistons, head up a pretty valley through birch woods and past people's conservatories: a pleasant jaunt in an open carriage. The



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couple in front photograph every passing cow and talk excitedly about the pencil museum in Keswick.

Ravenglass is basically one charming street of cottages overlooking a broad estuary. It's so calm, so quiet, that I fall asleep at 4pm at the smart Pennington Hotel and wake only just in time for dinner in its superb restaurant.

Next morning, I head home. There's one other passenger on the Ravenglass platform as the single-carriage train pulls in. "We feel a bit forgotten up here," she says. "We're praying for a Sainsbury's." The train passes request-stop stations where there's no one to request and carries on to Lancaster past the great silver sheen of Morecambe Bay.

The line back to Leeds, through rural North Yorkshire, is only a few rungs down from the Settle-Carlisle for its scenery, but the young man across the aisle spends the journey playing football on his computer and occasionally photographing the screen with his mobile phone. We're back in a different world from Ultima Cumbria.

tickets cost £70 (with concessions); £57 tickets give four days' travel in eight consecutive days. Tourist information: 01539 822222. golakes.co.uk



Cumbria's hidden corners

Muncaster Castle

A mile south of Ravenglass, this castle, above, has almost 80 acres of gardens dating from the 18th century. The World Owl Centre houses more than 200 birds and there's a daily "heron happy hour" when wild flocks are fed. Said to be one of Britain's most haunted castles. muncaster.co.uk

Ulverston

Home of the Laurel and Hardy Museum (Stan Laurel was born here), this market town, with its markets and cobbled streets, hosts regular food fairs and festivals. Add in a visit to Grange-over-Sands, a quiet, pleasant resort where time often seems to have stopped in 1967. golakes.co.uk

Ennerdale Water

Arguably the Lake District's wildest and most secluded lake. Six miles inland from Whitehaven, it rarely attracts crowds because you can't drive round it or park next to it. A great place to wander lonely as a cloud. wildennerdale.co.uk

Honister Slate Mine

England's last working slate mine, with 11 miles of tunnels, is set in stunning landscape. It runs underground tours and adventure climbing sessions. Also sells slate products – from bookends to wine bottle holders. honister.com



Steaming Ravensglass and Eskdale railway, Cumbria



Stay

Hallmark Hotel, Carlisle (01228 531951, www.hallmarkhotels.co.uk), has doubles from £69; Lowther House, Whitehaven (01946 63169, lowtherhouse-whitehaven.com), has B&B from £40 per person per night; Pennington Hotel, Ravenglass (0845 4506445, penningtonhotels.com), has B&B doubles from £72.

Getting there

North West Rail Rover tickets from Northern Rail (0845 0000125, northernrail.org) include all the network routes mentioned in this piece. Seven-day



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High and mighty The Smardale viaduct on the Settle to Carlisle line