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A Fun Whistle-Stop Tour

■ Plenty of 'Thomas'-type attractions are stationed around the Southland.

By BRENDA REES, Special To The Times

With a friendly smile and a charming toot-toot, Thomas the Tank Engine, the star of the popular 'Shining Time Station' TV series, charged into theaters Wednesday, making his feature-film debut in 'Thomas and the Magic Railroad' (from Destination Films).

What began as a series of children's books written by the Rev. Wilbert Awdry in the 1940s and then transformed into a British TV show in 1984 has become a modern-day classic children's character, joining the ranks of Big Bird, Snoopy and Mickey Mouse. Airing in more than 120 countries, the program has introduced 'old-fashioned' themes such as good manners and friendship to an audience of high-tech-minded kids.

Though kids can visit Thomas and his friends on the Island of Sodor only via film, television and video, there are plenty of train-related activities around the Southland to entertain families of all ages.

Kids can create their own adventures for Thomas at [Travel Town](#) in Griffith Park, where, on the first Sunday of every month, volunteers arrange a 400-piece wooden Thomas train set for a free afternoon play date. Held outside the Travel Town gift store--which carries an extensive collection of Thomas merchandise -- the play-day parties "draw steady and loyal crowds," says Greg Gneir, a Travel Town volunteer.

Travel Town also offers kids a close-up look at trains, large and small. Plan to stop by the 2,000-square-foot model-train layout, hop aboard the miniature train that circles the area and wander past the museum's locomotives, cabooses, freight and passenger cars. Every month volunteers offer caboose rides and tours of one of the passenger cars currently being restored. In addition, train-loving boys and girls can celebrate birthdays inside either a Southern Pacific or a Pennsylvania Dining Car, Travel Town's official "party cars."

Griffith Park, Land of Trains

Train rides seem to permeate Griffith Park. At the Los Feliz entrance to the park, the [Griffith Park and Southern Railroad](#) whisks passengers over a bridge, through a tunnel, past a stable of animals and through an old western town. Elsewhere, volunteers from the Los Angeles Live Steamers conduct train rides every Sunday at their permanent location near Travel Town (5202 Zoo Drive, Los Angeles, [323] 669-9729).

Other small-scaled train rides are scattered around the Southland. The Southern California Live Steamers offer trips at [Charles Wilson Park](#) ([310] 631-3845) the first Sunday of every month. Depending on which volunteers show up, kids can ride on small electric, steam or diesel-powered trains.

The Orange County Model Engineers conduct the Mackerel Flats and Goat Hill Junction Railroad out of Fairview Park (2501 Placentia Ave., Costa Mesa, [949] 548-7246) the third weekend of every month. Situated on 45 acres of parkland, the railroad is one of the largest layouts of its kind in Southern California.

Similarly, the Irvine Park Railroad (1 Irvine Park Road, Orange, [714] 997-3968) loops around picturesque scenes of waterfalls, lakes and sycamores in the oldest regional park in California. It operates daily. Picnickers and park visitors often wave as the train clickety-clacks its way to and from the Orange County Zoo.

If your little ones want a more authentic big train experience, head to Union Station in downtown Los



Thomas the Tank Engine makes an appearance at Adventure City
Kevin P. Casey/L.A. Times

Angeles and hop aboard the Metrolink or the subway. Better yet, book the family on a train trip to either Santa Barbara or San Diego via Amtrak ([800] USA-RAIL) and give up the car for a weekend.

Trains are a big part of SoCal's theme parks. Walt Disney, who had scale models and a track in the backyard of his Holmby Hills home, was adamant that a train would grace the entrance of Disneyland. Today, the [Disneyland Railroad](#) treats guests to dioramas of the Grand Canyon and a dinosaur world that are only seen from the train.

Likewise, the Ghost Town and Calico Railroad at [Knott's Berry Farm](#) features the only year-round operating, narrow-gauge train that is more than 100 years old.

For longer locomotive excursions, catch a ride on one of the Fillmore & Westerns' (351 Santa Clara Ave., Fillmore, [805] 524-2546) many family-themed train rides that includes a 'Spaghetti Western Dinner' train. Riders are treated to a 2½-hour trip between Fillmore and Santa Paula, where, aboard vintage passenger cars, they chug past orange, lemon and avocado groves.

Two area museums keep the history of trains alive. The Lomita Railroad Museum (24300 Narbonne Ave., Lomita, [310] 326-6255) allows visitors to climb aboard a full-size steam locomotive and a caboose as well as investigate the inside of a station agent's office. Train bells and whistles echo throughout the tiny museum and courtyard.

In addition, the [Orange Empire Railway Museum](#) is the largest museum in the West to preserve rail transportation history. Guests can wander the expansive outdoor museum, ride a loop on an electric streetcar and catch a short train trip on the Grizzly Flats Railroad.

At the end of the day, kids will no doubt want to bring some trains home. While toy stores carry plenty of Thomas the Tank Engine merchandise, a visit to one of the local model train stores could set the tone for future train-mania in young hearts. Brian Brooks, co-owner of the Whistle Stop (2490 East Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, [626] 796-7791) says Thomas is "a consistent and popular item. We've had it for almost nine years now. We have set up a play area with Thomas pieces that parents use as a baby-sitter while they go hunting for their hobby."

Other popular model-train stores: Allied Model Trains (4411 Sepulveda Blvd., Culver City, [310] 313-9353), the Train Shack (1030 Hollywood Way, Burbank, [818] 842-3330) and Morgan's Big Trains (7390 Center Ave., Huntington Beach, [714] 892-3688).

Finally, all this railroading is apt to make one hungry. Drop by one of Carney's locations (8351 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, [323] 654-8300 and 12601 Ventura Blvd., Studio City, [818] 761-8300) to feast on burgers, hot dogs and salads in a passenger car complete with wheels and track. The West Hollywood location is housed in a 1920s Union Pacific dining car, while the Studio City restaurant is an old Amtrak car.