

## 13 more passenger cars will be sent to Rail GD

*It's the "largest capital investment" made by Rocky Mountaineer*

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: - If everything goes as planned, 13 more Goldleaf passenger cars owned by Rocky Mountaineer will be sent to Rail GD's shop in New Richmond for a complete interior renovation. It will represent a total of 16 cars between November 2013 and the spring of 2018.

Rocky Mountaineer Vice-President Gord Miller says that the expansion of the tourist train ridership and the need to provide top quality service to the company's customers mean an acceleration of the Goldleaf cars' upgrading.

"The cars have to be all done by 2018. The demand is so high that we need these cars. We will have three cars at Rail GD by the end of 2015, five in 2016 and five more in 2017, in order to have them ready for the spring of 2018," explains Mr. Miller, who was in New Richmond on January 12 to check on the progress of the upgrading operation on cars 9505 and 9509.

The upgrading is thorough. "The cars are being taken back to the steel frame. Heating, ventilation, electrical and plumbing systems have all been reengineered, new seats custom made for us in the Czech Republic will be installed, featuring heat, lumbar support and personal electrical and USB adapters," adds Mr. Miller.

Rocky Mountaineer is active from April to October with Vancouver, Jasper, Banff, Calgary and, since 2013, Seattle as some of its main destinations.

The value of the contract has not been disclosed by either of the parties. Gord Miller simply says that it represents "the largest capital investment we've made as a company (...) Rocky Mountaineer is the largest tourist train operating in the world."

In 2015 the company will celebrate its 25th anniversary.



Photo: Gilles Gagné

Rail GD Director-General Joey Cyr, Christopher Owen, consultant of Canarail, Rocky Mountaineer Vice-President, Gord Miller and Rail GD President Gilles Babin.

The two cars presently in New Richmond will be part of the celebration Rocky Mountaineer plans to highlight that milestone. When Gord Miller says that the company is growing, he's not exaggerating.

"It took us from 1990 to 2008 to attract one million passengers, and only six more years to attract another million passengers," he says.

With the support of its consultant, Montreal-based Canarail, Rocky Mountaineer searched all through North America before finding a shop suitable for the kind of work needed on the Goldleaf fleet. Rail GD was it.

"They were very flexible, and driven by quality. They were as flexible as we want throughout the process. It (New Richmond) is the farthest we have ever sent our cars, at 6,000 kms. We have our own people on site. The distance is a cost factor but at the end of the day, we want the best product for our train," explains Mr. Miller, adding that the company wouldn't have been better served by "a closer shop unable to provide the same quality."

He says that Rocky Mountaineer consulted its riders

over the course of the 2014 season in order to inquire what could be improved on the car upgraded a year ago by Rail GD, "a real prototype", he insists.

"The feedback from our guests is very important. We have a very strong program in that regard. We ask them what they would like to see. Often, they mention simple things," he says, pointing out air conditioning and lighting adjustments, seat comfort and so on.

"We make small changes that will improve car maintenance, or insulation. The idea is adding functionality. The overall look won't change much (compared to the prototype of 2013)", states Christopher Owen, a mechanical engineer working for Canarail supervising the work of Rail GD's team.

The role of Rocky Mountaineer staff during the operating season is also put to good use.

"We involve our staff. We often say: 'That is good. Let's make it great.' We spend a lot of time reviewing the service, maintenance, and efficiency. There is little down time during the season between the arrival of the train and its departure for the next trip. It

is approximately six hours. There is a lot of activity in a very small amount of time. With our current demand, cars don't have time to sit. We want it right, now, as we don't have time to fix it during the season," Gord Miller and Christopher Owen both explained.

The 72 seats of the upper deck are made in the Czech Republic, and are all adjustable electrically. They were made following suggestions from Rocky Moun-

taineer. "From a simple bare seat, we wanted a double seat. We are the only ones who have them today but other train operators are looking at them," stated Gord Miller.

The Rocky Mountaineer trains use five different routes and offer 45 different packages for its riders. About 30% of their riders come from Australia, and the Americans also buy about 30% of the seats, while United Kingdom residents make up about 20% of the clientele. Canadians and people from elsewhere make the last 20% of ridership.

"Canada is the smallest of our big markets. A lot of people choose to use us to see the Rockies instead of Via Rail or driving their car," says Gord Miller.

"In-market sales we have teams in five countries, Germany, UK, Australia, US and Canada. Our head office is in Vancouver, with ranks of more than 100 people. In season, we employ more than 500," he points out

Rocky Mountaineer is privately owned, in the sense that its shares cannot be bought on the stock market. The holding is controlled by Vancouver-based businessman Peter Armstrong.