What Is the Tehachapi Loop?

This wording from the plaque at the site tells it all:

NATIONAL HISTORIC CIVIL ENGINEERING LANDMARK
TEHACHAPI PASS RAILROAD LINE
Constructed 1874 - 1876
Commemorated October 1998

In front of you is the world famous Tehachapi Loop which is about halfway upgrade to the Tehachapi Pass. This steep line averages 2.2% in gradient in its 28 miles of length. This feat of civil engineering genius was the crowning achievement of civil engineer William Hood of the Southern Pacific Railway Company. It is one of the seven wonders of the railroad world.

The Tehachapi Pass Railroad Line was cut through solid and decomposed granite by up to 3000 Chinese laborers from Canton China. They used picks, shovels, horse drawn carts and blasting powder. This line, which climbs out of the San Joaquin Valley and through the Tehachapi Mountains had 18 tunnels, 10 bridges and numerous water towers for the old steam locomotives. It was completed in less than 2 years time under the leadership of civil engineer J. B. Harris, Chief of Construction, a remarkable feat.

This line was part of the last and final link of the first railroad line connecting San Francisco to Los Angeles. It was a primary factor in the early growth of the City of Los Angeles and the State of California.

This single track line, essentially unchanged, is still in constant use today, 122 years after its completion. It passes an average of 36 freight trains each day. This attests to the superior job of both engineering and construction done by the two civil engineers and the Chinese laborers. This plaque is dedicated to them.

History & Heritage Committee
Los Angeles Section and Southern San Joaquin Branch
American Society of Civil Engineers

Find the Tehachapi Loop at No. 8 on the inside map.
1) From Bakersfield, take Edison Highway east. Watch for trains on your left as Edison Highway parallels the tracks for many miles. Leaving Bakersfield, you will pass through vineyards and citrus groves.

2) At Tower Line Road, Edison Highway becomes Bena Road. The tracks will follow Bena Road for several more miles, then they will take differing routes and the grade begins to increase.

3) Turn left at Caliente-Bodfish Road. As you climb, watch for a glimpse of a tunnel and tracks on your right.

4) Soon you will see tracks on your left as both they and you near the town of Caliente. At the “T” Intersection you will see you are in the middle of a horseshoe of train tracks. The tracks on your left are headed back to Bakersfield. They loop around to the overcrossing immediately to your right. You might want to turn left and drive a few yards to park at the Post Office for a better view. Or you can turn right on Bealville Road.

5) In about a mile, the tracks will again cross the road at the site of the former town of Bealville (noted by a historical marker on the south side of the tracks). While it has taken you only one mile, it takes a train five to climb the grade. Continue about one more mile to Route 58.

6) To continue your trek to the Tehachapi Loop, you will need to turn left. However, if the traffic on Route 58 does not allow you to turn left, simply turn right for a mile and a half to the turn off to Arvin (Route 223) then double back.

7) Exit at Keene, exit 139. Turn left, pass under the freeway, and then turn right at Woodford-Tehachapi Road. Soon you again will be driving next to the tracks as they make their way to the Loop.

DID YOU KNOW?
There are two main rail lines in Central California, the Union Pacific (formerly Southern Pacific) and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe. Both lines meet in east Bakersfield and share trackage over the Sierra. Because of the steep grade over the mountains, watch for several engines in front of the train, a few in the middle, and more at the back.

8) Welcome to the Tehachapi Loop! Look for the set of markers on your left, then get out to watch the long train you saw in the valley make its way up the mountainside and cross over itself on its way further east.

HISTORICAL TRIVIA
This driving tour route – Edison Highway, Bena Road, Caliente-Bodfish Road, Bealville Road, and Woodford-Tehachapi Road – used to be part of U.S. 466 that linked Morro Bay, California with U.S. 66 in Kingman, Arizona.

MILEAGE:
Between 2 and 3: 10 miles / 16km
Between 3 and 4: 4.6 miles / 7.4 km
Between 4 and 5: 1.3 miles / 2.1 km
Between 5 and 6: 0.7 mile / 1.1 km
Between 6 and 7: 5 miles / 8 km
Between 7 and 8: 2.5 miles / 4 km

Which way back?
Consider taking another route on your return to Bakersfield for more to explore!
See back panel for details.