

Riding the Rails

A March Odyssey

There are train trips I've wanted to take since I found out trains had names (how cool!) and before Arlo Guthrie warned us about the disappearing railroad blues.

One is the Empire Builder, the great northwestern route that crosses half the continent from Chicago to Seattle and is the legacy of James J. Hill. Another is the Coast Starlight that runs up from L.A. to Seattle, linking the magnificent coast line of California to the deep evergreen rain forests of the Cascades.

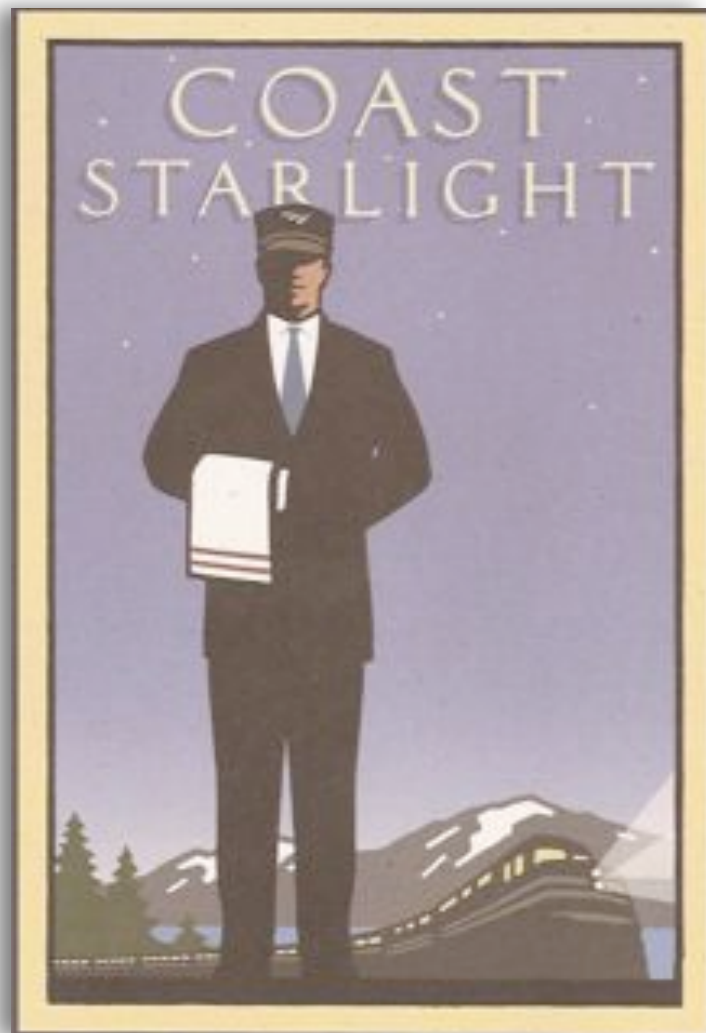
Last August our son and his wife moved to Seattle. Visiting them this March seemed like a good idea. Taking the train seemed even better. Combining a northern trip with a little sunshine in the south became irresistible. We would start in San Diego, catch the Surfliner up to LA, the Coast Starlight to Seattle and then take the Empire Builder back home to Minneapolis. I booked the tickets in January.

We flew to San Diego on US Airways. The flight wasn't bad but it was annoying: check-in procedures that include having to pay extra to check a bag; the usual security hassles; a delay caused by bad crew scheduling logistics; the intense, tension-filled blast of take-off; cloud cover obscuring any view; air turbulence all the way; virtually no on-board service; a lay-over in Phoenix; the wait for baggage at the airport.

These are becoming so routine that air travelers hardly think them worth noting. Train travelers do, however. As one put it, "From check-in to check-out, riding the train is just so much easier. It's nice to be treated like a customer instead of a criminal."

Commuting in Style

San Diego's Union Station is just waking up at 5:30AM. The lights are on, illuminating the big Santa Fe sign on top and the palms swaying in a pre-sunrise breeze out on the plaza. Inside it's nearly empty -- a security guard, a couple homeless



Just the facts

Surfliner

Departs San Diego 6:10AM. Arrives Los Angeles 8:55AM. Business class seats. Complimentary coffee, juice, rolls.

Coast Starlight

Departs L.A. 10:15 AM. Arrives Seattle 8:45 PM following evening. Roomette -- two facing seats around a window; convert to upper and lower bunk; Meals included; First class status. Access to parlor observation car.

Empire Builder

Departs Seattle 4:45 PM. Arrives St. Paul 7:05 AM following day. Roomette -- two facing seats around a window; convert to upper and lower bunk; Meals included; First class status.

Cost for two: \$918. Tickets booked two months in advance.



The Pacific Surfliner awaits us in the pre-dawn darkness at San Diego. Below, tile work in the station.

folks sleeping on the oak benches. The ticket windows are just being staffed. The old Santa-Fe mosaics have been carefully preserved. I find a ticketing machine that works like an ATM and take out the confirmation

Amtrak e-mailed me two months ago. Directions are clear and simple. I slide the bar code under the reader and -- presto -- the machine spits out six tickets. We're set for the whole trip. It takes about 90 seconds.



A friendly agent tells me there is a Starbucks across the street -- bliss! By the time I return

with wake-up jolts of java, people have begun to drift in. The pace quickens and we line up by a gate. Business class seats are guaranteed but not reserved. Tip: find out which way the train is going (it's not always apparent) and find a seat facing forward on the left side. Coffee, juice and pastries are complimentary.

We manhandle our bags up steep stairs, stow them in a baggage rack, get coffee and snacks and settle in. At 6:10 -- right on time -- the world begins to move slowly past. The rail journey has begun!

A conductor comes by and takes tickets, advising everyone to find an appropriate seat since the train will fill up soon. We may be riding the Surfliner for pleasure, but this is a commuter train. At each stop more and more business people come aboard, grab coffee, rummage through the pastries and hook themselves up to ear phones and laptops.

Outside the sun comes up and lights up the scenery: we ride through Solana Beach, San Clemente, San Juan Capistrano. Clumps of surfers are out on the waves. At times the tracks are right above the beach -- you can look down and see the waves breaking.

Luxury in L.A.

Union Station in Los Angeles is a marvel! It's big and spacious, easy to navigate and elegant. Ceilings are sky high, constructed of California hard woods and painted in an art deco style. The floors are done in dazzling designs of mixed Italian marble. There's a restored Traxx Cafe -- the last Harvey House restaurant built by the railroads to bring both food and young women to western travelers (see Judy Garland in "The Harvey Girls").

Our roomette booking aboard the Coast Starlight gets us first class privileges, which begin with a special waiting "lounge" in one corner of the station. Comfy chairs, information about the train, more complimentary coffee, juice, rolls, etc.

We've arrived right on time and enjoy the station for about 45 minutes. At precisely 9:45 a conductor gathers us all with our baggage and leads us to the train.

It's a little parade as we troupe through the station in single file. We find out car numbers and load our bags aboard. It's easy this time -- storage racks are on the first floor. A steward shows us to our roomette -- two facing seats, a big window and just barely room for small carry-on bags. As we settle in the steward arrives with splits of chilled champagne. At 10:15 that slow miracle begins again -- with hardly a jolt the train begins to move and we're underway. Life is good!



The Coast Starlight in Santa Barbera sunshine. The station sits next to the world's biggest fig tree.



Italian marble floor work in L.A.'s Union Station.



The Crown Jewel

Amtrak's Coast Starlight has a reputation as the classiest train in the system, and one of the most beautiful rides anywhere. The latter is deserved. The former -- well it depends on what you expect. If you rode trains thirty or forty years ago, this is disappointing. The rooms are cramped and small, the service is haphazard, the food is mediocre or worse. The tracks at times are bumpy. Even the special parlor car seemed a bit shabby, though its comfortable seats and observation windows were very nice. But the views -- oh yes!



Surf breaking out the window near Santa Barbera.

After Santa Barbera the train runs right by the ocean for hundreds of miles. On the left are rocky points, breaking waves and hidden beaches -- dozens of them. On the right hills dressed in that impossible California green roll down to the sea. Near Vandenberg Air Force Base (which is also an ecologically protected area) the ground cover is splashed with color -- as if God was trying to become an Impressionist. You don't want to blink for fear of missing another stunning view.

Dinner in the diner? Well, the wine was chilled and reasonably priced. The food was all right, just not up

But then you peak out the curtain -- and there's Mt. Shasta catching the sunrise! A most impressive mountain at any time. Gorgeous in the early morning light and they say it's even more impressive coming south when you can see it in the moonlight.

After breakfast the train climbs up into the Cascades which provide more hours of glorious views -- unbelievably huge trees in every imaginable shade of green rise above you while mountains rise and then fall into steep gorges below you. Again you don't want to snooze and miss any of the sights.



Mt. Shasta in the early morning light.

to the level you'd expect if all you had was the menu and decades-old memories. We eat in both the special parlor car and the main dining car. Best meal of the trip is the steak -- which has been a long-time signature dish. After that things can get a bit dicey.

When we return to our roomette the chairs have been converted to bunk beds, complete with fresh sheets, and light blankets. Somehow this seemed cooler when I was younger. In the cramped space it takes a gymnast's agility to maneuver. Late night bathroom trips with the cars bumping and swaying unexpectedly can be an adventure.

The Coast Starlight has been widely criticized for late arrivals. The story is that Amtrak has to lease tracks from freight lines and those trains have priority. Even now there aren't many options for crossing the Cascades and when something goes wrong, delays happen. We passed near Frazier where a huge landslide last year wiped out the tracks high on the mountain and again, a thousand feet lower where the tracks came back out of an S-curve. Passengers had to be bused from Sacramento to Eugene. Freight traffic was re-routed through Salt Lake City.

We wait a few times to let other trains pass, but we make up time in other stretches. By the time we reach Tacoma we are right on time. We pull into Seattle two minutes early.

Back Home by Empire Builder

Seattle's Union Station will look good someday. It's being renovated and the suspended tile ceilings hide beautiful plaster work. The station is laughably convenient to downtown, tourist areas and stadiums and it's easy to access.

The boarding process for the Empire Builder is a little less formal than the Coast Starlight, but just as pleasant. We leave right on time -- 4:45 PM -- and again, as the train moves out quietly past early spring cherry and apple blossoms, the steward appears with glasses and chilled champagne splits.

For the first hour or so the train runs along Puget Sound and the views out the left side are very nice. On the right side big, expensive houses sit above the tracks sharing the view.

At Everett the route turns east and begins to climb into the Cascades just about the first call for dinner. The views here become increasingly spectacular, with "in your face" mountains that look like Alps decked out in thick evergreen forests and fresh snowfall. We watch as long as the light holds.

The Empire Builder is a double route, beginning in both Seattle and Portland. They link up around Spokane which increases the size of the train and adds an observation car. None of this matters to us as we have already become re-acquainted with our cramped bunks.



Rivers, forests, Rockies and a fresh snowfall in Glacier National Park.

Around daybreak we pull into Whitefish, MT. tucked high up in the Rockies. It's lightly, and the cold air is pure and fresh -- perfect complement to a hot, pre-breakfast cup of coffee.

Then things get really nice. The train runs across Glacier National Park, one of the loveliest in the country. The light snow alternates with splashes of sunshine as we cruise past mountains, rivers, deep forests and steep drop-offs. It's every bit as stunning as the California coast and the Cascades and again you work to keep your eyes open so as not to miss anything -- at one point a moose comes barreling down the hill toward the train.

Once you leave Glacier, everything gets pretty flat pretty fast. It's not that the scenery is bland or uninteresting, just that compared to the mountains it's not as visually eventful. And it's

a long, long way across the northern plains. Plenty of time to read, snooze and chat with fellow passengers. We do a bit of all three until it's time to turn in for our second and final night sleeping aboard.



A pre-sunrise stop for fresh air at Whitefish, Montana.

There are flooding worries around the Minnesota border, but they turn out to be not so bad. I wake up in time to see the Fargo station, lights blazing in the North Dakota night, then drift off again. Time seems to accelerate as we home in on home and the landmarks become more and more familiar. I take a shower (another activity requiring a certain amount of agility) and we are all packed up as we roll into St. Paul's Amtrak yards.

We are right on time until a minor switching problem holds us up for a few minutes. We stepp off the train about 8 minutes late -- not bad for crossing more than half the continent.

A big breakfast awaited us... and a couple days of re-settling into routines and getting used to the scenery not moving past you.



Bottom Line

It felt good to check these train trips off my to-do-before-I-die list. Spending time in San Diego -- sightseeing, soaking up sunshine, seeing friends -- was a pleasant break from Minnesota's interminable March weather. Visiting our son and his wife in Seattle, and being guided around the area was delightful. All three trains -- from San Diego to L.A. to Seattle and back to St. Paul -- offered great views. And all arrived on time!

That said, I'm not sure I'd do it again. As my companion, the lovely Jean, put it, spending 80 hours knee to knee and nose to nose gets to be a bit of a strain, even with beautiful views going by.

Train travel is much, much more pleasant than flying, but you never forget it's still public transportation. It may be a moving destination in itself for us, but it's a way to get to the next stop for most people. The rocking movement and rough track takes some getting used to and space is tight -- especially for sleeping, especially for aging bodies not as agile as they used to be.

It was a very fine trip and a good adventure (and an excellent bargain!). But this is not the luxurious train travel of our childhood. Nor is it without challenges in our dotage.

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April 2009