

Katrina

It came home to us when we were ghosting into New Orleans in the gloom of late evening. Clunk-clunk... clunk-clunk... clunk-clunk... the wheels slowly rolled over the track joints, beating out a funeral dirge.

We stare out at block after block of one-story, single-family homes, and there's nary a light on. The darkened windows mutely stare back at us. The street lights are on, but nobody's home. Worse yet, nobody's coming home. Occasionally, you see one house with a light on, but the rest of the neighborhood is dark.

Southern Crescent Sleeping Car Attendant John Turk, a native of the "Crescent City" is an exception. Yes, just before the August 29, 2005 disaster that was Katrina, he and his family evacuated. But unlike so many others, he came back home. He wanted his daughter to graduate from her Catholic High School, not some public school in Houston or Atlanta. The toll on his family has been horrendous.

He puts down his well-thumbed Bible and stares out the window of his small compartment as we roll past the ghost neighborhoods. He wearily explains that his daughter has suffered emotional problems ever since the storm. His mother wound up in Ohio. "She cried every day for months," he says. He remembers breaking the news to her that she probably would never return to her home in New Orleans. She died just before Christmas, "primarily of a broken heart."

Down on stinky, sleazy Bourbon Street in the largely unaffected French Quarter, Tulane and LSU students are partying harder than ever, cruising the strip clubs and bars with an almost frantic abandon. One block over, the upscale antique stores on Rue Royal beckon fervently. The smiling employees at the classic Hotel Monteleone trip all over themselves trying to please you. Everywhere you see the bumper sticker, Renew Orleans. And it IS happening, at least here in the Quarter, Downtown and the Garden District; New Orleans is coming back to life.

But out in the neighborhoods it's still dark. John Turk sighs sadly, his massive shoulders slumped. "The essence, the very soul of New Orleans just washed away."



Photos by Phil Audibert

Clockwise, from top right: The New Orleans skyline, with the French Quarter in the foreground, the fabled and still largely abandoned Ninth Ward on the horizon (H-shaped railroad bridge), and the Mississippi River to the right. The river, here is 300 feet deep and its surface is 11 feet above street level! Right, sunset over Lake Pontchartrain. Below, Katrina damage is still very much apparent outside the French Quarter, Garden District and Downtown areas of New Orleans. Above, Sleeping Car Attendant, John Turk has 29 years experience on the railroad. He has served on just about every major passenger rail line in the United States, but has come back to his first love, the Crescent. Unlike many other Katrina evacuees, Turk and his family decided to return to his hometown of New Orleans.



The rant: Ain't Gonna Fly No More

I guess it all started when we bought the new RV. My wife, Susie, said she'd support the move if I would promise her that she would never have to fly anywhere ever again. "Sure," I said; I wanted that mini motor home so bad I'd promise her anything.

That was late last summer. And even though we all know vows like that, along with half-cocked New Year's Eve resolutions exist only to be broken, we've held true to the promise...so far. Oh sure, maybe we'll fly again, but not anytime soon.

We both hate flying for different reasons. She worries we're going to fall out of the sky, or that one of the dozens of redundant fail-safe systems will indeed fail, or that we'll blow a hydraulic line just as we're landing, or that an Al Qaeda surface-to-air missile will blow us up in mid-air, or lightning will bore a hole through the wing at



Photos by Phil Audibert

Top photo, the Crescent comes through Orange twice daily: around 8 a.m. northbound and at about 8:30 p.m. southbound. But, it doesn't stop. Above, Charlottesville is a scheduled stop for two daily passenger trains: the Cardinal which travels from Washington to Chicago and the Crescent which travels from New York to New Orleans.

Katrina and the Crescent

30,000 feet...the list of possible flying disasters goes on ad infinitum.

She joins me when I say, I hate the hassle. I can count on one hand the number of flights I've taken over the past decade where nothing went wrong: where I didn't have to wait hours in line to be checked onto a 747 by two harried, overworked employees, where there wasn't a "mechanical problem," that necessitated flying a mechanic in from another city, where thunderclouds, or fog, or snow or ice haven't gathered to ground us just before we took off, where we didn't take off so late that we missed our connection, where any shred of dignity I had left wasn't stripped away by a zealous security officer, where I haven't been seated next to a fat slob who fell asleep on my shoulder and drooled on my sleeve to the strains of the mewling and puking three-year-old across the aisle, where...well you get the idea; the list of possible flying hassles also goes on ad infinitum.

Gleefully, I've been collecting airline travel horror stories and relating them back to anyone who will listen; like the one about the plane that was diverted to Austin because of storms in Houston over the holiday season. This one sparked an airline passenger's Bill of Rights movement in Congress.

The airline would not allow the aircraft to pull up to the gate to let the folks off to stretch their legs. No it was much better to coop them up for ten hours...TEN HOURS, with no food or water. The toilets overflowed. Folks, let me tell you something. If I had been on board that flight I would have opened the door, deployed the inflatable slide, offered my wrists to the Air Marshal to handcuff as long as he would frog march my terrorist butt OFF OF THAT PLANE!

Remember the days when flying was glamorous? When you dressed up in a coat and tie to fly? When the flight attendants, then called stewardesses, were attractive, admired and helpful? When they genuinely loved their job?

Gone. Gone for good. The American flying public is only interested in cheap fares. They'll put up with cramped seats, carry-on fast food, lost luggage, blizzards, and long winding security lines just as long as it's cheap.

Well not these two puppies. From now on we're either going to not go, drive, or...take the train.



The Crescent, America's Back Yard

I guess it all started when we took the train to a wedding in Atlanta in 1979 so that Susie could introduce this young fellow she was dating to the rest of her family, including a red-headed niece who was sitting in a high chair.

Here it is, 28 years later and this same favorite niece is marrying a fine fellow from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The ceremony and reception will be in a classic, old-fashioned French Quarter Hotel in New Orleans. Flying is out of the question (reread adjacent rant). We could drive it in two long, long days (shudder). Or...we could take the train.

Welcome to Amtrak's Crescent (used to be the Southern Crescent), a train that runs daily from New York City in a giant crescent-shaped arc

through the Atlantic and Gulf Coast states to New Orleans, the Crescent City. It goes through such urban hubs as Philadelphia, Washington, Charlotte, Atlanta, and Birmingham. It also goes through the Faulkneresque towns of Tallapoosa, Georgia; Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Picayune, Mississippi; and Slidell, Louisiana. Pronounce that SLAH-DELL, LOOOO-zee-anna.

Twice daily, northbound at about 7:50 a.m. and southbound at about 8:30 p.m., it rolls through the town of Orange. On board the train is a "Route Guide" that explains historical and geographical points of interest along the way. Here's what it says about us:

Rapidan River: The Rapidan River is located near the sites of several Civil War battles, including Cedar Mountain and Port Republic (Huh? That's in the valley, no where near the Rapidan River!) in 1862 and the Wilderness in 1864. As the train passes through farmland and rolling country with dogwoods and apple trees it enters the country known well by James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. Near Orange you'll pass the James Madison *Law Office* Museum before gliding through town. (italics mine...but where did they get THAT from???) Further south, you'll pass the beautiful little Montpelier Station for James Madison's estate of the same name..."

Despite the historical inaccuracies, this was a heckuva trip. We caught the train in Charlottesville (it does not stop in Orange anymore...used to years ago) and rode it 1,040 miles over 23 hours to New Orleans. We sprang for a "deluxe bedroom," which buys you your own private compartment with a sofa that converts to a single bunk, a fold-down upper bunk, a folding easy chair, a cramped but private combo toilet/shower stall, and a sink with a lighted mirror.

It sure beat four hours sitting with your knees jammed into the seat in front of you, having your personal space violated by 150 brand new best friends, and having to squeeze past the drink cart to wait in line to use the bathroom.

And the meals were included! They were not what you'd call gourmet, but they sure beat the stuffing out of that excuse for a snack that you now have to buy on board an airplane. Three full meals, with a real multiple choice menu, served on a real table with real silverware, not plastic, and real cloth napkins...and an almost real table cloth and almost real looking plastic flowers.



Photo by Phil Audibert
Loading luggage in Birmingham.

And you're sitting there, a complete stranger is seated across from you but, this is important, he DOES NOT CROSS that invisible barrier that violates your personal space. And as America's back yard flies by your window like a tapestry on rollers, you can't help but engage in pleasant conversation. And as you enjoy the company of your new acquaintance and the flavor and texture of your southwestern omelet, pork sausage, croissant and hash browns; as you exchange good-natured barbs with the wait staff, it suddenly dawns on you that THIS IS THE WAY TO TRAVEL!

The journey is made infinitely more pleasant by the attendants. On the way down we had the young and pleasant Rashid Davis; on the way home the

incomparable John Turk. Almost exclusively folks of color, these service providers jealously guard a tradition of working on the railroad that goes back generations.

Take John Turk for example. With his giant girth and shaved head, he looks like he could be a

John and the other attendants on this train start their shift in New York at 2:15 p.m. and end it in New York four days later at 2:02 p.m. They travel the 1,377-mile route twice, once southbound and once northbound, to and from New Orleans. Then they have five days off, before they do it all over again.

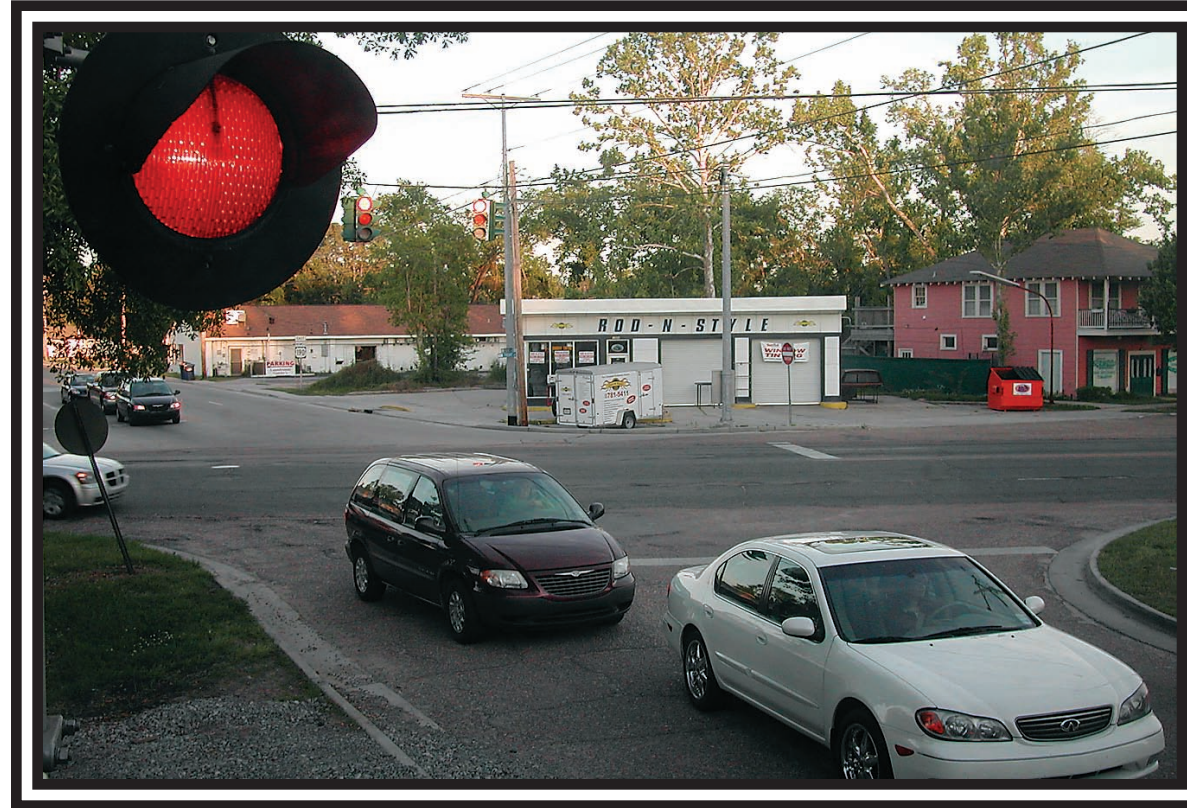


Photo by Phil Audibert
Somewhere in Mississippi...In many towns in the deep South, Main Street parallels the railroad tracks.

wrestler in Istanbul. But a nicer and more helpful man you will never meet. He's been working the rails now for 29 years. He remembers when the Crescent wrecked near Shipman, Virginia Dec. 3, 1978; knew the cook who was crushed to death by his wood stove.

John started out on the Crescent, then moved to the City of New Orleans which runs right up the Mississippi to Chicago, then served for years on the Chicago to Oakland run before coming home to the Crescent. He remembers taking care of some French passengers as they were rolling through the mesas and buttes of Utah. "France can fit inside the state of Georgia," he says soberly. "I learned how big this country is by their reaction."

Recently, he just learned that his grandfather worked for the old Louisville and Nashville Railroad. It calls to mind the lyrics of a classic folk song, "The City of New Orleans," by Steve Goodman.

*And the sons of Pullman porters,
And the sons of engineers,
Ride their father's magic carpet made of steel,
Mothers with their babes asleep
Rocking to the gentle beat,
The rhythm of the rails is all they feel*
- "The City of New Orleans" by Steve Goodman

train is just about the most comfortable way to do it. An attendant in the hallway cautions, "You can go forward or you can go back, just don't turn right or left." Hmmmm...there's a lesson here somewhere. If I walk forward on a speeding train am I speeding up time? One thing I know for sure. If I bolt to the right or left, I'll make time stand still...like forever...at least for me.

Every now and then we roll over or under an Interstate, and I thank the Lord that we're not driving; the engineer is. The automobiles can't keep pace with us; their drivers and passengers have to deal with maps and directions and fuel and meals and pit stops, not to mention road rage, traffic jams, and construction delays. None of that concerns us. Now and then we cross a bridge or go through a tunnel and we appreciate the mix of sweat and ingenuity that made that crossing so easy. We bring plenty of reading material, but find ourselves just staring out the window.

And what we're seeing is America's backyard, be it junk cars, hunting dogs on chains or neatly manicured lawns and quarter horses grazing contentedly. Like voyeurs, we look at our nation's laundry, both dirty and clean. And from what we see on the outside, we jump to conclusions about things on the inside. Nice back yard? Things must be going okay inside that household. Trashy back yard? Hmmmm.

*Passing trains that have no name
And the freight yards full of old black men
And the graveyards of the rusted automobiles*
- "The City of New Orleans" by Steve Goodman

The railroad is also America's Main Street. Railroad Avenue in Orange was the happening place during the hey day of the Iron Horse. It still is in Tallapoosa, Georgia. We see cryptic business signs like Main Street Collision (not a body shop, a clothing store), Little House of Flowers (not horrors, we hope), Million Dollar Engagement Ring Sale (no comment), Lsenhower's Hair (Eisenhower was bald).

Down through Georgia we go, with its red clay soil and kudzu. Every embankment, every tree, telephone pole, and bridge is covered with this Japanese broadleaf vine that can grow as much as 32 inches a day. At this time of year (early April), it is all brown and dead looking, but just you wait.

Here we are in Alabama sliding past the Anniston Army Depot, the largest military depot in the United

States. Rows of Sherman tanks stand guard, the muzzles of their cannon pointed directly at us. It's an uncomfortable feeling.

We pass a tar-paper shack with outlying farm sheds and several small neatly plowed plots and gardens and realize that the two mules resting in the shade are this man's tractor.

Birmingham, Alabama, the Pittsburgh of the south, home to Bessemer Steel. Huge trackside piles of shiny metal stand next to railroad cars filled to the gunnels with rusty scrap iron. All wait their turn in the smelter. Right beside them sit the triple-decker automobile transport cars with their protective screens.

How ironic, the beginning and the end of the iron-ore-to-brand-new-automobile chain all sitting in the same yard. Most railcars sport spray-painted graffiti... fascinating and quite beautiful but undecipherable. What talent. What a waste!

Look on the other side, Moundville, Alabama, where 20 Indian mounds bear mute witness to a people who lived here 900 years ago. We pull over on a siding and wait. After awhile a freight comes barreling through, buffeting us with hurricane-like force. John Turk explains, with a wry shake of the head, that Amtrak rents its space on this mostly Norfolk Southern line. The Crescent has a narrow time window in which to work. If it misses that window, well, freights have priority and further delays are assured.

Now it's Mississippi with town names like Hattiesburg

and Picayune. This is swamp country, miles and miles of it. Cypress knees in the black moccasin-infested waters. More of America's backyard: trash, bald tires, twisted abandoned bicycles, precariously leaning light poles, weed-infested cracked pavement parking lots, a huge brass foundry, neatly laid out square catfish farm ponds, hunting stands, ATV tracks paralleling ours. The tapestry rolls on and on.

We stop at Slidell, Louisiana, and then cross the 630-square mile Lake Pontchartrain into New Orleans. The strains of the song well up.

*And all the towns and people see,
The changes into a bad dream,
The steel rail still ain't heard the news.
Passengers will please refrain,
The conductor sings his song again,
This train's got the disappearing railroad blues.*
- "The City of New Orleans" by Steve Goodman

Not if we have anything to say about it.

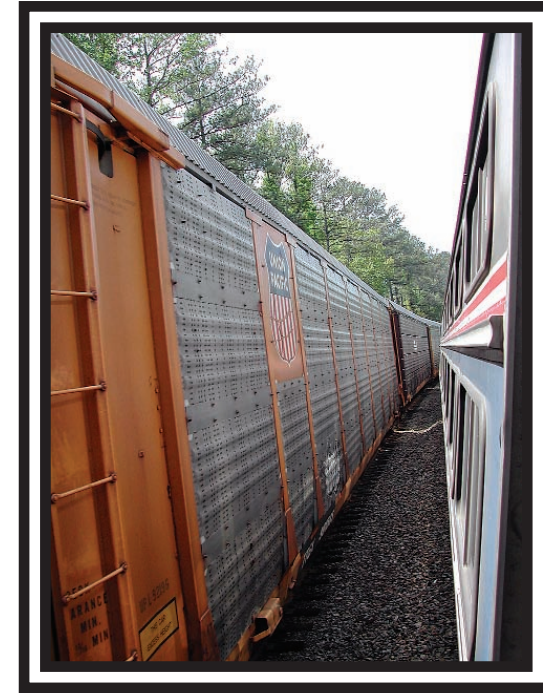


Photo by Phil Audibert
Triple-decker cars, bearing brand new automobiles (protected from vandals by screens), barrel north as the Crescent waits on a siding.