

And so, armed with this mantra and the memory of the recently read "The Old Patagonia Express," by Paul Theroux, we boarded a train in Richmond. From there, we traveled to Washington, Chicago, Portland, San Francisco, Salt Lake, Denver, Chicago, Indianapolis and back to Charlottesville. It took us 13 days and 12 nights, which included multi-night layovers in Chicago and San Francisco. We shared bread with all manner of people and saw everything from desert to swamp, mountaintop to shoreline, slum to skyscraper. It was a great trip and as far as we're concerned, riding the rail is the only way to go.

For one thing you don't have to drive. You don't have to jack yourself up on coffee only to pull in at a rest stop. You don't have to refuel, check tire pressure or your rearview mirror. You don't have to sit in traffic or share somebody else's bad day. You don't have to find a bed or a place to eat.

More importantly, you don't have to fly. There are no cancelled train trips; only delayed ones. There are few lost bags; there are no nights spent stranded on a bench on the Blue Concourse; there are no interminable waits for take-off clearance. Besides, if you crash, you have a reasonable chance of surviving.

There are also no dignity-debasing security checkpoints or "off-with-your-shoes" searches. You are not charged extra for luggage; you can carry liquids with you, even a pocket knife.

Of course all of this will change when some bomb-wielding maniac decides to try his luck on Amtrak. But despite terrorist attacks on a commuter train in Spain and a subway in London, we can only hope that hijacking a long distance passenger train does not give these people as much bang for their buck as driving a jetliner into a tall building. Sad but true.

On the rail, weather delays are few and far between; exceptions being extremely hot or cold weather, and the occasional avalanche and mudslide. A thunderstorm to a train is a welcome and refreshing bath. When the late evening sun comes back out, it bathes the countryside flashing past your window in gold.

The scenery is fascinating, much more interesting than watching a patchwork of fields five miles down or the tops of cumulus clouds. It rolls past your window like a tapestry, and if you own an iPod or similar device, you can score your own movie.

Note that I did not say the scenery was beautiful. It is indeed beautiful in places but ugly in others. It is cluttered and ordered. It is America's back yard; its front lawn; its Main Street; its narrow alley, its forgotten hollow, its junkyard, its breath-taking vista.

And you can enjoy all this from a comfortable seat



fact that they are not prepared from scratch right there on the train. Okay, they're pre-cooked and microwaved or oven heated to temperature, but still, they beat the heck out of airline food back in the good old days when you actually could get food on board an airplane.

How much does it cost? Admittedly we were lucky; we were able to take advantage of a credit we earned earlier. But we also had Bill working for us. Because we are loath to fill out forms on line, we paid Bill a personal visit when he was not too busy with arriving or departing trains at the Charlottesville Amtrak station. This alive in-person human being worked magic. He shaved it down to \$1,970 total. That's not each; that's for the two of us. I defy you to drive all around the country for that amount of money, meals and bed included.

Heck, I defy you to fly that route with all those stops for that amount of money.

Here's another advantage. Most train stations are in the middle of the city they serve. Do you have any idea how long it takes to get from O'Hare to downtown Chicago? It can be two hours! Union Station is just across the Chicago River from the Willis (formerly Sears) Tower. You are walking distance to the financial district, Millennium Park, and Michigan Avenue. Besides, riding the rail, there's no jet lag. You cover about one time zone per day. When you arrive, it really is 7:40 a.m., not 4:40.

But they always run late, you protest. Actually of the six individual trains we rode, two were late, four were on-the-dot on

time. Even the Empire Builder, which left Chicago at 2 p.m. Sunday, rolled into Portland at 10:10 a.m. Tuesday morning, right on time. Besides, there's something less frustrating about a late train. You shrug your shoulders and settle in for the ride, because, once settled in, you've finally realized it's not the destination; it's the journey.

On a cancelled or delayed flight, you're freaking out, punching numbers into your cell phone, hassling the overworked lady at the ticket counter, trying to get her to re-route you. With Amtrak, if you miss what's called a guaranteed connection because the train was late; they'll put you up for the night.

But, you protest, riding the rail takes so much time! So what? we retort. It's not the destination; it's the journey!

Have you ever noticed how air travel is always defined by what did not go wrong. How was your flight? Great! We didn't crash! How was your train trip. Great! And a little faraway smile drifts across your face, because you're finally getting it: It's not the destination; it's the journey.

# Postcards from Riding the Rail



It's Not the destination; it's The Journey!

Every summer for the past three years, my wife Susie and I have gone on a trip that included a visit to any community named Orange that we could find along the way. Then we would send "Postcards" from these communities back to the Orange Review. This year is an exception. We visited no Oranges because...this year we rode around the country by rail, and the train didn't pass through any Oranges, or apples for that matter. Still, we couldn't resist sending postcards home with the same message over and over again. It's not the destination; it's the journey.

It really IS all about the journey, because if it was only about the destination, we'd all be dead by now.

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Tierney on the train to grandma's house in Minnesota.

these tracks! Hah! And then we roll into the city of his name to a station named "Union."

Go west young man. We leave Washington and clackety-clack right alongside the vestiges of the original water road, the 186-mile-long Georgetown to Cumberland canal. The beasts of burden on the tow path have been replaced by cyclists and joggers. We come to Harper's Ferry where a small arsenal became a much bigger powder keg. Deer standing in the middle of the Potomac River barely lift their heads from their evening drink as we clatter by.

"Thisssssssss... is Cumberland, Maryland," dramatically intones the conductor, obviously enjoying himself immensely. Small children in the observation lounge laugh uproariously. Late that night we cross the mighty Ohio. From here, it's a downstream float to St. Louis.

But we're going north... to the windy city, that cattle town turned muscle boy...Chicago. This is big. Oddly enough, it's a good thing the cow kicked the lantern in 1871; the Great Fire gave this rough and ready rail and water hub on the edge of the prairie a clean slate. The first sky scraper was built here in 1885. Then came the 1893 World's Fair where Mr. Ferris built a ride wheel that was 250 feet tall! The one that stands there today on the Navy Pier is only half that!

Chicago is huge. In 1909, Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, pretty much fathered the concept of urban planning in the United States. "Paris on the Prairie," they called it. And so an architectural tradition took root here that puts New York to shame. The Saarinen style art deco towers found themselves shouldered aside by Mies van der Rohe's black boxes of the 60s, now all of them bowing to a 1990s architectural explosion of semi circles, triangles, "bundled" tubes, curved glass facades, all going up, up, ever up.

From here our journey takes us past the Wisconsin dairies, across the Mississippi to "grandma's house" in Minnesota, turning northwest across North Dakota. We pass the state fair gearing up in Minot, through the golden fields of wheat, sunflowers, bright yellow rape seed, and blue-blossomed alfalfa. Tiny ducks flutter fearfully in freshwater swales as we roar by. The ubiquitous grain elevators and oncoming mile-long convoys of tankers and coal cars are the only things that break up the prairie. At Williston we follow in Lewis and Clark's wake as they paddled up the Missouri. What was this like 200 years ago? Look what followed them.

We're now in Montana, somewhere between the High Lonesome and the Big Empty. We arrive in Cutbank, a place barely the size of Gordonsville, a place that in wintertime, routinely posts the coldest temperatures in the 48 contiguous states. We're talking minus 40s here!

We steadily climb into Glacier



Montana, somewhere between the High Lonesome and the Big Empty.

National Park, through the Marias Pass, the route that Lewis and Clark tried so desperately to find in their hazardous Bitterroot Mountain crossing in search of the Columbia River gorge. We wake the next morning in that very place, all docile now due to hydroelectric dams. Wind farms on the ridges above add to the grid. Two hundred years ago, the Indians lined this very gorge, certain that the visiting white men would drown in their attempt to run it to the Pacific. They didn't because, well, they had big things yet to accomplish. As we pass the orchards and truck farms of eastern Washington State, we see, rising out of the horizon like some sort of snow-capped ghost, Mount Hood. It's big.

Portland, Oregon is hot today...108 degrees. Still their legendary micro brews taste good. We learn the mercury went up to 111 the next day, but we were already 600 miles away in San Francisco where the high nudged 61. Who'd have thunk it; go south to lose 45 degrees.

On our return trip we travel through Sacramento where the newspapers trumpet that Governor "Ahnuld" has finally slain the deficit dragon...well sort of. We pass through the High Sierras and the Donner Pass, where settlers trapped by snow resorted to cannibalism. They say the Sierras were so steep the pioneers dismantled and lowered the Conestoga wagons by rope to the valley floor. No one on the train nor the Interstate alongside pays this any mind as we both whiz along at a comfortable, air-conditioned 70 miles an hour.

We follow a trout and river rafting stream all the way to Reno. Is that the Mustang Ranch we just passed? Parked semis and lots of red lights around the sprawling hacienda style building would suggest so. Hmmmm. Maybe that's why the next town we come to is called Lovelock. Dust devils swirl.



Glacier National Park, Montana, through the Marias Pass, the route that Lewis and Clark tried so desperately to find in their hazardous Bitterroot Mountain crossing in search of the Columbia River gorge.

Sage brush and tumbleweed bend to a sandstorm coming from the east. Occasionally, we see an animal carcass or a pile of bleached bones beside the gleaming rails. This country is both desolate and big. Amtrak's route guide says here in the Humboldt Valley, settlers had to decide whether to cross the Sierras or not. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Through the night we cross the Great Salt Desert and are detoured north via Promontory, where the golden spike was driven in 1869, connecting the east and west coasts by rail. Ironic that the labor crews working eastward were mostly Chinese and those working westward were mostly Irish. East meets West in Utah.

We wake up in Wyoming. It is marginally greener here, not much. Herds of antelope graze the sparse scrub alongside cattle and sheep. A red fox climbs the embankment by the tracks. Prairie dogs perch on their mounds. A bill board advertises coffee for 25 cents. Snow covered mountains are barely visible to the south. Somehow, California's budget woes are of little importance here.

Dinner in Denver. That's what's so great about the rail; the station is walking distance from Coors Field and Larimer Square. What more could you want? Baseball, beer and a bison steak! We wake up in Omaha, cross into Iowa and marvel at the green deciduous trees, waving grass, corn by the square mile. We're headed home.

On the rail we are seated with strangers at all meals. On this trip we had a fascinating conversation with an embryologist and her young son about her daily dilemma regarding ethics in her profession. If you can save someone's life from certain disease by genetic manipulation, why can't you pre-determine a baby's sex that way? Yes, today, I think I'll order up a baby girl, like Tierney, and when she's 4 we'll ride the train to grandma's house in Min-ne-so-ta.

We made immediate fast friends with a Chicago couple who travel around the world singing lieder, which is a classical vocal music form popularized in 19th century Europe. He's also a syndicated classical music radio show host and an avid bird watcher. She's a college level teacher. We only know them as Peter and Cathleen. They could be our best friends; we'll



Wyoming, in the big American west.

the Vietnam War, worked as an editor for leading daily newspapers from Philadelphia to Oakland, including a stint with the *Globe* supermarket tabloid, where he made up headlines before sending out his reporters to "find" the facts to support them. This makes me shudder. No wonder no one trusts the press anymore.

Anyway, Chris is relocating to Durham, NC to write full time. He has six or seven fiction and nonfiction titles in mind. Extremely well read, he also had some interesting observations.



You never know who you might meet on the train, like Chris, the Aussie with a larger-than-life personality and many stories (fact or fiction?) to share.

One: Roughly paraphrased, "it took Europe 5,000 years to go from the Stone Age to the computer age. It took America 400."

Two: "Americans are the hardest working people on earth."

Three: "Because you're always in a hurry, you'll always get there first."

We take these statements as compliments, ever mindful that being an American can sometimes be weird. There's this reputation to uphold, and this whole thing about being big.

Then in big Chicago, we see a young man in sandals gently place a bruised overripe pear in a dozing homeless man's lap. We might be big...but we're also kind.

**"Bye-bye, Virginia," squealed Sinead and her 4-year-old sister, Tierney as we pulled out of the Staples Mill Amtrak station just west of Richmond. "It's a long way to grandma's house."**

"And just where is grandma's house?" I ask Sinead, age 6, as she plays peek-a-boo with me from behind her coach seat? "Min-ne-so-ta" she silently mouths to me. "Minnesota; that's a loonnng way," I say, realizing that this delightful child has no idea that she will be spending all day today and all day tomorrow and far into tomorrow night before she will cross the Mississippi River at St. Paul into Minneapolis. She'll wake up the next morning in a different world. Toto, we are not in Virginia anymore.

Jeesh, this is a big country, but I guess you already knew that, huh?

Or did you? Because unless you've ridden through it or driven across it, you don't have quite the same appreciation for just how big it is. Flying across it in a scant six hours doesn't count. We just got back from riding all around it by rail, and I'm here to tell you that America is BIG.

We're not just talking land mass here. It's more than that. America is growing; it's expanding; it's building up; it's sprawling out. It's a work in progress. It's got muscle. It cops a 'tude...yes, still. And it's all because of the road.

This train trip we're taking prophetically follows this historic trail of expansion. On the brief ride from Richmond to Washington, we pass Guinea Station where Stonewall Jackson died, then the Meade Memorial at Fredericksburg to remind us to never lose sight of America's most defining moment, the Civil War.

Then, we pass behind Mount Vernon, the home of the father of our country. To think that George Washington spent many nights here on the other side of



Chicago is b-i-g BIG. Here the Chicago River winds amid skyscrapers in the "city of big shoulders."