

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

The Golden Gate Bridge



San Francisco, California



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

Mount Hood, Oregon

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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