

America's Greatest Train Rides

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We were slowly approaching 8000 feet over the gloriously craggy Sangre di Cristo mountains, en route from southern Colorado to New Mexico. As my wife and I chugged up the Raton Pass--one of the highest points in America's rail system--I was one contented traveler. I thought to myself, "This can't get any better."

Then it did.

The train headed into a narrow, pitch-black tunnel through the top of the pass. And when it emerged on the other side, we had a gasp-worthy view of the biggest sky imaginable, peaks and valleys, forests and deserts, with several different weather systems hovering over the astounding landscape.

Ever since that moment, I have understood completely why more and more Americans are riding trains (the past two years have been the best in Amtrak's history), why President Barack Obama is putting \$8 billion into improving our country's rail travel, and why financier Warren Buffett recently made a \$44 billion investment in a railroad company. There's a little bit of a "trainiac" in all of us, and there's still no better way to explore the United States than by rail.

Trains offer a certain combination of quality and quantity time that is impossible to duplicate. You can also lengthen your adventure as much as you like by arranging to get off and back on wherever you like. Not only is the route we were traveling, Amtrak's **Southwest Chief**, one of the nation's best rides, but going from Chicago to Los Angeles is an interactive way to relive America's expansion west. With a few exceptions, you're on the same tracks that once made up the Santa Fe Railway, which was built along the wagon trail of the same name and was largely followed to create the archetypal American highway, Route 66. The trip lasts just over 40 hours, with decent dining facilities, terrific observation cars, and, yes, movies for those immune to nature's charms.

We started in Chicago, where a porter brought us to our compact private bedroom (worth the extra charge, trust me) with its own facilities: a combination shower and commode that my wife dubbed "the shoilet." Through the picture window we watched Illinois and Missouri go by before it was time to retire to our bunk beds and be lulled to sleep by the rocking train. We disembarked the next morning in western Kansas, spending a day in the cowboy town of Dodge City before riding across Colorado and New Mexico until we reached the Santa Fe area.



Later that week, we re-boarded the train in time for the sunset ride to Winslow, Ariz. Rail fans like to stop for the night there at La Posada--the only trackside resort hotel saved and restored from the legendary Fred Harvey chain. From Winslow, we made our way to the Grand Canyon. While most visitors drive to the park, you also can travel right to the lip of the Divine Abyss--on the original Grand Canyon Railway from Williams Junction, which has been bringing tourists there since 1901. After gazing at the canyon, we took an overnight train across Southern California and woke up in Los Angeles, where we reluctantly boarded a plane home.

Besides being a supremely relaxing way to travel, the train is quite affordable when you compare it to the cost and hassle of booking an airline flight and two nights in a hotel. A couple can make the trip on the Southwest Chief with a private bedroom for two nights and all meals included for \$909. A family of four could have its own family bedroom and all meals for \$944.

After you have "Chiefed"--that's how Hollywood types referred to doing the Chicago-to-L.A. trip in first-class cars in the decades before air travel became commonplace--you'll want to explore other parts of the U.S. this way. Here are five more great long rail journeys.

The West Coast's **Coast Starlight** is generally considered Amtrak's most scenic route. It runs between Los Angeles and Seattle along the Pacific --in some cases, right next to the ocean--and through the stunning Cascade Mountains, making major stops in Oakland, Eugene, and Portland.

From California, the classic route east is the **California Zephyr**, which goes between the Pacific and the Great Lakes. It basically follows the path of the first transcontinental railway, from San Francisco and Sacramento through Reno and Salt Lake City, before heading into the Rockies to Denver, across the Nebraska plains to Omaha, and through Iowa to Chicago. By taking the Southwest Chief in one direction and coming back on the California Zephyr, you can replicate what the first wave of Gilded Age tourists in the 1880s and 1890s called the Grand Tour of America.

If you're looking for a ride that goes directly through the heart of our country, hop aboard the **Texas Eagle**. It starts in Chicago, crosses the Mississippi at St. Louis, then cuts down through the Ozarks, across Arkansas into eastern Texas, and continues through Dallas, Fort Worth, and Austin all the way to San Antonio. There it connects to the Sunset Limited, which goes west along the U.S.-Mexico border through El Paso and Tucson over to Los Angeles.

In general, America's trainiacs are less enthusiastic about many of the East Coast routes, which run along the delay-ridden tracks between Boston and Washington. Nonetheless, my favorite eastern ride is one of the country's first scenic rail routes and still one of the best: the **Empire Service** from New York City up through the Hudson River Valley past West Point and the towns through which writer

Washington Irving once imagined a headless horseman galloping. At Albany-Rensselaer, you can head west across the state through the Finger Lakes to Buffalo and on to Niagara Falls and Toronto. Or you can continue north on the Adirondack all the way to Montreal.

If you're on the East Coast and your family is going to Florida, try the **Auto Train**, a unique--and uniquely American--train in which your car travels with you. It's a vestige of a service once provided to the wealthy on all passenger trains in the early 20th century, when automobiles first became more prevalent but couldn't be driven long distances. Passengers and their vehicles board the Auto Train just south of Washington, D.C. It takes you through the Carolinas and Georgia before terminating outside Orlando, home to Disney World--a fitting end, since its founder, Walt Disney, was quite a trainiac himself.

Unforgettable Day Trips by Rail

Not all of America's best train trips require you to burn up your vacation time. There are many lovely, shorter, cheaper rides available all over the country. Here's a selection.

To see the New England shoreline without getting stuck in traffic, take Amtrak's **DOWNEASTER** , a two-hour ride along the jagged coast from Boston to Portland, Maine, or the **CAPE COD CENTRAL RAILROAD** from Hyannis, Mass., a two-hour round trip between Cape Cod and Buzzards Bay.

For a unique vantage point on two of our national parks, try the **GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS RAILROAD** , a spectacular four-and-a-half-hour trip from Bryson City, N.C., through a moody section of the Appalachians, or the **BLACK HILLS CENTRAL RAILROAD** near Mt. Rushmore, a two-and-a-half-hour tour of South Dakota's Black Hills.

In Pennsylvania, you can satisfy your curiosity about three subjects--the Amish, toys, and trains--in one swoop by taking the **STRASBURG RAIL ROAD** near Lancaster. The trip is an hour, but attractions close to the depot include a model-train barn and the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania.

In Colorado, the **DURANGO & SILVERTON NARROW GAUGE RAILROAD** is a National Historic Landmark. It was started in 1881 to haul silver and gold ore along the Animas River through the San Juan Mountains.

Wine buffs searching for a safe driver can buy a seat on one of the rides offered by California's **NAPA VALLEY WINE TRAIN** . A three-hour round trip stops at one or two major wineries.

Taking you through some truly dramatic scenery, Alaska Railway's **WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE** leaves from Skagway and features a three-hour trip north into the Yukon. For a turf-and-surf vacation, you can ride Alaska Railroad's **COASTAL CLASSIC** from Anchorage to Seward, which is where several of the cruise ships depart from.