USA by Train

Lisabeth-Anne Wesley

<AQ: over 3,000 or almost 4,000?>

From city to mountain, desert to beach, over 3,000 miles from Atlantic to Pacific, and all by public transport!

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'You travelled *how?*'

When you tell people that you travelled around the USA, from New York to Chicago then on to Los Angeles via northern Arizona, they assume that you either flew, or hired a car, or a mixture of both. They are almost uniformly surprised to hear that we enjoyed a travelling holiday of almost 4,000 miles all by public transport. America's Amtrak long-distance trains are a delightful (and fashionably green) way of combining travel with sightseeing and relaxation, and are one the of USA's best-kept secrets – many of the locals that we met didn't know you could make those journeys.

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Our rail journey started at New York's Penn Station (all together now, 'You leave the Pennsylvania Station at a quarter to four': from the song Chattanooga Choo Choo') on the *Lake Shore Limited* overnight to Chicago. Amtrak's long distance trains have wonderful names: the *Lake Shore* travels along the Hudson River northwards through New York state and then, as its name suggests hugs the southern shores of Lakes Erie and Michigan eastwards to Chicago.

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A word about onboard accommodation: paying for a sleeper upgrades you to first class and costs extra on top of your rail pass, but as its in effect your hotel for the night you simply regard it as hotel expenses. The cost includes sleeper accommodation (full bedrooms are more pricey than roomettes, which are reminiscent of couchettes on European long distance trains), all meals, use of the shower room (lovely clean fluffy towels provided), bottled water, free newspaper in the morning, and unlimited coffee, tea, and fruit juice—you don't need to visit the café, you just help yourself from the beverage station at the end of the carriage. There are also printed route guides in each compartment, pointing out place of interest along the way, with tips on photography as well. Amtrak really wants you to enjoy the journey and makes you feel looked after: each sleeping-car has it's own attendant who will stow your luggage, make up your bed, bring the newspaper, take orders for meals, share a joke or reminisce about railways in the old days. They even open and shut the doors at stations (as on aircraft, passengers are not allowed to do this themselves) and help each passenger out with a steadying hand. V.I.P. treatment indeed, and first class travel in more than name only.

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The sleeping-cars on the 1,600 km New York to Chicago run are Viewliner cars: the roomettes have bunk beds, one of which unfolds from the upper wall of the car while the lower one is formed by pulling together the facing seats. All very neat. What I do'nt like (apart from lack of cat-swinging space which makes getting undressed a challenge) is the fact that right next to your seat is the toilet! It's covered over when not in use, but all the same . . .

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Go West

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The approach to Chicago is awesome: the Willis (formally Sears) Tower, for a while the tallest building on the American continent, is right by the station. Union Station itself is well worth exploring as a 1930s architectural gem, particularly the Great Hall, now no no longer used as the station concourse but hired out for functions.

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We left Chicago on the *Southwest Chief*, which travels over 2200 miles from Chicago to Los Angeles, much of the route travelling alongside the legendary Route 66. The accommodation this time consisted of Superliner cars, double-decker vehicles with be-drooms and roomettes on the top deck and luggage stowage, toilets and showers on the lower. You walk from car to car along the upper deck; as well as the dining car there is a observation car and a café.

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It's quite magical to go to sleep in dreary, cold, grey, rainswept Missouri and wake up next morning under a bright blue sunny sky in Kansas. The difference is palpable. The Southwest Chief passes through seven states (Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and California, and three time zones on its three-day journey, and so it's no wonder that the traveller really *feel* the journey and beco-mes aware of Western history. This simply wouldn't happen on a plane journey.

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Scenically, the journey gets interesting in Colorado, where the flat land begins to give way to mountains (see Picture 1). The train pulls and winds its way higher and higher till it reaches the Raton Pass, at 7,588 feet the highest point on the Santa Fe railroad who's tracks we are now on. Then its down through the Raton Tunnel and into New mexico. By now the architecture of the towns we pass through is unmistakably Western, and you sense just how much the US is in fact several countries rather that one. Down through Apache Canyon, noting the changing flora and the shift from desert to farmland and back again; a service stop at Albuquerque and a chance to buy Native American jewellery, crafts and artefacts from the artists themselves; than it's time for dinner in the diner while the setting sun paints the famous Red Cliffs of New exico.

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The final part of the trek takes place overnight as the train travels across nort-hern Arizona and on through the Mojave Dessert. The journey reaches its terminus in Los Angeles' Union Station, another 1930's architectural delight, with graceful palm trees all round and fragrant gardens and looking more like a Spanish convent that a station.

What's Next?

Two more journeys are still on the "must do" list: the "Coast Starlight", along the Pacific coast from Los Angeles to San Francisco, then from there back to Chicago via Denver and the Rockies on the "California Zephyr". Next time, next time... We flew home full of admiration for what we had experienced of America's unsung Public Transport. Sure, it doesn't go everywhere, and where it does go, it might not go very often, but it deserves be to known about, and I doff my souvenir Amtrack baseball cap to it (Picture 2)

Picture 1: View from the observation car: Amtrak's *Southwest Chief* climbs through Colorado. Note the souvenir Amtrak baseball cap!