

FIRST-CLASS RIDE

Though my latest cross-country train trip has a sad purpose (to visit my beloved mother in hospice care in Virginia), I can report that Amtrak is still alive and well (at least for now). But who knows what Vlad the Impaler in Chief plans to cut out of the national passenger railroad's budget.

My trip begins inauspiciously with a 5 a.m. phone call at home announcing a five-hour delay due to snow in the mountains. So I turn off the alarm and go back to sleep for a couple more hours. Once I get to Richmond BART, I cross over to the Amtrak platform. Already running five hours behind schedule, we get all the way up in the Sierra Nevada when the train suddenly stops. It is snowing heavily and night has fallen. We then sit for three hours waiting for a big rotary snowplow to come clear the tracks and guide us over Donner Pass to Reno and points east.

Once we get rolling again, it is the usual scenic ride through deep snow all the way across Nevada and Utah. Our California Zephyr carries a light passenger load due to all the delays, so I enjoy several leisurely meals in an almost-empty dining car. As a sleeping-car passenger, I get free meals

all the way to Chicago: omelet, bacon, and whole-wheat muffin for breakfast; spinach salad with grilled chicken for lunch; grilled fish, sautéed veggies, and baked potato for dinner. My sleeping-car attendant keeps the coffee urn hot until midafternoon for refills.

My Amtrak roomette is two facing sofa seats by day, which the attendant converts into upper and lower beds at night. Various lights and power outlets let me work onboard. My iPhone serves as a personal hotspot connecting my laptop to the Internet. I work on a small table that folds out from the wall. It also serves as a table to eat on when I decide to take a couple of meals in my room. I carry a roll of fives to tip the attendant for delivering meals from the dining car.

Downstairs on the double-decker Superliner car are more bedrooms, luggage racks, restrooms, and a hot shower. On a three-day train ride, this amenity is a lifesaver. Several rest stops along the way allow you to jump out for a few minutes of pacing the platform and breathing fresh air. Smoking is not allowed on Amtrak – strictly enforced.

WHY THINGS FALL APART

“Not only does the universe not care about our desires, but in the natural course of events, it will appear to thwart them, because there are so many more ways for things to go wrong than to go right. Houses burn down, ships sink, battles are lost for the want of a good horseshoe nail...It is in the very nature of the universe that life has problems. It’s better to figure out how to solve them, by applying information and energy to expand our niche of life-enhancing order, than to start a conflagration and hope for the best.” (Psychologist Steven Pinker, Harvard University, from his Jan. 1 Wall Street Journal column on the Second Law of Thermodynamics)

SWAMI SEZ

“When tempted to fight fire with fire, remember that the fire department usually uses water.”
(Swami Umami)

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