

## HOW TO SURVIVE AND ENJOY A CROSS-COUNTRY AMTRAK TRAIN TRIP

I just got home to our cool coast from the hot, muggy East, riding Amtrak passenger trains all the way: California Zephyr, Capitol Limited, Northeast Regional, Downeaster, Lakeshore Limited.

Essential items to pack for your trip in the sleeping car:

- Slippers, loafers, clogs, or flip-flops for late-night bathroom visits.
- Air freshener and disinfectant spray or wipes for the bathroom.
- Hand sanitizer.
- Portable electric fan.
- Earplugs or noise-canceling headphones.
- Meds for altitude sickness (elevation 9,000 feet on some routes).
- \$5 bills for tips to attendants (sleeping car porters) and waiters.
- Splurge on a multi-city ticket (definitely worth breaking up your trip into single overnights on the train, plus hotel nights in between).
- Your favorite sleep aids.
- Smartphone as personal hotspot for internet connection to your laptop or tablet.
- Expect delays and late trains; don't plan tight connections.

Some of the more unusual sightings I made along the way:

- A group of Mennonite women wearing long dresses and bonnets (shades of “The Handmaid’s Tale”) walked single file through Chicago Union Station holding coffee drinks with whipped cream on top. (For religious reasons, not fear of flying, Mennonites take trains, mainly in the Midwest.)
- My trains followed meandering rivers all across the country. On the Colorado River, we passed a tree with an American bald eagle’s nest on top and two eaglets inside. A parent soared nearby in the warm air, looking for prey to feed its young.
- Boulders covered the hillsides, but I never saw one rolling downhill.
- Red Roof Inns don't have red roofs.

- Fireflies (lightning bugs) flickered in the bushes trackside at night in the Midwest.
- Colorado River rafters paddling whitewater rapids waved as we passed by, and a few mooned us. Gross!
- In West Virginia, we rolled alongside the Mason-Dixon Highway, and passed a small village consisting of five houses, a barn, and a church.
- Gas prices in the Midwest and East are about a dollar per gallon less than in California.

The Capitol and Lakeshore trains between Chicago and the East have replaced traditional dining cars with so-called “contemporary” boxed meals handed out by lounge attendants. Lunch and dinner offer a choice of antipasto plate, cold chicken or roast beef sandwich, chicken Caesar salad, or vegan wrap. Included are desserts, energy bars, beverages, and one complimentary alcoholic drink (beer, wine, or liquor). Breakfast is vanilla Greek yogurt with fruit and granola, pecan and banana bread, blueberry muffin, fruit juice, and coffee, tea, or milk. The food is fresh and tasty, prepared by a foodservice company and delivered to the train daily. You can eat in the lounge car or in your room. All meals are included in your first-class fare.

At Chicago Union Station, Western trains connect to Eastern trains. There is no through service. Chicago is the traditional hub city of the American railroad network. To escape the annoying track door recordings repeated every few seconds, hang out in the relative tranquility of the Metropolitan Lounge, exclusively for first-class (sleeping car) and business class passengers. Stash your luggage while you wait for your connecting train, and take advantage of hot showers, free snacks and beverages (Peets coffee!), workstations, TV screens, newspapers, free WiFi, and comfortable armchairs. Upstairs, visit the food court, serving all kinds of Chicago specialties.

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