

## **An Amtrak Trip**

Have to be in Chicago Saturday for granddaughter's wedding. I wonder fly or drive or.... train? Haven't taken a train for years. First class waiting room at Union station. Deluxe bedroom - private shower and toilet, double-size lower bunk, sofa, upper bunk. Depart late afternoon, have nice complimentary dinner, relax while we glide along on the shiny rails, have a good night's sleep, wake up refreshed, shower, have either a complimentary sit-down breakfast in the dining car or continental breakfast in our room and arrive refreshed in Chicago in plenty of time to get a rental car and drive to the wedding. Socialize that day and part of the next, then reverse the procedure to return to Washington. Sounds good, let's go for it - especially since the brochure says "...the spacious new Superliner© equipment gives you roomy, comfortable coach seats - or a choice of First Class Sleeping Accommodations.... There's simply no more enjoyable way to travel between Chicago and Washington, DC!"

Reality set in as we boarded train 29 on the 22nd of March; it seemed like we walked a mile with our baggage before arriving at the car. Our room - bedroom B in car 2900 - was up a narrow stair - not normally a problem but made us very grateful we hadn't packed our big suitcase. In the room we discovered the shower and toilet were the same room. They recommend one sit while showering. Why? We find out later.

Thinking we'd unpack and hang our good going-to-the-wedding clothes to reduce wrinkling we quickly discovered the hanging closet would hold only our two overcoats and my sport coat. Lots of hooks around the room for hanging other things though.

Not long after we left Union station we stopped for about 15 minutes; we received an announcement over the PA system that there was a leaking air hose and that would necessitate the electric power being off during the repairs. Translation: no ventilation during the period. Maybe a half hour later we were told that there would be another unscheduled stop of 30 minutes or so - so that permanent repairs could be made: the air hose would be replaced. Again no ventilation during the stop. We were told not to worry, the time would be made up. Well, these things happen with "spacious new Superliner equipment" I guess

The evening meal was excellent. We each had prime rib with all the usual fixings, dessert included, and shared the table with a pair of ladies who participated in friendly conversation.

During the evening I had my laptop computer going with the GPS system tracking our movements. I had, in the past, always noted how straight railroad tracks seemed to be so I was properly astonished to discover that they snaked around the mountains much more so than highways, so that at times we were actually heading northeast. Too late I remembered that trains can't handle grades like cars can.

The ride was not the "gliding on silver rails" we had expected; it was really quite bumpy

and rocky - it was difficult to stand without a hand-hold or something to lean against. When I did the crossword puzzle my lettering looked like that of a 5-year old learning the alphabet.

The porter converted our room for sleeping and we crawled under the covers. We quickly discovered it was a bit warm even though our room thermostat was at full "cool"; the covers came off and, after getting somewhat used to the bumpy ride we dozed off for brief periods. It was hard to sleep both because the mattresses were hard - like balsa wood - and because of the motion of the car. It was about what one might experience in a small boat in heavy seas, except that the boat's motion would be fairly predictable, while there was no predictability in the rolling and bumping that we experienced.

At about 3AM, with the place like an oven, both of us were lying there naked and sweating. I called to the porter and after he checked the setting of the air flow lever in the vent he said he'd do something about it. The lady in the next compartment was equally upset with the temperature and pleased something was going to be done about it. It took a while, but he finally told us he had turned off the heater and maybe about an hour later the room began to cool off and we went back to sleep.

We had left a call for 6:30, incorrectly expecting it would be on Chicago time, but were awakened on eastern standard time, or 5:30 Chicago time. Continental breakfast served in our room was excellent, albeit much earlier in the day than we would have liked.

We opted not to take advantage of the shower, given the rocky ride and the very cramped shower/toilet area; we favored checking in to our hotel early enough to clean up and change for the wedding.

Somewhere east of Gary the train stopped and waited for about a half hour - apparently for tracks ahead to clear of some freight trains. Later we slowed to a crawl in South Chicago at about the time we should have been arriving at Chicago's Union Station. As we entered Chicago we took a turn to the west and then backed up, swinging to the north to enter the station almost exactly an hour late.

The wedding took place Saturday afternoon and it and the reception went off very well. The next day, after a magnificent brunch with the newlyweds and bride's father and close friend, we left for Union station under the threat of an impending snow storm; hardly a flake appeared before we arrived a good three hours before train time.

About 45 minutes before train 30 was scheduled to depart (6:40 PM) there was an announcement in the first class waiting room for all sleeper car passengers to come to the desk with tickets in hand. The problem, it seemed, was that the dining car was "no good" and had to be replaced causing a delay that would prevent evening meal service. As the clerk took my tickets he gave us \$10 each to go get something to eat at the station - and told us the train would be one to one and a half hours late in leaving.

The menu on the dining car on the way out priced the meals at \$15 to \$20, as I recall, and

I cannot see an equal meal being available in as nice a setting for anything like the \$10 they provided. But on the other hand, Chicago's Union Station had no "nice" restaurants in it like Washington's does. We were told for a nice dinner we'd have to go to a place about four blocks away. In the snow? No thanks. We opted for a gyro from one of the fast food places and a couple of expensive cocktails from the bar.

I wondered about breakfast, given the dining car problem, but they assured us the decision not to serve dinner was just because the dinner would be so late.

Waiting would not have been so bad if the waiting room had been large enough for all the people waiting for late trains. They also didn't keep the snack bar serviced very well. For the first part of the wait I was fortunate enough to find a seat near a power outlet and phone connection, so I could check up on my email but after coming back from dinner we found that seat occupied. Before long many were standing and several were sent to the coach waiting room for seats. Not very "first class" in my view.

We finally boarded at about 8:10 PM and after the now-familiar long walk located our car and made ourselves comfortable in our room. The first thing I did was check the temperature of the air coming out of the vent - my wife had already turned the thermostat down. The air felt cool, and we hoped it would continue to be so. We finally started to move at 8:48 - two hours and eight minutes late.

A few minutes into the ride we heard a repeated sound of a door roughly sliding open and shut. After a few minutes of this, with no people passing by to explain it, I went to investigate. I found that one end of the curtain that shields the space between cars had come loose and had fallen across the doorway. The door was trying to close, bumping into the steel rod at the end of the curtain, and retracting. The curtain was in the form of a horizontal window shade, and the spring had apparently broken so there was no tension to keep it taut and hence latched to the other car, I put the curtain back but it would clearly not stay in place with that broken spring. Later a trainman came through and tried the same solution I had; I suggested to him that he tape the loose end in place but apparently he had no tape .

According to the Route Guide, "individual speakers bring you recorded music and train announcements." We couldn't get any music and the announcements were impossible to hear. We asked our steward about this and he said that the music comes from the lounge car and the equipment is usually broken. The reason we couldn't hear announcements, he said, was because the speaker in the "A" room is behind the upper bunk and is muffled by the stored bedding - "a design fault," he said. He promised to let us know if something important was announced. I guess there were no important announcements since he never reported back.

The dining car offered to serve dessert and coffee, so we elected to partake of this nice offer. When I asked for milk in lieu of coffee, however, the waiter at first balked but then relented. He said something like wanting to save the milk for breakfast, as they had not gotten their last order, or something to that effect. But the dessert - a chocolate

concoction - was excellent and went well with the milk. The next day at lunch it was reported that they were out of milk (I was told they were out of it for breakfast, too). This was after the train had stopped at Cleveland, Toledo and Pittsburgh. To me it seems incongruous that a few gallons of milk couldn't have been picked up at one of those stops.

A note about sleeping in the upper bunk. There's a set of straps arranged to prevent one from falling out the side of the bed, a sensible objective especially since - for half of the bedrooms - a rapid stop would project the sleeper over the side. For the other half a stop would simply push the passenger up against the wall. A problem is that in order to clamp the straps to the ceiling they had to be fairly loose, loose enough that they would bump against the sleeping passenger. Drove me nuts while trying to go to sleep, so I opted for sleep to the neglect of a safety feature and removed them.

We finally arrived at Washington's Union Station exactly three hours late, at 4:23 PM. We opted to take a cab to our North Arlington home. When the cab driver heard how late we were, he said Amtrak should give us out money back. Well the logo says "Satisfaction guaranteed," doesn't it?

Fat chance!

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Some time later, I heard from an Amtrak customer service representative. He said it was an unusual trip and he would send us some vouchers good for additional train travel. I doubt that we will use them.