

# Coast Starlight – holiday travel at its best

By Lisa Huard

Have you taken a train lately?

Whether you're close to the Los Angeles or Sacramento areas and you want to get to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, consider taking Amtrak's Coast Starlight to at least Seattle. You can easily arrange for other transportation to Vancouver from there.

This holiday season we decided to do something different to get to family. We decided to take the train instead of driving from South Lake Tahoe. It's just one of those things we say we want to do and for some reason we just keep jumping in the car or "hurry to wait" to get on a plane.



Paul and Lisa Huard of South Lake Tahoe ride the rails to their holiday destination.

The train mentality is different altogether. At the Sacramento Station we arrived with our luggage in tow and headed for Train 14 southbound for Los Angeles on Track 3. We were taking

the SuperLiner Sleeping Car on the Coast Starlight, one of Amtrak's premier trains that offer services and features exclusive to this train.

My train experience has been limited. I have taken the train from Anaheim to San Diego, from Oxnard to San Diego and again on a brief excursion in Alaska as part of a cruise. Each time was pleasant but as a traveler on coach, I simply had a seat. This was different.

On the platform we were greeted by the car's conductor, Jaime; a nice man who would be taking care of us on our journey. We had arranged to get a "roomette" which was a small but private room with two reclining type chairs that face each other. The space is very comfortable and has amenities such as pillows, temperature control, lights, a small tray table in the center, an electrical outlet, and music. It's designed that two people can comfortably sleep should you decide to. The two opposing chairs fold toward each other and make into a bed. There is also an upper berth that opens down from the ceiling. The more flexible traveler can take the top bunk.

### **Better than expected**

What did I expect in taking the train? The sounds of the train rolling down the track, the sway of the car as it barrels past the stagnate traffic as the rails parallel freeways through towns on the way to the coast, a nine-hour drive by car taking 12 by train, the graffiti of a city on walls in the industrial areas of towns. As the "driver" for more of our trips (control issues) I was looking forward to being able to take naps whenever I wanted. The problem was that I still found myself wanting to see everything. I expected to need to occupy time with a book I've been meaning to read and perhaps playing Cribbage for hours just to pass the time.

What was a great surprise? Incredible, personal service of a

conductor (and other staff) who gave us a tour of the different types of sleeper rooms before others arrived. The offer was the fresh fruit and Champagne, juice, and coffee on our arrival. The holiday decorated Parlour Car where you could sit in comfortable surroundings and enjoy the view out the windows while having a drink, some food, or playing cards. The Dining Car where you choose from a nice menu for your breakfast, lunch, and dinner and merely sign for it as it's included in your roomette ticket.

The sounds a train makes are pleasing; there really is a clickety-clack in amongst the vibrations of the large windows for your viewing pleasure. It's also much more pleasing for the train you are on to be the one making the sound of the horn as you pass by any intersection where a car could be. I used to live in Anaheim, one mile west of Disneyland. The train tracks ran close to my home and honestly, the sound of the train wasn't as romantic when it rattled your house.

The sounds are reminiscent of the candy advertisement from a bit back, "Choo-choo-choo-choo, choo-choo-choo-choo, Good and Plenty, Good and Plenty."

Jaime came back to familiarize us a bit more with the train. He told us the history and uniqueness of the Pacific Parlour Car. It is their "signature" lounge car, exclusive to the Coast Starlight and is a unique and luxuriously upgraded piece of historic equipment and is available to sleeping car passengers. In fact, it is one of the last five cars left from the Santa Fe's famed train of the 1950s, the El Capitan.

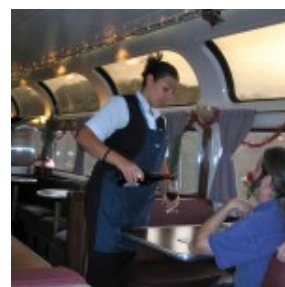
### **Top notch amenities**

For our journey I had packed a great picnic complete with wine, cheese, crackers and fruit. The ticket had said meals were included, but I thought that would mean something wrapped in plastic. Boy was I wrong.

Beyond the Parlour Car is the Dining Car where we joined

another couple for breakfast. Unless youâ€™re a recluse in your roomette you will meet all sorts of folks. Here Cora presented us with a cup of nicely brewed coffee and a menu to make a selection from. Since the train is moving there are two ways in which they will serve eggs; scrambled and as an omelet. Cora explained that way they would always come out right for the passenger.

Breakfast fare included choices in eggs, breakfast meats, breads, French toast, yogurt, fruits, and oatmeal. Lunch selections were Caesar salad, burgers, vegetarian burgers, and penne pasta. Dinner boasts roasted herb chicken, a seafood selection, and marinated steak. Of course there are incredible desserts such as Ciao Bella Sicilian lemon sorbet, cheesecake, fruit, and nut desserts selections. And yes, for those who just canâ€™t live without their espresso, cafÃ© latte, cappuccino or mocha, they have those too.



Mel brings wine and cheese to passengers headed to Southern California. Photo/Lisa Huard

The food was good and so was the company we shared a table with. One couple was from Vancouver, British Columbia. They caught this leg of their trip in Seattle and were headed to

San Diego. They are a couple who have traveled the world many times over on all sorts of transportation and are thoroughly enjoying their trip on this train. They have often driven from Canada to San Diego and to Scottsdale by car. We have too. It was interesting that all four of us continued to look at the train's map information to figure out where we were even though we were so familiar. When you're on the train, you get a view that you can't get anywhere else.

The train's hallway is narrow. In fact it might be a great way to travel if you are single and want to meet someone. You dine with other folks as they fill up the four tops and unless you back up to the nearest connecting hallway, you literally are up close and personal to someone crossing your path. Since you can see the people coming, you get to decide if you really want to "meet" them or not.

The other intriguing thing about a train is that it is literally pieces of equipment hooked together. Those junctures of metal were most challenging for me. Looking forward you can see that one car is moving in opposition from side to side from the other. You quickly press on a panel to open the door. Then you tell yourself to move forward over the connected area and aim to hit the panel of the second door. If successful, you'll find yourself closer to the Dining Car. Kids love this part. Adults and those using canes; not so much.

The restrooms are adequate, a bit larger in length than that on a plane, but certainly not in width. In fact if you're 5-foot-7 with a 31-inch inseam, your knees will be hitting the toilet paper holder. The restroom is not someplace you would want to spend a lot of time in and like all other travel, be sure to wear your shoes. It's moving, as you know.

My girlfriend who is a flight attendant is aghast at the many people who will go barefoot or in their socks to the restroom on a plane. Included on the Sleeper Car are showers. You can use the cute little bag of shower amenities that they provide

you in your roomette. And if you need more, just ask.

After our breakfast we decided to go back to our roomette since it was light out and we could see where we were going. Over the PA system came a voice telling us that the Café™ Car was now open. It sits below the Parlour Car and provides sandwiches, drinks, and snacks. We started to laugh as it reminded us of a cruise where if you plan it right, you could eat the entire way.

Aside from rolling down the tracks, the train has a schedule of eating. In fact if you wanted to, you could find yourself doing nothing but eating the entire time. The Starlight is on its second day since it originated in Seattle and is on its way to Los Angeles. Today, the Parlour Car opened at 7am and the Dining Car began its breakfast service at 6:30am. Seating was open and no reservations for breakfast were required. Lunch service begins at noon with a last seating at 1:45on and does require reservations. Cora will be traveling the Sleeper Car to take everyone's requests for seating. No need to track her down.

We selected a 12:30 seating because at 3:20 there is a Wine and Cheese Tasting Event where for only \$5 and a proper ID you can entertain your gastronomic palate with four wines and three cheeses from places that are actually produced along the route of this fantastic train. The wine selection included treats from Santa Barbara County, Pinnacles Ranches in Monterey County, and the Paso Robles area. From Washington state wines from the Columbia and Yakima Valleys can please your taste buds. On the southbound train, this portion of your journey occurs around sunset. The dome ceiling of the historic Parlour Car is even more special as you sit, learn, and enjoy these treats.

### **Life on the rails**

Jaime stopped by again to check on how we were doing. He

brought us a beautiful Origami bird in blue and red that he made. He is an intelligent, artistic, and thoughtful person. He told us he makes Origami for all of his passengers. He also color codes them to help children or older folks get back to their particular car without confusion. He tells them as they are leaving their compartments to look for the red and blue, or orange and red bird on the wall. When they find it, they know they are back where they need to be.



Jaime is no ordinary conductor.

Photo/Lisa Huard

Born and raised in the Philippines, he was a teacher of mathematics for most of his career. Teaching and sharing is a passion for this man and you can tell that by how helpful and engaging he is. He taught in his home country for 22 years, and then taught in Nigeria for nine. He then said he copied Eddy Murphy in "Coming to America." Landing in California, he taught in the Los Angeles Unified School District in the inner city for two years and that did him in. As a "quitired" teacher myself, (I resigned as I'm still too young to retire), we shared our feelings about education for today's youth. We both agree the education process is subject oriented and not student centered as it once was; that test scores and the emphasis on paperwork showing accountability seemed to be at the top of the flagpole rather than performance and true competition. We talked about how everyone is more dependent on electronics, including myself,

who can type quicker and for longer than I can hold a pen to paper these days.

We commented on how even with the progression of all of our new and fancy ways to communicate, that we may be communicating more, but are we doing it better? I even shared with him a recent email I had asking my niece if she still knew how to write complete sentences. You know those things with a subject and a predicate. Her emailed reply was something like; "æo aunt lisa u r funy LOL katie." Wouldn't you know it? She's having trouble in her language arts class in school.

Since retiring from teaching he's been working for Amtrak and loves it. He meets people from all over the world. He observes what everyone is doing. He enjoys seeing people look out the window at the land passing by and is amazed at the individuals who sit and play games on their iPhones or Blackberrys who never look up. You might think that I'm not looking up that much, but I am. After all, it's a 12-hour trip.

### **Money well spent**

Anyone who knows us knows that my husband is not one to spend money on what he views as "frivolous" expenses. I have to tell you, he loved this trip. He loved being able to walk around, have what he wanted when he wanted it. He completely took advantage of all the train had to offer. The employees are friendly, helpful, and love that people are looking at train travel as a way to get around rather than the hustle and bustle as we "hurry" to get to places these days without seeing anything along the way.

The scenery on this particular journey varies greatly beginning in the industrial areas of Sacramento. You knew you were in the Davis area when the station looked pristine and had a million bicycles in bike racks parked as individuals



caught the train to their jobs. There was interesting graffiti along the way to Salinas, Paso Robles, and San Luis Obispo. And then there's the Pacific Ocean. How can you not love that view? The coast area south of Morro Bay is incredible, especially as you near sunset during the winter at about 5pm. The foam of the ocean coming to the shore, the scattered clouds with the sun setting make for a spectacular view. Some portions of the trip are on precarious cliffs and you feel like the train is literally running directly over the water. As it gets dark outside you can see the occasional off shore oil derrick between the main land and the Channel Islands all lit up with lights like a Christmas tree.

And in the days of everything running late and people being upset, this train ran early. Apparently it's one of the few things that do. There are points along the way when it has to wait as running ahead of time isn't permitted. Pretty tough to fit opposing trains on the same track.

For those of us who are lucky enough to do a bit of travel and have taken a seven-day cruise, you know what I mean by it takes you five days to figure out the ship and all that there is to do. That's just in time for your trip to end. We've all commented on how great it would be if in each individual cabin you wish someone had done a cheat sheet for you. Well here's my version of a good cheat sheet when you're booking a trip southbound. First of all, if there's just two of you get a minimum of the roomette. It's a total treat and you don't have to spend the bigger money for the larger compartments.

Be proactive and engaging with the staff. Introduce yourself and shake their hand. This is common courtesy and common sense if you want to have a more personal experience. If it's not busy, ask your conductor if they can tell you a bit about the train. They love the train and are most happy to share the information. They also have written information that can provide you with the history and particulars for those of us

who are visual learners.

Eat at every meal service just to say you did and really feel you took advantage of the price of your ticket. Take advantage of the coffee, teas, water, juice, snacks and great meals included with your ticket because "les toilette" is just down the hallway. Get up and walk around. It's funny watching everyone negotiate their gait as the train is moving along. Of course remember you look just as uncoordinated.

Visit the Parlour to view the scenery and just to have a different perspective. When booking your ticket get an even numbered if you are headed south. That will be the side that the ocean will be on. Check out your compartment; push all of the buttons, (Almost all. Skip the emergency one that can summon your conductor) and open things. I didn't realize there was a skinny closet to hang and store things and towels until after Salinas.

Take a pair of comfortable slippers or socks to be cozy. If you are sensitive to motion, bribe (or threaten) your traveling mate so you sit forward in the compartment. This seat should be designated as a "No napping" zone.

Take disinfectant wipes with you, after all it is a public train and I do admit that there were times I wish I had my cleaning bucket with me. When using "les toilette" close the drape if stopped at a train station unless you are not at all modest. Although the scenery is fun to see with no obstructions, sit on the east side of the train in the Dining Car so the sun does not pound in your eyes. Carry a pen; your meals are included in your Sleeping Car status and you'll feel like you're Robin Leach who most of us remember as someone who would hang out with the "Rich and Famous". Talk and furthermore listen to people on the train; their stories are interesting even if some of them are made up. Smile at all who pass your way. Look up, look out, enjoy.

P.S.

At 7:05 as we arrived at the Oxnard station and were exhausted. After all, we ate, drank, and laughed our way to Southern California. I never cracked open the book, never played cribbage. Perhaps on the return trip, perhaps not.