

Opinion: Losing my kids to Calif.'s overcrowded trains

By Joe Mathews

If California's train deniers are right—that no one ever rides trains here, that Californians prefer to drive or fly, and that high-speed rail is a boondoggle that won't attract riders—then how do you explain my wife's public humiliation?

Recently, our family was on Amtrak from San Diego to L.A., when an announcement came over the sound system: "Mrs. Mathews, we have two of your children here in the café car. Mrs. Mathews, you should never let your children walk unaccompanied on an Amtrak train."



Joe Mathews

Mrs. Mathews, upset at the scolding, looked for someone to blame: me.

Her accusation was based on an overly limited reading of the facts. True, I had been nominally in charge of our two older children when they went to the café car. But she missed the larger context, which absolves me and debunks the idea that Californians are train-phobic.

The Pacific Surfliner that day was mobbed, with every seat taken and passengers standing in the aisles and stairwells. So when I took those two hungry boys in the direction of the café

car, the crowds were so thick I couldn't squeeze through. The boys, now 9 and 7, are very skinny and insisted on continuing on, despite my pleas, beginning a memorable adventure.

Our story may be singular, but the situation is not. Crammed Amtrak trains are commonplace in California. California is now home to three of the busiest intercity train lines outside the Northeast Corridor of the United States. The Pacific Surfliner has 3 million riders annually on trains from San Luis Obispo to San Diego, America's second busiest passenger rail corridor.

Two others are in the top 10: Capitol Corridor, from San Jose to Sacramento, has 1.6 million yearly riders, and the San Joaquins, serving Central Valley cities that train deniers claim have no taste for rail, tops 1.1 million annually.

All told, Amtrak carries 12 million riders in California each year. Amtrak would like to accommodate more of us, but service is limited by the lack of tracks and the fact that Amtrak must share tracks with commuter rail and freight. Amtrak even publishes guidance on its website on how to avoid the crowds. Among the advice for the Pacific Surfliner: avoid riding on Fridays and Sundays, when trains are especially crowded.

While train deniers have dominated the public conversation about rail's future in California, the sardine-like state of Amtrak California suggests that high-speed rail would be popular.

Studies in other countries suggest that high-speed rail draws people away from cars and planes, and inspires people to take trips they otherwise wouldn't. And why not? Riding trains in California offers unsurpassed beauty. Over the holidays, I was on a Pacific Surfliner along the Santa Barbara coast just as the sun set over the Channel Islands. Even the off-shore oil platforms looked beautiful.

Amtrak is far from perfect; the inside of the cars could be

cleaner, the trains are slow, the Wi-Fi unsteady, and then there are those crowds. But that argues for more rail, not less.

After her public shaming, Mrs. Mathews ordered me to retrieve her two older children from the café car. But I couldn't physically break through the crowds of passengers standing in the aisles and stairwells. I couldn't even reach a conductor until I started climbing on top of armrests and over seats to reach a business class car, where people pay extra to guarantee a seat.

A conductor there tried to clear a path through the crowds, too, but they were too thick. So he radioed to the café car that we would wait until the next stop, where I could get off the train and then re-board directly into the café car. (My children communicated over the radio that I shouldn't hurry—they were having a great time.)

I asked the conductor how often the train was this crowded; he said this was standard for evening trains on weekends. And on late summer weekends when horses race at Del Mar, things are even more jammed, he said.

The next station was only 10 minutes away, but the train stopped because we were near a stretch of single track, and we waited for two trains to pass. It was a half-hour before we got to the station and I could get to the boys, who I found covered in chocolate chip cookie crumbs. From there, with a conductor's assistance, we got back off the train again and sprinted up to re-board at the car where my wife and their little brother were. It took us five minutes to navigate the 40 feet to their seats.

Don't let the train deniers win. More train service—including high-speed rail—can't get here fast enough.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.