

TRAVEL

S A T U R D A Y , F E B R U A R Y 6 , 2 0 1 0

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All aboard

THE SUNSET LIMITED



PHOTOS: REUTERS AND BLOOMBERG

You don't need a car to see America. And if you want to meet the people and enjoy the ride, Amtrak is the way to travel

BY DOUGLAS ROGERS
THE GUARDIAN, NEW YORK

It was just before noon, 16km outside Birmingham, Alabama, that the bomb threat was called in. I was in the bar car, sipping a Coke, when the train screeched to a halt and a stewardess rushed in. “A small emergency, sir. Please exit the train.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Just a call that there may be a bomb on board.”

I looked outside. The southern sun beat down on a dusty railroad town called Irondale. I was struck with a horrific thought: This is it, I’m going to go up in a giant fireball out here in Nowheresville, Alabama. Then a second thought came to me and calmed me down: I’ve never been to Alabama. This was as good a time as any to see it. I gathered my bags and joined 200 fellow passengers in the Irondale dust, awaiting a bomb squad.

It was a scorching Saturday in mid-August, the second day of my weeklong rail journey from New York to Los Angeles. When most of us think of traveling across the US we think of taking a car, and indeed just such a road trip had long been a dream of mine. But at home in New York I had a young daughter and a seven-months’ pregnant wife. The chances of me traveling across the US at all in the next 18 years were fading fast. Then I remembered Amtrak. The US’ federally run rail service has more than two dozen routes around the country, and I discovered that you can travel from New York to Los Angeles in four days, having to change trains only once.

I pleaded with my wife to let me do it. “You’ve got a week,” she relented. “Keep your phone on in case this kid comes early.”

There were two possible ways to go: north, via Chicago, and across the midwest plains; or south, taking Amtrak’s Crescent service from New York’s Penn Station to New Orleans (27 hours), and connecting to the Sunset Limited, the oldest continually operating train in the US, a 44-hour journey from New Orleans to Los Angeles through the deserts of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. I chose the south. Not only because I could stop over in New Orleans, but one look at the route evoked old blues songs, country music and classic westerns: Tuscaloosa, El Paso, Tucson, Yuma. I booked a first-class sleeper cabin on each train and, settling on El Paso as my second stopover — is there a more quintessential wild west town? — set off to see America.

Amtrak has its detractors. The national rail service was cobbled together in 1971 from the fading passenger operations of the major freight railroads. In 38 years it has never run at a profit and is derided by many Americans as slow and over-priced, with poor customer service. I love trains, though, and I was happy to reserve judgment.

We pulled out of Penn Station at 2:15pm. My sleeper was small but comfortable. It had a bunk, two facing seats that can become a second bed, and a sink that flipped down over a poky toilet. A steward came through to ask what time I wanted dinner. I dozed off as New York’s skyscrapers gave way to New Jersey smokestacks and Pennsylvanian forest. It must have been very comfortable, for I awoke at dusk, somewhere in Virginia, having slept through Philly, Baltimore, and DC. It was time for dinner and a cocktail.

And here, I admit, the romance faded a little. In my enthusiasm I had imagined the Crescent to be a faded American version of the Orient Express, or at least as stylish as the Eurostar. Ultimately, though, it’s a no-frills commuter train. The bar car needed reupholstering, the dining car smelled of fried fish, and the middle-aged woman in charge bossed me around like a canteen matron scolding a school kid. Plus it was overbooked. “Is this the first-class dining car?” I protested as she shoved me into a booth.

“Only one dining car on the train, darlin’,” she snapped, tossing me a menu.

I ordered the short ribs (pretty good) and a mini

bottle of merlot (not so good), and dreamed up a new marketing strategy for Amtrak: tuxedoed bartenders serving martinis; plush lounge cars with poker tables and burlesque dancers. Heck, maybe even a cinema car.

“It’s good but it ain’t like grandma’s,” mumbled a voice opposite me. I woke from my reverie. An elderly gentleman was tucking into his fried chicken. His name was Turner King and he was on his way to see his sister in Atlanta, Georgia, the train’s next major stop, where we were due in at 8am. I asked him why he hadn’t flown: a plane would have taken one hour, maybe two; Atlanta was 16 hours away.

“Planes fallin’ out the sky like stones these days. We safer on the ground.”

Around midnight I went back to my cabin. North Carolina rolled past, its moonlit fields haunted with the ghosts of civil war soldiers. I felt the train strain as it eased through the Blue Ridge foothills. Ten hours later I awoke, annoyed to discover that I had missed the last breakfast call because the public address system was broken.

Then came the bomb scare.

Irondale (population 9,000), however, turned out to be something of a treat. Just back from the tracks was a line of shops that included a secondhand bookstore and a restaurant named the Irondale Cafe. I walked in to find a packed lunchtime crowd, Muddy Waters playing on a crackling blues station, and plates of fried food misting up the windows.

“What’s your speciality?” I asked the server, a young kid, possibly on his first day.

“We don’t have one,” he muttered.

The diners around me erupted.

“Yeah we do,” they shouted. “Fried green tomatoes!”

I looked at the walls. They were covered with posters for the eponymous movie and signed photographs of its stars Jessica Tandy and Kathy Bates. It turned out the Irondale Cafe was formerly the Whistle Stop Cafe, made famous by a local writer, Fannie Flagg, in her novel and the later hit film, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. I ordered a plate of the delicacy — delicious salty-sweet green slithers wrapped in a crisp batter — and called Grace, my wife. She told me New York was hot. I thought nothing of it, and bought a copy of the *Whistle Stop Cookbook*. She would like that.

Outside, sniffer dogs and soldiers inspected the train, and a local TV crew arrived. Before I knew it I was being interviewed about the bomb scare and my reason for taking a train across the US. By 2pm the train was declared safe, the call a hoax, and we were on our way.

The landscape got flatter, greener. A hot air balloon floated over a cane field outside Tuscaloosa. We eased into Mississippi. Tumbledown shacks — trucks in the yard, generations of motor parts piled high out back — rolled by. It looked pretty poor. I was keen to see to the “shimmering bayou country” mentioned in the route guide, but by the time we got to Louisiana it was dark and we arrived in New Orleans three hours late.

I didn’t mind. I’m happy arriving in New Orleans any time. I checked into the Soniat House, a gorgeous French Quarter hotel, and went out for a bourbon. I was surprised to find that, as with sailing, one gets motion sickness from being on a train for a long time. I felt wobbly, unsteady on my feet, and not even the famous brandy punch at Brennan’s Restaurant or the turtle soup at the legendary Commander’s Palace in the Garden District was able to steady me.

Up until the 1940s, wealthy east coast Americans heading west would catch steamers from New York to New Orleans, from where they would get the Sunset Limited to Los Angeles. Now, Amtrak trains rattle into New Orleans from the east coast and Chicago. The Sunset, however, remains the flagship train of the south. Established by California’s Southern Pacific in 1893,

and originally connecting San Francisco to New Orleans, it now runs three times a week between Los Angeles and Orlando, Florida; New Orleans is the mid-way stop. I checked in at 11am Monday, jazz drifting out of the station speakers, a faint hint of carnival in the air. The passengers — young couples, families with kids, European tourists, a couple of dusty young troubadours with guitars and harmonicas — gave it a holiday feel. Then I saw the train: two-decks, streamlined as a bullet. This was more like it.

Ahead of us lay 3,210km, 21 stops and five states, and there can be few more dramatic scenic train routes in the world. We cruised out of New Orleans, crossing the muddy Mississippi on the 7km-mile-long Huey Long Bridge. We headed west, through Bayou country and the Cajun coast, the historic towns of New Iberia and Lafayette. After a while, the land leveled out and we traveled parallel to a highway for several hours, giant billboards for porn shops and casinos competing with churches and exhortations to join Jesus.

The food and the service improved too. For lunch I dined on barbecued beef brisket with a lovely Napa Valley cabernet served by a graceful 1.83m-tall attendant and part-time actress named Deborah Reese. She told me she had bit roles in *Paradise Cove* and some reality shows. “I was just on the Crescent line,” I told her. “This is much better.”

She winked at me. “Baby, we from Hollywood. We do things in style.”

The announcer, named Jose, was part of the new mood, too, joking as we arrived in Houston, that the train would leave the station at 9:50pm — according to his watch, no one else’s. “Not to worry if we’ve gone when you get back,” he said, “because, there are some good



IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

» **Amtrak** (+1 800 872 7245, amtrak.com) runs both trains. **The Crescent** from New York to New Orleans: from US\$125 per seat; US\$178 per roomette; US\$328 per bedroom. **The Sunset Limited** from New Orleans to Los Angeles: from US\$133 per seat; US\$236 per roomette; US\$512 per bedroom

WHERE TO STAY

» **The Soniat House**, New Orleans (+1 504 522-0570, soniatthouse.com) rooms from US\$240 per night
» **The Camino Real Hotel**, El Paso bed and breakfast (+1 915 534-3000, caminoreal.com) rooms from US\$159 per night

FURTHER INFORMATION

» **New Orleans:** neworleanscvb.com and louisianatravel.com
» **Texas:** traveltex.com
» **El Paso:** visiteelpaso.com

blues clubs in Houston and we’ll be back in two days to pick you up.”

I woke to a spectacular view of the west Texas desert beyond San Antonio, and made my way to the observation car, a sleek, 70-seat, top-level deck glassed in like a gallery. We sat back and watched the great canvas of the Texas desert unfold before us.

Around Del Rio, a border town on the Rio Grande, two park rangers boarded the train, part of Amtrak’s Tracks & Rails program, and for the next three hours pointed out cactus, exotic wild flowers, names of lakes and rivers. We were soon in the Chihuahuan desert, watching turkey buzzards circle the heavens, tumbleweed blown rail-road towns ghosting by.

By now the train had turned into the great democracy, passengers excitedly talking to each other, telling their stories. I met Opal Davis, 56, from Chicago, on her way to Los Angeles because she had just discovered that her biological mother, whom she’d never met, was alive and well and living in an old people’s home. There was Guadalupe and Angie Sanchez, a mother and daughter from a blue-blood Tex-Mex family: Angie, tough as nails, was returning home from a spell running armed convoys in Iraq. Now she was off to flying school. And there was Louisa So (蘇玉華), a beautiful Hong Kong tourist on a four-week train journey across America. I say tourist. She gave me her Web site address and I looked her up. Turns out she’s a famous actress.

By the time we barreled through Marfa — the artsy west Texas town that has been the backdrop for the Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*, Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* and George Stevens’ *Giant*, James Dean’s last movie — the entire carriage had broken out in song, Opal Davis leading the way with Smokey Robinson and Otis Redding tunes, with even the dining car stewards joining in. Indeed, when we reached El Paso at around 5pm, my second stopover, I felt rather attached to my new friends and sad to be leaving them. I would catch the train again in two days’ time.

El Paso is hot, dusty, sprawling. I’d half expected a film-set wild-west town, wide streets lined with swing-door saloons; it looked more like a war zone. In fact, just across the Rio Grande, fenced off and seething, lies its Mexican sister, Ciudad Juarez, currently the most dangerous city on earth. More than 3,400 people have been murdered in drug-related violence in Juarez in the past 20 months. El Paso is Geneva by comparison.

A friend had recommended a downtown hotel, the Camino Real, a 14-story tower block close to the station. I walked there in blazing sunshine, cursing myself for not choosing Tucson as my second stop. I arrived at the back entrance. It looked like an airport hotel. Who would recommend this? I opened the door. And there, spread out before me was the most glorious sight: a plush, cool, carpeted lounge bar with a circular marble counter centerpiece, all set below a giant glass ceiling dome. It looked like a church. “Welcome,” smiled a bartender. “Margarita?” I felt I was in paradise.

My mobile rang. It hadn’t been working right through the desert. It was my wife. She didn’t sound well. My heart raced. “Listen, I don’t want you to worry, but ...”

She was in hospital, on a drip, laid low by a heat wave. Our unborn child was fine, but she would be in hospital for two days. I would book the next flight out of El Paso. I still hadn’t made it across the US ... but I had an idea. The four of us would take a steam ship from New York to New Orleans. From there we would catch the Sunset Limited out west. This land seemed filled with possibilities. Outside, somewhere near New Mexico, a train whistle blew.

Douglas Rogers (douglasrogers.org) is the author of *The Last Resort: A Memoir of Zimbabwe*, published by *Harmony*.