

A Most Memorable Journey

In the summer of 2011, I took an extended trip to California for a mathematical research workshop. On the way home, I traveled north to Canada then spent four and a half wonderful days riding a passenger train called the *Canadian* from Vancouver to Toronto. Now I am admittedly a train buff (or, to put it less politely, a real foamer). I live by the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem *Travel* (the one that ends "there isn't a train I wouldn't take, no matter where it's going"). But even for train buffs, the *Canadian* is something really special – a sort of Holy Grail, the only remaining great streamliner cruise train on this continent. The "consist" (that's foamer speak for the roster of cars making up the train) includes lovingly-maintained stainless steel coaches, lounges, sleeping cars, sight-seeing dome cars, and dining cars. The route includes some unforgettable scenery. In short, this train puts anything on the United States' sorry Amtrak passenger rail system to complete shame. (I have ridden almost all of Amtrak's trains at one time or another, so I know what I'm talking about. Maybe you do too.) In short, taking this trip was something I had wanted to do for years and it was one of the first items to be crossed off my bucket list.

If you haven't taken this kind of trip, I imagine you're thinking to yourself, "what *on earth* would anyone do for four and half days *on a train*, much of that time out of the range of cell phone service and wireless internet?" The simple answers are: you might bring good books and read if you are so inclined, you will probably eat more than you should of the delicious food in the dining car, you can go to the lounge car and chat with fellow passengers, you should take hikes during the extended service stops along the way. Or maybe you will just stare out the window for hours as the majestic Canadian Rockies, the vast wheat fields of Alberta and Manitoba, the deep woods of the Ontario Shield, the tiny trackside hamlets and the cities of Jasper, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, and finally Toronto roll past. By the way, most of the tourists who take this train leave after the first day or so, when the *Canadian* comes down out of the Rockies and the most spectacular mountain vistas (and the full-length dome lounge car) are left behind. But that's really when the full long-distance train travel experience starts! You get into long conversations over meals with fellow travelers like the Australian sheep-farming couple who are also making a trip they have dreamed of for years. You make friends and share surprisingly personal confidences with people you may never see again. You have time to really think.

Admittedly, I'm not a digital native in the ways most of you probably are; being connected and accessible 24-7-365 is not the way I grew up. If you did grow up that way, the biggest surprise the first time you take one of these trips might be this: being disconnected from the rest of the world but cocooned in a safe and comfortable environment might be one of most *liberating* experiences you will ever have. So much of the irrelevant hustle and bustle and the distractions of everyday, media-fueled life just aren't there any more. Coming home after a trip like this you cannot help but feel refreshed and re-energized. I'm hoping to do this again soon, and I might just combine this trip with a corridor train from Toronto to Montreal, then one of VIA Rail Canada's other long-distance overnight trains, the *Ocean*, from Montreal to Halifax, Nova Scotia. I hope you all have the chance to do something like this some time too!