

Time for a New Deal for Train Travel

EDITORIAL AND PHOTO
BY TERENCE BAKER



Amtrak just celebrated its 40th birthday, but, sadly, no one's partying. Trains should be encouraged, hopefully with willingly paid fares, rather than tax dollars. One reason: full trains = emptier roads.

I adore old and/or deluxe trains, of which I have a "collection," (as I do stamps ([Notebook, Oct. 2010](#)) and journeys to geographical extremities ([Notebook, April 2010](#))) but today, they're fewer and fewer in number. I still want them to exist, but when they disappear...well, it's akin to bemoaning disappearing bookstores and then asking, well, how much did I spend in them?

Trains of yore possess resplendent interiors, sepia images of Chicago and Ruhr Valley steelworkers, enthralling espionage intrigues and Agatha Christie whodunits and forward motion through scenic canvases. Growing up, I read Rogers E.M. Whitaker, 50 years a train writer for *The New Yorker* under pseudonym E.M. Frimbo, and watched on PBS, the BBC's *Great Railway Journeys*, wondering whether I'd complete those journeys without the BBC's clout. One presenter, novelist Lisa St. Aubin de Terán, who wrote *Off the Rails: Memoirs of a Train Addict*, traveled from Brazil's São Paulo to Bolivia's Santa Cruz, a fairly miraculous achievement; Whitaker traveled 2.7 million train miles, many on American track now lamentably devoid of passengers.

Steam trains and early diesels once

blowing life now collect rust and romantics' sighs. I've seen giants colonized by scrub in Bodie ghost town in California's Sierra Nevada, decorated with Soviet stars in Budapest railyards, destitute at the mouth of Colombia's mighty Magdalena River and sheltered beneath snow-swept hills in Ny-Ålesund, the world's northernmost town. In Alaska sits one patiently overseeing abandoned mining town Solomon but which in 1880 worked on New York City's High Line.

Many old trains serve "heritage railways," a horrid train-speak term that screams "day out." I've enjoyed two, the Three Rivers Rambler, whistling from downtown Knoxville to the Tennessee River, and the Valley Railroad in Snoqualmie, Wash., setting for 90's TV series *Twin Peaks*. The train ending in Esquel, Argentina, made famous in Paul Theroux's travel classic, *The Old Patagonian Express*, was declared a national monument. I'd prefer to see classic trains going everywhere but rather anonymously, stealing into towns sans group fares and faux Victorian stationmasters.

A pipedream? Well, in 25 years of traveling, I've found several: From Bogotá to the Zipaquirá salt mines on a clunking Colombian thing of few passengers; between Moin and Guápiles, the first Costa Rican passenger train in 10 years, but now, as it was before, the sole privilege of bananas; on the Lake Titicaca-to-Cusco Express, since gussied up, hawkers and musicians shoed off; on the *Majestic*

Imperator from Vienna to Graz; from Rome to Frascati, leaving from a platform 500 feet from the others (like Harry Potter traveling to Hogwarts from Platform 9¾?); even on the Panama Canal from Miraflores lock to San Lorenzo fort amid specters of Spanish *conquistadores*.

Abandoned and unmanned stations, I love, too. Joyous examples await in Corrou, featured in Scottish movie *Trainspotting*, amid Rannoch Moor near Loch Ossian, the nearest road 10 miles away; in Berney Arms, Norfolk, far closer to London, where the two daily trains that stop there won't unless you ask; in Uruguay's Colonia del Sacramento; in California's Chinese Camp, a former goldrush site, and in Denmark's Laugø, basically a guardrail between Hillerød and Tisvildeleje.

Is it naïve to suggest that such trains benefit the soul and thus might benefit the country? Should *everything* be economically justifiable? Wouldn't communities still beside train lines desire actually *seeing* passenger dollars, not just cargo? Some politicians are demanding a new "New Deal" infrastructure program, so couldn't we start by replicating something approximating the Golden Age of E.M. Frimbo?

Yes, I'm probably dreaming, but that'd be a day of rebirth I'd certainly celebrate, especially as more trains also equal less crowded roads.

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Terence Baker is the managing editor of this magazine.