



Low and Slow:

Amtrak's California Zephyr Takes its Time

By **Eric Elkins**

“I've always wanted to do that!”

It's the refrain I hear again and again when I mention that my daughter spent 30 hours on Amtrak's famed route to the West Coast. I mean, haven't we all seen the train cars stop in at Denver's Union Station and wondered what it might be like to just hop on one and see where it takes us?

We finally pulled the trigger while drinking Father's Day “blendies” from Union Station's Pigtrain Coffee, sitting on a bench outside and dreaming of our next daddy-daughter escape. A scuba trip to Mexico was out of the question. No way we could visit family in London. The summer of Covid left us with few options.

But... what about a long, slow train ride into the west over the July 4 holiday weekend? We could socially distance-visit my mom in Sacramento for a few days and then make our way back home. I googled the trip from my phone as we sat there, watching A-Line arrivals from DIA drag their rollies along the platform.

The California Zephyr's 51-hour western journey starts in Chicago, wending its way across the Great Plains before arriving in Denver around 7 a.m. every single day of the week. It arrives at its terminus in Emeryville, California late the next afternoon, making its way through the Rocky Mountains, along the Great Salt Lake and Utah's salt flats (too late at night to see anything), before climbing the Sierra Nevadas and winding down the trip through Sacramento and on to the East Bay. And then it takes the same route back.

My cursory look at tickets had them at \$115 per person to Sacramento, which was thrilling. But when I dug further, I realized the least-expensive sleeper (a roomette) would set us back \$300 per person, one way. That included food and non-alcoholic drinks, but still. The Family Bedroom (with four beds) or a spacious Bedroom will set you back closer to \$450 per person.

But without a major trip in the works this summer, throwing down \$600 (plus flights back) seemed justifiable.

And I'm so glad I booked it.

On the morning of our departure, my daughter and I walked over to Union Station in time to grab some coffee beverages and get in line (masked up) at the platform. We were directed to our two-story train car, where we were guided to our personal sleeper upstairs. But what at first seemed way too small for two people and their stuff (I had to drag my suitcase back down to the public luggage rack below), turned out to be a cozy space for us to share. Comfy upholstered seats faced each other, with a pull-down tray table between the two. The windows were high and large, and after we stowed our big grocery bag o' snacks and carry-ons, we had room to lounge. My daughter and I are neither tall nor wide, but we definitely didn't have a lot of space to move.

Due to coronavirus precautions, Amtrak has made some fundamental changes to the travel situation. People who opt for roomettes and bedrooms can take off their masks when in their private rooms, and have use of the dining car for meals. Coach passengers must keep their masks on for the entire journey (except when eating), and have use of cafe services.

The sleeper cars have their own communal bathrooms (some with showers), but the Covid ick factor kept us very careful when using them. We went through a LOT of antibacterial gel on that ride.

Once the train had left the station and was winding through the mountains of the Front Range en route to Winter Park, we decided to hit up the dining car for breakfast and more caffeine. The Covid thing also means a limited menu, so I ate a microwave egg sandwich while my daughter dined on yogurt and a packaged muffin. But the scenery was so grand, we didn't really care. In fact, because we'd arrived after the breakfast rush, the dining car was empty, so we spent the next few hours reading our Agatha Christie train-themed mysteries and ogling the absurdly beautiful scenery through the massive picture windows of the car.

In fact, pretty much all we did until the train stopped at the Salt Lake City station late that night was read, snack, and stare out the windows for hours at a time (with some lazy cat naps here and there). The California Zephyr doesn't have WiFi, and spends long stretches of the route out of mobile service range. I thought I might get some work done along the way, but really couldn't.

Which was glorious.

Before we left the dining car, the attendant asked us for our lunch orders — which we could have delivered to our room or eat there at a reserved time (due to distancing, only every-other table would be available for the duration of the trip). We chose to have food dropped off and made a reservation for dinner in the car.



From Fraser to Glenwood Springs to Grand Junction, the California Zephyr follows the Colorado River, winding along wide open green valleys full of grasses and low-lying trees, red rock canyons with stone bluffs that almost block out the blue skies above, through dozens of tunnels, moving sure-footedly along sheer cliffs that drop straight down to the sun-dappled river. The scenery is never less than stunning, with the occasional pastoral view of anglers waist-deep in water, rafters navigating rapids, and endless wildlife like antelope, deer, eagles, and hawks (we were told views of bears and elk are not uncommon).

I'd look up from “The Mystery of the Blue Train” to find myself transported by the views for hours at a time. Neither of us could believe the day had gone by so quickly when our 6:30 dinner reservation reminder popped up on my phone.

I'm very fortunate, because my 20-year-old daughter is a lot like me and has no problem doing nothing for long stretches of time. Neither of us got antsy just hanging out and watching the world go by. This kind of trip is not for everyone, because it forces you to slow down, breathe, and just be. It's pure magic, but only if you're able to let go and be open to it.

We took dinner in the car, served by an attendant who wasn't super-careful to keep his nose from popping out of the top of his mask, which wasn't awesome. The food wasn't terrible — a reheated platter of beef and potatoes for me and vegetarian Asian pan-fried noodles for my girl. Basically, slightly upscale airplane meals.

I took advantage of my one free alcoholic drink with a mini bottle of whiskey, which felt about right as we traveled our old-timey way through the wide-open stretches of eastern Utah, through sun-baked hills, golden-hued ridges in the distance. Looking outside, it could have been any year between 1840 and 2020. The train never felt like it was going particularly fast, and the slow roll just made us feel more aligned with the travelers who rode those same rails 150 years before us.

We hit Provo at true dusk, having chased several sunsets in the last hour as the mountains waxed and waned, dropping down into the valley and skirting the city, barely stopping long enough to pick up passengers and chug up to SLC. We put off turning on our cabin lights as long as possible, watching as the streetlights in the suburbs sprinkled awake as we passed.

Excited to stretch our legs, we stepped out of our coach around 10:30pm, thinking we'd explore the Salt Lake City Amtrak station and find a snack and a stationary bathroom. But there are no amenities there — just a concrete pad and a light rail stop with a low-slung, one-room ticket office. So we took in the dry air and clear skies, wandered up and down the platform, then headed back to our little space to reset it for the night.

In a roomette, you press foot pedals to bring the two seats together and flatten them out into a bed. And then you pull down the hatch above until it clicks into its settings to become a bunk. It has its own sheeted mattress and an extra one on top for the lower bunk, so I dragged that one down and set it up for myself. Once my daughter was ensconced in the top bunk, I attached the safety webbing to keep her from rolling over the side. With the bedtime configuration in place, standing inside our cabin was no longer an option. We both lay in the dark a little while, listening to the rattling of the train along the tracks, the vibrations of anything that wasn't tightened down inside our sleeper, and sort of slept for the next few hours.

Flashes of dawn started punctuating the room through a gap in the curtains around six, but I managed to snooze in and out of consciousness until eight or so. I could hear my daughter shifting around above me, so I pulled the shades back to reveal the windswept yellow hills of western Nevada. We rolled into Reno a few minutes later.



By the time we got up to the dining car for breakfast, they were out of any hot items, so we consoled ourselves with yogurt and instant oatmeal, enjoying the steady incline into the high Sierras, dry scrub giving way to evergreens and oak.

Neither of us was ready to pack up our stuff and leave the train when it began to slow down at our stop just outside of Sacramento around 2 o'clock that afternoon. We wanted to keep basking in the quiet peace of enforced idleness, in no hurry to join the manic news cycle and strife of the outside world again.

Eric Elkins loves food and travel, and is craving both right now. He owns WideFoc.us Social Media, an agency he founded in 2007, and has been making a lot of homemade pasta lately.