

Darienite

News for Darien

<http://darienite.com>

If You've Never Taken a Long Distance Train, You're Missing Out: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

Categories : [Opinion](#), [Transportation](#)

Tagged as : [Cameron on Transportation](#), [Cameron on Transportation 2017](#), [Jim Cameron 2017](#)[Jim Cameron's Transportation Column](#)

Date : September 24, 2017

How did you spend your summer vacation? Probably by traveling, but hopefully without the disruptions my wife and I experienced.

In August we flew to Chicago and drove to Wisconsin. That journey was relatively on time. But the return trip became an adventure when our return flight from O'Hare airport was delayed five hours, and then cancelled, due to bad weather.

As any regular reader of this column knows, I'm no fan of flying. So I was happy to be grounded rather than fly through thunder storms. But how to get home? Why not the train?

Darienite

News for Darien

[*http://darienite.com*](http://darienite.com)

There are three daily trains from Chicago to New York: the relatively speedy Lake Shore Limited, which follows the route of the old Twentieth Century Ltd; the Capitol Limited, which goes by way of Washington, D.C.; and the thrice-weekly Cardinal, which meanders way far south into West Virginia, along to D.C. and then N.Y.C.

Luckily, we were able to book a bedroom on the Cardinal, a.k.a. “the bird,” so named because the cardinal is the state bird of West Virginia and because this slow-poke of a train was rescued from being cut by then U.S. Sen. Harry Byrd of West Virginia.

While the Lake Shore Limited makes its trip in 20 hours, and the Capitol in 23 hours, the Cardinal takes 27 hours to go from Chicago to New York. That’s a long ride, even for a rail fan (and longer still for my saintly wife).

As sleeping car passengers, we waited departure in the beautiful new Metropolitan Lounge at Chicago’s Union Station from which we had priority boarding of the train where our attendant helped us get settled and showed us our new home for the next night and day.

If you’ve never taken a long distance train you’re missing out on a real adventure. Our bedroom had upper and lower berths, a private bathroom which doubled as a shower, and comfy day-chairs to watch the scenery roll by.

As a member of Amtrak’s Guest Rewards program, this \$1,200 bedroom was free thanks to all the points I’ve accumulated riding Acela in the Northeast. Also included in the fare were four meals: two dinners, a breakfast and lunch, for my wife and myself.

Mind you, “the Bird” doesn’t have a fancy dining car with cooked-to-order meals like the Lake Shore and Capitol Ltd. No, we ate in something like a Café Car with pre-plated, pre-cooked, frozen meals which were microwaved. The food was far better than airline food, but hardly the cuisine of years past since Amtrak has been under pressure to cut costs, especially in food service.

It’s expensive to provide good meal service on a train. But when passengers are paying \$1,200, they expect — and deserve — better than frozen food. But as a captive audience, what choice did we have but to gobble down what was offered?

The train’s meandering route was smooth, so we slept well. And the daylight portion of the route was certainly attractive as we journeyed along river valleys past some beautiful scenery. But we had no observation car, unlike the Capitol Ltd.

“On time” is a relative term and shouldn’t be your reason to take a train. Sure we were an hour late into New York City, but by then we had a real rail adventure to talk about.

Darienite

News for Darien

<http://darienite.com>

More of Jim Cameron's Columns

- [Cruising — Dreamy Boats & Garbage Dumping](#) (Jan. 6)
- [Testifying on a Bill in Hartford: 'Not Any More. It's a Waste of Time.'](#) (Feb. 16)
- [Less Driving, More Walking — Better Downtown Economies](#) (March 16)
- [The Enormous, Beautiful, Amazing George Washington Bridge](#) (March 23)
- [State Should Regulate Uber, Lyft, Limo Services & Taxis Uniformly](#) (March 31)
- [The Great 10-Hour, New York-to-Chicago Railroad That Never Was](#) (April 21)
- [Cramming Passengers on Planes Is Not Just Uncomfortable, It's Also Unsafe](#) (May 19)
- [Connecticut: Getting There and Back for Ages: Cameron on Transportation](#) (July 14)
- [Adventures in Toll Collecting: From Woodstock's Zonked to the Malodorous Chicken Truck](#) (Sept. 3)
- [Bring the Kids and See Railroad History Come Alive at Several CT Rail Museums: Cameron on Transportation](#) (Sept. 10)
- [Overnight 'Sleeper' Bus Service Has Started in California — Is It Coming to the East Coast?](#) (Sept. 18)

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

Republished with permission of Hearst CT Media.