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Historic Dreams of Big Trains: Supertrain, Superliners, Taggart Comet, Breitspurbahn — Cameron on Transportation

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What do Ayn Rand, Hollywood and Adolph Hitler have in common?

They all dreamed of building super-trains.

Maybe it was because their visions for giant, high-speed trains came before the era of cheap flights moving large numbers of people over great distances, but each of them had a grandiose vision of fast, luxurious rail travel.

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In her 1957 novel “Atlas Shrugged,” Rand made the construction of a coast-to-coast train, “The Taggart Comet,” central to the plot of her dystopian America set some time in the future. In an era of crumbling infrastructure, the construction of an 8-mile rail tunnel under the continental divide saw mismanagement lead to [a fatal passage](#), killing all on board.

Fast forward 22 years and NBC was still dreaming of high-speed, transcontinental rail travel, this time on “Supertrain.” This fictitious nuclear-powered cruise-ship-on-rails would zoom from New York to Los Angeles in 36 hours at a cruising speed of 190 mph.

Equipped with a [swimming pool, disco, infirmary and shopping center](#), the double-decker train was so big it had to run on a broad-gauge track. One-way tickets in a roomette were \$450.

The life-sized set for the show’s shooting looked tacky, and the few cutaway shots of the \$10 million Supertrain [scale-model](#) cruising across the country were unconvincing. Of course, the show wasn’t about the train but the people who rode it, like a “Loveboat” on land. The vision of TV mogul Fred Silverman, the [show was a disaster](#) and lasted only one season.

Mind you, by 1979 when Supertrain was taking to air, Amtrak debuted its own double-deck long distance trains, dubbed [Superliners](#). The cars still run today on such trains as The Empire Builder (Seattle to Chicago) and the California Zephyr (San Francisco to Chicago). But these trains are more ballast than bullet, with a (rarely achieved) top speed of 100 mph. And though they do offer a dining car and glass-topped observation lounge, there is no pool or disco.

What inspired Rand, NBC and Amtrak to such rail dreams? It might have been Adolph Hitler.

Early during World War II, Hitler was thinking and building big. Berlin was to be rebuilt as [Welthauptstadt Germania](#), capital of the world. And to move people across conquered Europe, the network of Autobahns was to be complimented with the [Breitspurbahn](#), translated as broad-gauge railroad, with trains twice as wide as standard gauge.

The locomotives’ designs ranged from traditional steam to gas turbine, but the rail cars would make Supertrain pale in comparison. Each double-deck car would be 138 feet long, 20 feet wide and 23 feet tall, the size of a small house.

The train would be a third of a mile long carrying 2,000 to 4,000 passengers at 120 mph. On board would be a 196-seat cinema, barbershop, sauna and a dining car for 176. Daytime and night seating (and sleepers) would be offered in three classes. Additionally, a single car could carry up to 450 [slave laborers](#). There was also room for several 20mm anti-aircraft guns.

Hitler had a team of 100 top engineers working on the railroad’s design right up until the end of the war, though a prototype was never built.

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Today we have any number of super-fast trains, but none as large as earlier generations had imagined.

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