

8 Replies to “Travelogue: Edmonds to Chicago via the Amtrak Coast Starlight”

myedmondsnews.com/2019/02/travelogue-edmonds-to-chicago-via-the-amtrak-coast-starlight

February 9, 2019



Amtrak train passing Alviso Marina (By Don DeBold from San Jose, Calif, courtesy Wikipedia)

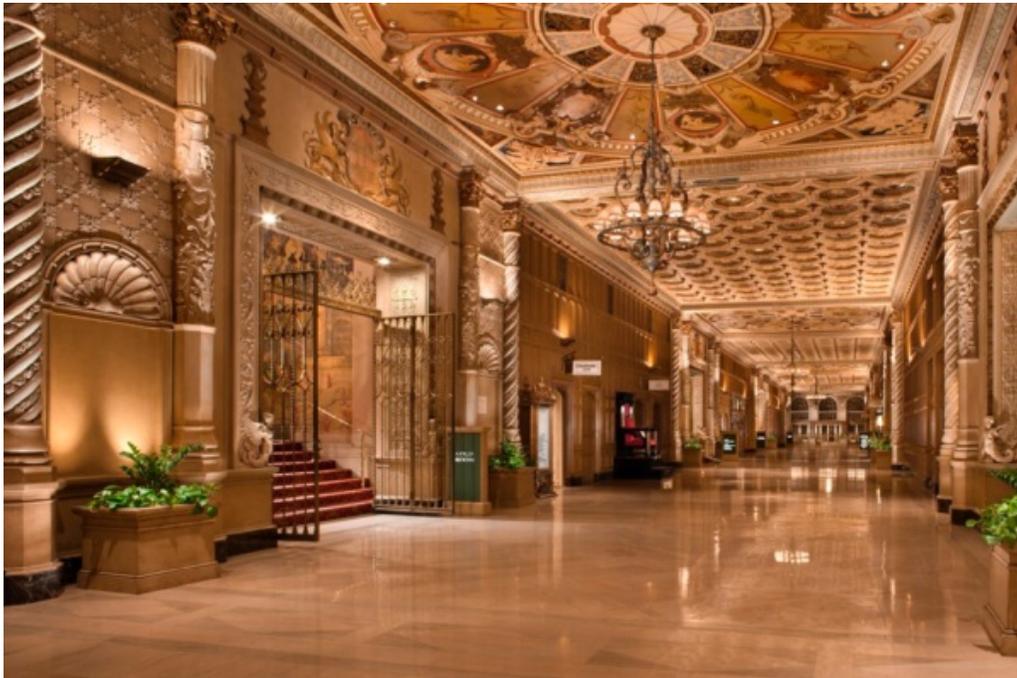
Part 1 of 2

Tuesday, Jan. 22

There are four Amtrak routes across the Western United States. The northern route, with the Empire Builder, crosses to Chicago not far below the Canadian border, and passes through Glacier Park, beginning and ending, if you will, in Seattle, which means it very conveniently passes through Edmonds both ways. The “northern middle route” heads east from Sacramento, passing through Utah, Nevada, and Colorado on the way to Chicago, and the Colorado stretch provides some magnificent scenery. To catch this train, you need to take the Coast Starlight from Seattle (with an easy connection from Edmonds, via the Sounder). It’s an overnight trip, reaching Sacramento at about 7 a.m. The stretch down from Washington is less dramatic than the northern route, but you get a wonderful feeling for the enormous energy and fertility of the western coastal region as you pass endless fields along the way.

There is a southern route, which winds its way to New Orleans, but this year I am taking the “southern middle route,” which stretches by way of the Coast Starlight from Los Angeles, then through Arizona and New Mexico before swinging north to Chicago. There is no better way to see the western two-thirds of the United States than these routes — and next year I intend to take the New Orleans route, if it is still open.

This year, at this season, packing is a problem: rain gear for Edmonds and Seattle, warm-weather clothes for Los Angeles – and then blizzards and 15 degrees in Chicago! Sleeping compartments are small, so the way to pack is a large suitcase full of rain and winter gear, and a small backpack or gym-sized bag for the compartment. There is baggage storage on the lower deck, and the sleeping compartments are on the upper deck, with great views — and this year, by luck, I’m on the right-hand side of the train with a magnificent view of lower Puget Sounds before dark, and glimpses of San Francisco and Golden Gate after breakfast. We reach Los Angeles at 9 p.m. tomorrow, and I’ve reserved a room at the Millennium Biltmore for two nights. Another one to add to my collection of Grand Old Hotels!



The Biltmore Lobby

You see evidence of the energy of America in the huge fields and the industrial sites backed up to the railroad tracks. You also see also some of the “underbelly” of our country: endless garbage dumped “down by the tracks,” tent encampments and as we get further south, people living under bridges. It appears that the thing to dump by the tracks in Oregon is shopping carts; in California it seems to be plastic bags full of garbage, and the *real* California specialty: graffiti. Graffiti seems to cover almost everything from bridge piers

through warehouse walls to most — can it be that many? — freight cars. Some of it is pretty accomplished — and some of it in amazingly out-of-reach high places. Almost an art form — or is it an art form? And how do they get that high up?

Amtrak sleepers are comfortable and clean. The seats can recline, or make into beds at night — an upper and a lower. The beds are narrow, but comfortable, and the sheets are clean and crisp. The coffee's good, too! My only complaint is the non-stop, repetitive announcements over the PA system, often repeated, often "clever" and sometimes halting: You think the announcement is over, long pause, and just as you get back into your book or conversation — back again. Does "I'm coming through to get dinner reservations" followed by "I'm done with dinner reservations in the sleepers, and now I'll be coming through the coaches" *really* needed? Just try napping, or making a phone call!

Praise is also due: I thought I was leaving Los Angeles on Friday, Jan. 25, only to discover that my ticket said *Dec. 25, 2018!* I called Amtrak on my cell phone from the roomette, and after a 10-minute hold (*who* picks that music?) I got a very helpful agent — and we went into a tunnel! The next try got through, and in less than 10 minutes I had a new reservation.

Wednesday, Jan. 23

We're now just out of San Luis Obispo. Dinner before arrival is served early, at 5 or 5:30, but as a sleeper passenger I can order dinner to my room, and after breakfast with Mr. Cheerful (Do *not* speak to me before coffee, and especially don't try to engage me in a cheerful conversation before breakfast and my second cup!) I think I'll dine *en suite*.

I haven't been in California since a road trip in 1972, so everything comes as a surprise and a delight. The first view of the famous skyline of San Francisco across the sparkling bay, with the iconic red-orange towers of the Golden Gate Bridge further up the bay — who wouldn't be thrilled and impressed?

From San Francisco we continued south — endless fields and then rolling hills. The hills, with the tracks winding through them, curve after curve, all treeless and at this season green clad with low brush and grass that look velvet in the distance, and then suddenly at about 5 o'clock, we came around a corner, and looking up a valley — the sea in the distance! I couldn't help but think of Edith Hamilton's description of the "march up country" of the Greek soldiers fleeing Persia, which I read years ago in school:

So, always cold and sometime freezing, always hungry and sometimes starving, and always, always fighting, they held their own. No one by now had any clear idea where in the world they were. One day, Xenophon, riding in the rear, putting his

horse up a steep hill, heard a great noise in front. A tumult was carried back to him by the wind, loud cries and shouting. An ambush, he thought, and calling to the others to follow at full speed, he drove his horse forward. No enemy was on the hilltop, only the Greeks. They were standing, all facing the same way, with tears running down their faces, their arms stretched out to what they saw before them. The shouting swelled into a great roar, "The sea! The sea!"

The passage thrills me as much today as when I first read it 50-odd years ago. But I must quote one more sentence: *"It was the middle of January [today is the 23rd]. They had left Cunaxa on the seventh of September. In four months they had marched well on two thousand miles."*

Well, I've come almost that far in the last almost 36 hours — and there was the sea, now dark. It was moving to watch the water turn a darker blue as the sun went down, a solitary ship just to the right of the path of the sun on the water, a few clouds — pure Turner. Or perhaps Homer's "wine-dark sea." Very, very beautiful.

I am struck by how much empty space there is in California. I've seen vast fields, green hillsides with pasture, ranches, miles of empty beach with here cliffs above the beach (in places the tracks run frighteningly close to the edge!) or there gentle hills rolling down to the line of rollers — and so few people. I want to explore much more of all this. But now we're almost to Los Angeles, so it's time to gather things up.

Thursday, Jan. 24

Yesterday I Ubered to Hollyhock House at Barnsdall Art Park. This was the first time I have used Uber, and I admit I'm now sold on it — except in London, where the taxi drivers know everywhere and everything.



Hollyhock House (By Sfoskett – courtesy Wikipedia)

Hollyhock House was built by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1919-1921 for Aline Barnsdal. It is superb. The house has recently been restored, work still ongoing. I have only twice before seen a house where every element was part of one painstaking design of every element (Spencer House, by John Vardy and “Athenian” Stuart, in London; and Castle Drogo in Cornwall, by Edward Lutjens, with a garden by Gertrude Jekyll). The effect is an astonishing unity of detail, and while I try to avoid adjectives such as “breathtaking,” Hollyhock House is both thrilling and stunning: I could only stand behind the ropes and soak it in. Every detail fits, there is wood everywhere, and each major room opens to the outside, taking in the outdoors and the view almost as part of the room. Transitional passages have very low, almost oppressive ceilings, so that when you enter a high-ceilinged major room, the feel is of compression and then and release which emphasizes the large space you enter. The textures of the wooden furniture and the stone and concrete are part of the overall design as well. The house is quite simply a revelation. Words can do it no justice. If you ever can, see it!

I should also give a shout for the Biltmore Hotel. A grand sweep of lobby and galleries in a synthesis of Renaissance Revival, Mediterranean Revival, and Beaux Arts styles with the feel of the 20’s. Eight Oscar ceremonies were held in the Biltmore in 1931, 1935–39, and 1941–42. Clean, large rooms, great food in the various restaurants, and an excellent downtown watering hole in the bar.

Saturday, Jan. 26

Back in the train, the Southwest Chief. We are slowly climbing into the mountains above Albuquerque. After a morning of vast stretches of emptiness, something very different: red rock, with occasional stripes of yellow or gray, evergreens and some ponderosa, snow lying on north-facing hills. It's superb. There is some melt going on: every now and then we pass a stream running muddy red from erosion, and the train winds its way through canyons, moving very slowly with the climb. After the coastal stretch Wednesday, this is the first feast of wild outdoor magnificence; it is blowing hard outside — trees and bushes are bending and weaving in the wind.

The snow has me feeling like an exile. After a lifetime in the ski business, which I loved, being lightly disabled means no skiing. But looking out the window I can almost smell the snow — heavily metamorphosed, crusted snow, with here and there wind ripples where the snow has drifted a bit. It reminds me of spring races, whether in Europe or the U.S. — sunshine, bright snow, fresh air... But it looks as if I'll get some winter yet: Chicago reports 5 degrees Fahrenheit with chances of snow, and wind. Oh boy!

— *By Nathaniel Brown*

Edmonds resident Nathaniel Brown taught and coached cross-country running and skiing for 16 years before joining the US Biathlon Team as wax technician, switching to the U.S. Cross-Country team in 1989. He coached at three Olympics and 14 World Championships, edited Nordic Update for nine years and Cross-Country Skier for two. He has written three books on skiing and training. He owned and operated Nordic UltraTune, an international freelance ski tuning service, until retirement seven years ago.