

United States | On a multi-stop book tour, writer and train devotee Bella Pollen sets out to find if Amtrak can still deliver the romance of the railway

When I decided to do an east/west US book tour by train, my publishers all but sniggered. Americans are not proud of their national rail service, they warned. Amtrak's reach was limited, they said. It was also reliably late, with bilious food and toilet facilities not to be discussed in front of the squeamish. Perhaps, but I love trains; I love them for their mechanical beauty, for the switches and signals that guide them, for the architectural marvels that house them. I have only to gaze upon the cascading display of a departure board to wonder at the adventure it promises.

Then I tried booking. Amtrak's online route planner can be geographically mystifying to the uninitiated. When I typed in a proposed journey from Atlanta to Nashville – a four-hour drive – the suggested itinerary zigzagged north (14hrs) then west (13hrs) before being bussed 11 hours back south. Total travel time, including roughing it between connections? Forty-seven hours. God knows Lewis and Clarke managed to steer a straighter course than this, and that was before the US was even mapped.

Trains were once the most romantic means of travel. They changed our perception of distance, shrinking and expanding the world while offering a moving window on to the grandeur of its landscapes. Whatever happened to the gilded age of the railway – and is Amtrak's story really as sorry as billed?

A far cry from New York's heavenly Grand Central is its ugly sister, Penn Station, a place of transit hell, where, stupefied by baffling signage, I find myself in the Amtrak holding bay, angst-ridden and prisoner of the last-minute boarding announcements, each of which have resulted in a near riot at the ticket barrier.

Still, if the virtual and civic faces of Amtrak suck, the trains themselves are the domain of the guards who run them. On discovering I'm British, head conductor Arthur (New York to Washington) serenades me with a cup of tea and a history lesson. In 1850 America built her first steam locomotive, Tom Thumb. Despite being beaten in an impromptu race by a horse-drawn carriage, steam locomotion took off. By 1850 most cities in the north were linked to those in the Midwest, with roughly 80 per cent of corn-belt farms within spitting distance of a station.

But over-extension led to disaster. Twenty years later, J Cooke & Co, the principal backers of the Northern Pacific Railroad, went bankrupt, setting off a chain reaction that caused the Panic of 1873. Within two months, 55 railroads had failed. JP Morgan, the New York robber baron, muscled the system back together towards the end of the century and Woodrow Wilson nationalised it during the first world war. Now government-owned and heavily subsidised, Amtrak is a massive loss-making enterprise. Running just over 300 trains a day, it represents a tiny fraction of US commuter trips. The guards are fiercely loyal to favourite routes but all agree: in the US, the car killed the train and re-drew the map of the country. "When people started driving," Arthur says as we pull into DC, "those little mom and pop railway towns just dried up."

I re-board the following afternoon sharing a monstrous hangover and a ticket for something called a Viewliner Roomette with a publishing colleague, Daisy. Washington to Atlanta is a sleeper service and we're disproportionately excited about the prospect of a bed. We haul our suitcases along the narrow



## American express



corridors to passive-aggressive announcements. "Folks, we are full so you WILL be making new friends on this journey." "Smoke, and you WILL be getting off at the next stop." In neighbouring compartments, couples are performing ungainly pas-de-deux, bottoms stuck out of doors, a line of Winnie the Poohs in chinos. "Oh my lord," someone says tetchily, "if I could move, I would!"

Amtrak's 3ft 6 in by 6ft 8 in Viewliner, with sink, vanity unit and coat hangers, is the size of a single bed. We pile in with suitcases. Shockingly, the "in-room WC" is, as billed, in the room – Alcatraz-style. Daisy and I look at each other and break out the Alka-Seltzer.

An attendant passes through announcing dinner reservations in 15-minute slots. The dining car is a handsome, curved-ceiling affair with red leather booths under panoramic windows. Amtrak operates a blind-date policy and Daisy and I are matched with a moneyed mother and daughter from Charlottesville, Virginia. The mother wrinkles her nose when I tell her we're visiting Asheville. "Isn't that for people pursuing an alternative lifestyle," she lowers her voice, "as in... hippies?"

The service is old-fashioned charming, but though the menu is sprinkled with upmarket phrases such as "signature dish" and "garden fresh", our seafood platter and Chinese noodles are indeed, a little bit bilious. I suggest you find salvation in the humble hot dog and order it for every meal. Back in our



Clockwise from main: the Southwest Chief stops on the way to Lamy, New Mexico; the train's conductor Josh Garcia; passengers take in the scenery; May Ling King behind the counter of the onboard café; a station en route



the Grand Canyon Railway in Arizona, where, according to the brochure, passengers will be entertained by cowboys and a mock train robbery.

Disappointingly, I'm only going as far as Lamy, New Mexico, a 1,076-mile, 25-hour journey. We soon encounter our first delay. Through my picture window, Illinois's summer skies and grain barns are suddenly consumed by darkness. The tornado siren sounds. The train stops then shudders backwards as passengers are dispatched from the front carriages to the observation lounge. The place is rammed: eagle scouts off to camp; a husband and wife, who look uncannily like Grant Wood's *American Gothic* couple; a quartet of kids fighting over a Rubik's Cube while dad reads Edgar Allan Poe. There are about 15 Amish too, teens in pinafores and braces, elders with salty beards. Two grandmothers in white heart-shaped bonnets sit impassively, watching as the trees bend and smack against the windows. "Mennonite or Amish?" I ask.

"Amish," one confirms, adding, warily, "you've probably heard a lot of bad things about us." Lizzie and others from her community are heading to Mexico for "doctoring". Her son-in-law, Elam, a carpenter, has a bad back and the doctor promises a miracle cure that, worryingly, isn't legal in the US.

A farmer holds court with his satellite phone. "See that purple mass? That's the tornado coming right into us." There are excited oohs as though a hellacious twister were part of Amtrak's billed entertainment, but we are spared. The storm blows through, and the train heaves off towards the Mississippi's lurid green slime.

It's 9pm, and the unflappable José has pipped my cabin and duct-taped the air con to which I'm allergic. I retire happily, swaying into the curves, lulled by the cack of wheels as the miles rumble on through my body. A life-long insomniac, in motion I sleep like an angel.

Dawn, and Lizzie is already up and reading *Chicken Soup for the Soul* while daughter Mary listens with bemused good manners to an itinerant musician with the alcohol shakes heading west in search of a gig. "Oregon has the best magic mushrooms," he tells her. He strums on his guitar as the sun shines up the nameless factories and faceless cops of the no-man's land that lines the railroad. On we speed, past regimens of new tractors and the 100-ft blades of wind turbines resting on their sides. Dodge City, then Garden City; Kansas, it seems, goes on for ever.

At breakfast, I eat excellent creole scrambled eggs opposite a gregarious septuagenarian who introduces himself as Sy Blye, a former basketball player, four times inducted into the Hall of Fame, who began his career while there was still segregation. I tell him he's look-

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ing good. "That's because I got a western doctor, a holistic doctor and a voodoo doctor," he replies. Sy's feisty wife is a navy veteran and gold medalist in the Golden Age Games for retired service people. "I used to be a person of colour too," she says, rubbing at the pale skin of her arm, "then one day I just faded out."

We go on chatting as the morning's flatlands rise to meet the mountains of Colorado, then drop down again into the tundry deserts of New Mexico. Who travels by train, I wonder, looking around the Observation Lounge. People who save up especially, people who are loath to see the landscape gobbled up at 600mph; people willing to lose themselves in dreaming. Amtrak is not cheap, but its passengers are rust belt, middle class, Navajo, Democrat, right-wing conspiracy theorist, inner city youth – it would be hard to stuff more cultural and socio-economic eclecticism into one carriage. Trump's divided America? Not on this train. There's barely a phone or screen in sight. Everyone's talking, everyone asking those essential human questions: where have you come from, where are you going and what constitutes home? Here is the romance of the railway. Yesterday's high-speed travel may today be archaic, impractical and slow, but this is the adventure. This is why we're all here – for the disparate threads of our lives to cross for a few poignant hours. Trains connect places and people and by the time the Southwest Chief chugs into Lamy's Spanish mission-style depot, I'm in possession of a clutch of addresses and demands to keep in touch.

"You should come see us in Pennsylvania," Lizzie says tentatively as I step out into the searing white heat. And here, if Amtrak has a route that will get me there, I almost certainly will.

Bella Pollen's memoir, *Meet Me In The In-Between* is published by Mantle

Or if you prefer something a little more luxurious...

**The Royal Express, Japan** The nation of high-speed bullet trains has recently discovered the joys of a sumptuous dawdle down rural branch lines. To enhance the meandering experience, they're introducing super-luxurious trains such as the Shiki-Shima and Twilight Express Mizukaze, which serve the best of Japanese cuisine in interiors rich in traditional crafts, from paper screens to lattice-work ceilings and polished walnut floors. This latest, the Royal Express, pictured, rambles down the coast from Yokohama to the Izu Peninsula, and offers day-trips and more. *Overnight itineraries from £930pp, the-royalexpress.jp*

**The Seven Stars of Kyushu, Japan** The pioneer of luxury rail in Japan picks out a route through the nation's volcanic, rainforested southwestern island of Kyushu. This head-turningly handsome hotel train has space for just 30 people

in 14 suites; its walls are made from a combination of rosewood and maple, its window coverings are shoji paper screens, and in the dining car the locally sourced beef and woodsmoked fish are served with an artistry that it seems a shame to disturb. *Four nights from £4,220pp, cruise-train-sevenstars.com*

**The Caledonian Sleeper, UK** Next spring's reincarnation of the regular overnight service between London and the Scottish Highlands features new carriages with luxury suites and double beds, and a club car for top-end travellers where menus will "celebrate Scotland's natural larder". Passengers can fall asleep in a city of black cabs and hipsters, and wake up in the joy of red deer and peat bog. *Prices for the new suites have not yet been released, but standard sleepers start from £140, sleeper.co.uk*

**The Andean Explorer, Peru** This year's launch from Belmond (Operators of the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express and Royal Scotsman, among others) is the first luxury hotel train in South America. It shares some of the same track as the Hiram Bingham, the well-established way of getting from Cusco to Machu Picchu in style, but the Explorer then heads south, on one- and two-night



itineraries to Arequipa or Tliffaca. Unlike much of stable, its decor doesn't glorify golden era, but local artisans, colours and Lake next year it adds a spa. *Of the Belmond One night from £495, per11 relive some of the best of Peru, peruair.com*

**Golden Eagle, Russia** Art and textiles, and introduce "Imperial" suite car. Eagle is doing what hotel *perair.com* best: setting off on an spectacular, inhospitable After a refit to large on first-class service of the year the train covers Trans-Siberian railway, but will leave Vladivostok for adventure into known Baidal-Amur Maib, ble terrain, while through Siberia, arriving at Yrvice. For much later in Mongolia's Ulan gowers bits of the for the nomadic Naadam ft, but next July it From £12,895pp, for the lesser-goldeneagleluxurytrains.com

Ang a fortnight in Bator in time am festival.