October 2, 2016

And the great rail adventure begins!
While I’ve been up and down the East Coast on Amtrak more times than I can count, going cross-country by rail in a sleeping car, otherwise known as a “roomette” in Amtrak parlance, is new to me. Traveling by rail conjures all sorts of things—associations with classic films, romance, folklore, families, and times when life was less complicated by technology, for example.

Day 1 began at Penn Station in New York, my “home” station, on a Sunday afternoon. I was booked on the Lake Shore Limited to Chicago, a popular daily overnight train. I was invited to wait for the train inside Club Acela, a plush lounge for passengers who hold sleeping car tickets. The lounge has comfy chairs, snacks, drinks, kind attendants, and people filled with quiet anticipation of the journey to come. At the designated boarding time, we were escorted down the escalator and onto the train. It felt like a great migration that walk to the train. George, the attendant for my car, came around and showed each person in the car how the roomette works—literally—where the lights are, how to work the sink, toilet, explained how he’ll make the bed up, how it folds down, etc.

Like a restaurant, Amtrak takes reservations for dinner, a nice touch. Dining times are staggered so the crew can accommodate everyone. And if you’re alone, the friendly staff seat you with fellow travelers. What better way to get to know people? I ordered a pad Thai with chicken and vegetables and dined with a couple from Texas that had visited Boston. They were train people. You meet a lot of train people on Amtrak trains—regulars. They’re committed to traveling by rail on a regular basis and wouldn’t ever dream of flying.
Settling into my roomette was pretty easy. George pulled the seats out to create a bed, arranged the sheets, and gave me a nice, soft blanket. Going to sleep on the train felt like I was flying through the air on a magic carpet, or in this case a train, barreling down the tracks at break-neck speed. It felt fast. How many miles per hour were we going? I’ll have to ask. I pulled the curtains back from the windows; it’s pitch black outside. Throughout the night, the train whistle blows frequently. I’m told later that the engineer must sound the whistle before each crossing by Federal law, except for areas designated quiet zones in communities that have said “no whistle”.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residency, October 2, 2016

**October 3, 2016**

I Woke up before 6 a.m. It’s dark. There’s a fog-like mist. Ohio stretches flat like a pancake. Corn fields, grain silos, pastures, and farm equipment stores dot the landscape. I see lights from local vehicular traffic on the road that parallels our train. Lots of pick-up trucks. People are going to work. It’s Monday morning, after all.

I see lots of green pasture land interspersed with fresh, brown dirt. Farms and more farms. Family farms may be on life support but they’re hanging on in Ohio and Indiana, and, I’m told, all the places I’m passing through on this journey. Announcement on the P.A. system: The station in Waterloo, Indiana is five minutes away. We stop to pick up what looks like a dozen people. I wonder where they’re going. I gaze out the window and gaze at a vintage white pickup truck. A child’s tricycle is parked next to it.

At breakfast, I meet a couple that’s originally from New England—he from New Hampshire, she from Maine. She grew up in a tiny fishing village outside of Acadia National Park swimming in quarries in the summers and ice skating in winter. At 14, she worked one summer as a waitress in a restaurant where she served the Kennedys—Rose, Joe Sr., JFK, Jr., and his other siblings. The couple had come from her class reunion in Maine and had taken the train from their home in Tennessee, all the way to Boston and Maine. They’d boarded in Albany, New York, and like me, are headed to Chicago where they’ll have a layover and pick up their train to Tennessee.

We pulled out of Waterloo slowly, slowly enough for me to spot an empty horse trailer and to get a good look at historic homes where I assume people live. Funny thing is, I don’t see anyone moving about. There are grand homes and not so grand homes on Lincoln St., right across from the railroad tracks. Outside of town, there are crop fields. What’s planted in those fields? I see nothing stirring except a few vehicles traveling on the service road. A factory. More fields. Railroad crossings. This is rural America.

All night I listened to the low wail of the train whistle—every couple of minutes or so. I wondered if there was any real pattern and whether the whistle was recorded or real. I didn’t sleep that well but I think I had too much coffee. I don’t drink coffee but something about travel and work-related events makes me start drinking coffee.
Almost to Chicago. Indiana’s lush, green fields mixed with corn well past its prime. Dried and brown. No fall foliage here yet.

A brief layover in Chicago gave me a chance to stretch my legs and go for a long walk toward the lake. The city blocks are long, longer than in New York, and the streets are lined with tall, sleek buildings that embrace you like a canyon. They don’t call it the city of broad shoulders for nothing. Any vestiges of the Chicago of my father’s youth are on Michigan Ave. The Art Institute has a gorgeous addition. Millennium Park is a jewel with sculptures and an urban garden with herbs, wildflowers, and plants marked by name.

Chicago’s Union Station boasts a gorgeous lounge for passengers holding sleeper tickets. The lounge offers good lighting, comfortable tables, chairs, plenty of outlets for charging devices, a business center, and most surprising of all, a buffet of fresh vegetables and cheeses for passengers to munch on. Add to that, there’s complimentary wine—two glasses per ticket—poured by a gracious attendant. Amtrak’s pulling out all the stops at Chicago’s Union Station. The bathrooms are clean and tidy.

When it’s time to board the train, the Chicago-based staff gathers us up for the great migration to the track. It’s an exciting moment that I feel in my gut. We board the Empire Builder which terminates in Seattle. I’m riding it to Whitefish, Montana, and will arrive on Oct. 4 around 9 p.m. Boarding the train in Chicago, I’m feeling sleepy. It’s been a long day and it’s only 4:07 p.m. CST. How is it that I feel I’ve lived five days in less than 24 hrs.?

Settled on the train: I’m somewhere in Wisconsin. Almost to Milwaukee, I think. I’m seated in the lounge car with a vista so magnificent...
corn and soybeans? Is this Hillary or Donald country? Apart from the farms, there are mini storage facilities, warehouses, trucking depots, and shipping container lots. Before too long, I see McMansions and development.

I would say most of America is represented on the Empire Builder. All races, ethnicities, and ages. In Chicago, I met an Amish family from Indiana traveling to Glacier National Park in Montana, like me. They’re furniture designers and distributors. I met a couple who’s getting off the train at LaCrosse, Wisconsin. The wife has spent 40 years traveling by rail; she and her husband were coming from a medical meeting in Boston.

There are a handful of kids on the train, perhaps they’re on holiday. Speaking of holidays, it’s the Jewish New Year and many friends are celebrating. I’m celebrating on the train. There are orange pumpkins in the fields. This is the land of corn mazes, pumpkin patches, and yellow school buses inching up to flashing railroad crossings. Oh, it looks like kale or some leafy green growing in the field to my right. The sun bathes the early fall afternoon in golden light that shifts every so often. To my left, sun-dappled fields, to my right, brush and trees in shadow that haven’t turned yet. Who lives here? Who works here? And why?

I met John from St. Paul in the lounge car where I’ve been sitting all afternoon enjoying the view. He’s an IT guy who’s training to be an engineer by the Minnesota Transportation Museum which runs the Osceola & St. Croix Valley Scenic Railway. The Railway is in Osceola, Wisconsin and the group takes people on 50- to 90-minute rides on the railroad. John took classes to become a qualified conductor and tells me that Amtrak’s Empire Builder probably got its name from the industrialist James J. Hill who owned The Great Northern railroad. Hill had a train called the Empire Builder. Visitors can tour Hill’s mansion in St. Paul which overlooks parts of the city. John and I met Michelle, a doctor of family medicine based in Rochester, Minnesota, home to the famed Mayo Clinic where she works. We get to talking and waiting for our dinner reservations. Other passengers stop by. The Amish couples at the table next to us are busy playing Settlers of Catan, a board game that looks thoroughly absorbing. They seem to enjoy it a lot, while nibbling on caramel corn and snacks.

My second night’s dinner was a romp. I dined with three funny women from Wisconsin who were on their way to Seattle, and then on to Hawaii where one of the women’s son’s is getting married. We had the best time and the most delicious steak dinners. For the record, it was probably the only steak I’ve had in a year or more. I’m told a few times I look like one of the women’s sisters-in-law, Bonnie. I guess I have a doppelganger in Wisconsin. I meander back to my roomette, Dorothy pulls out the bed and I’m grateful for sleep.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residency, October 3, 2016
October 4, 2016

I had a good sleep and awoke to North Dakota in total darkness. We were approaching Minot. North Dakota is a flat, prairie-like expanse. I’m told we’re close to the Canadian border. By the end of this day, at 9 p.m., we’ll arrive in Whitefish, Montana, where I’ll disembark for two nights. Whitefish is essentially a gateway to Glacier National Park, and a charming town I’m told that’s not to be missed.

I ate breakfast with a man from Juneau, Alaska, and a couple from Wisconsin. I invite the guys to be interviewed, and they’re game. I’m learning so much about people—what they love about their lifestyles, where they live, what they do, why they do it. On the train, there’s nothing but time, quiet, lively conversation, visual stimulation, and sleep—shifting moods, light, and landscapes. So many different people, so many different stories.

Montana is beautiful but it looks very muddy. Rain swamps everywhere. It’s starting to get hilly, and I suspect the terrain will change in the next few hours, hopefully I’ll be able to see it before nightfall.

The rest of my residency goes something like this:

October 5, 2016: Visit Glacier National Park, the town of Whitefish, and other points of interest.

October 6, 2016: Explore more in Glacier and the surrounding towns. Depart Whitefish station at 9:30 p.m. on the Empire Builder bound for Seattle.
October 7, 2016: Arrive in Seattle at 10 a.m. PST and meet a friend who used to live in NYC and returned to her hometown. Explore Pike Place Market. Spend the evening with my cousin who’s flying up to Seattle from San Jose to take the Coast Starlight with me down the coast.

October 8, 2016: Board the iconic Coast Starlight with my cousin traveling south to San Jose.

October 9, 2016: Arrive in San Jose at 10 a.m. PST and spend two days off the train visiting my cousin and his family in Los Gatos, Calif., about 20 minutes from San Jose.

October 10, 2016: Spend the day in Los Gatos.

October 11, 2016: Depart San Jose station at 10 a.m. on the Coast Starlight bound for Los Angeles. Arrive in Los Angeles at 9 p.m. the same day. Visit with a friend and native Angeleno upon arriving in L.A.’s iconic Union Station.

October 12, 2016: See some of the sights in downtown L.A. with a friend who’s originally from the L.A. area and used to live in New York, and her neighbor. Board the Southwest Chief at 6 p.m. PST bound for Chicago for the return East.

October 13, 2016: Ride the Southwest Chief through southern Arizona, New Mexico, Kansas, and more.

October 14, 2016: Arrive in Chicago via the Southwest Chief at 3:15 p.m. CST. Enjoy a six-hour layover in Chicago where I get to take in more sights, and enjoy a nice, long walk by the lake. Depart Chicago on the Lake Shore Limited at 9:30 p.m. CST.

October 15, 2016: Wake up in Buffalo, New York after an overnight on the Lakeshore Limited. Arrive in New York City, Penn Station around 6:30 p.m. ET.

Follow me on Facebook, (Tobi Elkin) on Instagram (@telkin), Twitter (@tobielkin) and Snapchat (@telkin). Reach out if you want to share your rail experiences or want to know more about mine.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residence, October 4, 2016

October 6, 2016
Greetings from Kalispell, Montana! It’s the land of big skies, open spaces, cattle lolling about on vast expanses of prairie, wild horses, and flat, brown fields mixed with the high altitude and
snowy peaks of Glacier National Park in theidically lovely off-season. I’m discovering so many
micro-climates in this state and am enjoying them all.
By the way, Glacier is a major destination for people
traveling on Amtrak’s Empire Builder. There are even
two station stops within the park. On Oct. 4, we
stopped at West Glacier station where one of the
lodges remained open. My Amish friends disembarked
there.

Rewinding a bit, on Oct. 4th around 9 p.m. Mountain
time, I said goodbye to Dorothy, my gracious and
friendly Amtrak attendant, and got off the train at
Whitefish station. It was drizzling and cold. I had
booked a room in nearby Kalispell. I was so happy for
a hot shower—I haven’t tried the shower on the train
but there’s still time for that!

After waking up at my hotel in Kalispell, on Oct. 5, the hotel shuttle gave me a ride to the
rental car place and I took off for Glacier National Park, entering the park at West Glacier. I had
arranged to meet Tim Rains, the Public Information Officer for the Park. Tim is so
knowledgeable about the park, places to go, routes to follow, and all of the park’s seasons. In
addition, he’s an artist, a lively person, and a pleasure to chat with. I couldn’t have asked for
more. He checked to ensure Glacier’s iconic Going-to-the-Sun Road was clear—at this time of
year, there are road closures due to snow and icy conditions. I was in luck—the road was
clear!

I set out snaking around a narrow road that had me climbing into the mountains. With each
switchback, there were incredible vistas and plenty of places to stop and gaze at all the natural
wonders in the park. It was cold, so a hat and warm jacket are advised at this time. Visiting in
the off-season is smart as you can avoid the crowds, although most services are closed with
the exception of restrooms and a couple of stores.

A video posted by Tobi Elkin (@telkin) on Oct 6, 2016 at 11:28am PDT

Tim told me the park experienced a 20% increase in visitors during the high season this
year. This could be due to somewhat lower gas prices and the 100th anniversary of the
National Park system. I couldn’t imagine visiting during the high season—I enjoyed the park
with a few people who, like me, were exploring during a calmer period.

At one point, traffic was stopped as park crews worked on the road near a tunnel. I hiked the
Trail of the Cedars—a walk along wooden planks and beside tall trees—up to the falls. There
are so many other day hikes but I realized I wouldn’t have time for too much more if I wanted
to continue on the road. I was disappointed that I didn’t see any wildlife, except for a family of
ducklings along a lake.
At Heavens Peak, I was at nearly 9,000-ft. in altitude. I don’t know how much higher in altitude the park goes. At one point, the fog and clouds were so dense, I could only see inches in front of me. I was grateful it wasn’t snowing. Descending down into the valley, I saw on the map that I’d made one huge loop. The park ends at St. Mary and despite studying the map over and over, I found myself lost.

Don’t get me wrong, to be lost in Montana is not a bad thing. I had enough gas, but I genuinely couldn’t figure out how to get back toward Whitefish and Kalispell. The distances between towns are so great here that I decided I needed to ask for directions. I could have turned around and gone back over the mountain pass but I was concerned about the visibility and potential for snow. Google maps didn’t work; there was no mobile reception for most of my day. I ended up going toward Browning, driving at least 50 miles through a truly desolate landscape—prairie and hills dotted with cattle and not much else. Open vistas. Some horses. No people. And not a soul on the road. If you ever want to be away from people and I mean completely away, come to Montana. I’m serious.

Browning is a town where the Blackfoot Indian Reservation is based. And if this is how our federal government treats Native Americans, it’s a sorry state of affairs. I saw ramshackle trailers and tiny houses, junk heaps, a few stores that didn’t look open, and a building that housed a tribal council. I saw very little in the way of solid-looking housing. I didn’t see any schools. The median income for a household in Browning is $23,879 according to an entry I found on Google via Wikipedia.

I stopped to ask for more directions at a gas station. A guy, maybe about 18-years-old, told me through very crooked teeth that I needed Rt. 2 going west. I wanted to stop and find people to talk with but I was concerned I wouldn’t make it back to Kalispell before dark. I discovered I had 100 more miles to travel, so I didn’t stick around. I wouldn’t say that Browning is a stop that most tourists make.

I found my way to Rt. 2 and enjoyed another long stretch of peace and quiet. Even the satellite radio wasn’t reliable out here. But I didn’t need or want it.

I arrived in Kalispell at 6:15 p.m. well before it got dark and headed over to the Kalispell Brewing Co., a friendly oasis in the center of town. They don’t serve food but the free popcorn is amazing, and so is the craft beer. I had a cream ale which was delicious, and struck up a conversation with a man who hunts antelope. Yes, he hunts antelope which isn’t uncommon in these parts. In fact, he hunts everything and grew up in Cincinnati hunting too. When I got off the train in Whitefish, I saw a guy carrying a rifle case, so that was the tipoff that hunting is popular in Montana and it’s a way of life.

Not far down the street from the brewery, I was directed to Hops Downtown Grill. The joint was jumping. I sat at the bar and people started talking with me right away. Montanans are friendly and many of them have lived elsewhere for a few years and return home to work, raise families, and be closer to family, etc. I met Monica and her boyfriend, among others. Monica
was so gracious, she offered to take me around the area the next day and see local sights I might not otherwise see. At Hops, I had my first yak burger. For my vegan friends, I know what you’re thinking. It is what it is—delicious.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residence, October 6, 2016

October 8, 2016
After an overnight on the Empire Builder, we pulled into Seattle’s meticulously restored King St. Station. After disembarking around 10 a.m. PST, I checked into the Best Western Hotel in Pioneer Square which is within walking distance of the hotel, and headed for the Pike Place Market area. Taking the advice of my English friend in New York who lived in Seattle for nearly a decade, I stopped at the Crumpet Shop and had a delicious crumpet with ricotta cheese and jam. This place is not to be missed. Then I headed down to the market to meet a friend who used to live in New York and her 1-year-old son. The weather was crisp and sunny sunny—not a without a trace of that infamous Seattle rain. The day went far too quickly, and before too long, my cousin arrived from San Jose. He flew up to be my traveling companion for the trip from Seattle to San Jose on the Coast Starlight.

Upon the advice of my English friend, we had dinner at Pintxo, a Spanish tapas restaurant in the Belltown neighborhood. It was an excellent choice and definitely ranks as one of the very best tapas restaurants I’ve eaten at in the U.S. The wine list is extensive, the service personal, and the diverse dishes we ordered were more flavorful than similar selections I’ve had at other tapas places. Prior to our reservation, we stopped in at The Upstairs, a quaint speakeasy adjacent to Pinxto that was outfitted with comfy couches, chairs, and tons of ambience.

After dinner, we walked up the street to The Whiskey Bar which has a mind-blowing selection of whiskies, craft cocktails, and beers. The menu is multiple pages long; the scene is fun and friendly. There were so many bottles, they reached all the way from the bar counter to the ceiling. One of the bartenders had to climb up on top of the bar to reach a bottle on the top shelf. No doubt, that bottle was literally “top shelf” whiskey.

After a night at the hotel and breakfast, we walked to the station for a 9:30 a.m. departure on the Coast Starlight. We situated ourselves in the comfortable Parlor Car reserved for passengers with sleeping car tickets, and settled in for the journey through Washington,
Oregon, and California. The Coast Starlight runs from Seattle to Los Angeles. We’ll get off in San Jose on Sunday morning Oct. 9 around 10 a.m.

I gaze out onto a beautiful, early fall Saturday afternoon as we approach Vancouver, Washington. Yes, there’s a Vancouver in Washington. We’ve stopped in Portland, Oregon where I got a chance to get out and enter the station. It’s fun seeing all the new people who get on the train. There seems to be a crew of “regulars” in the Parlor Car. David (my cousin) and I chose to eat lunch there—a chicken salad served on real dishes—not plastic! I noticed because it was the first and only time I ate off of real china during the trip.

On this day, we went through Oregon—Portland, Salem, Albany, Eugene-Springfield, Chemult, Klamath Falls (a place I’ve always wanted to visit), and the first stop in California—Dunsmuir. I had hoped to see Mt. Shasta from the train but it was already dark. We’d be traveling through Redding, Chico, Sacramento, Davis, Martinez, Emeryville, and Oakland enroute to San Jose.

During our journey on the Coast Starlight, we were invited to a wine tasting while enjoying the stunning views. One of the things that’s most striking about the Parlor Car is that people respect one another’s privacy while they’re sleeping or reading, but they’re also open to striking up spontaneous conversations—they’re not hard to strike up. And unlike an airplane where no one wants to make much eye contact, if any, there’s enough space on the train to move about and socialize, or retreat to one’s sleeper compartment for alone time. These options, this freedom, and the luxury of time seem to put people in much better moods.

In the Parlor Car, one half of a newlywed couple is reading, the other studying maps; a software engineer from Cupertino, Calif. is chatting up a couple who just boarded in Portland en route to Oakland; my cousin is deep into a book; the retired judge and his wife are reading the newspaper (a paper copy); a couple of other passengers are just gazing out the windows; and one guy is filming the entire journey on his tiny handheld camera.

Signing off, for now, from the Coast Starlight.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residency, October 8, 2016

October 11, 2016
This morning I departed from San Jose station after two days off the Coast Starlight, staying in Los Gatos, a quaint town about a 20-minute drive from the station. It was fun to spend time off the train here as I had the opportunity to visit with my cousin and his family who live in this mostly sunny Silicon Valley enclave. Lemons, apricots, and other fruits grow year-round.

On a side note: There’s always something we leave behind in our travels. On this trip, I haven’t left anything that I know of, but there’s still time for that!

My cousin, on the other hand, left his shoes on the train from Seattle and realized it right after we disembarked at San Jose on the morning of Oct. 9. He’d changed to flip-flops during our journey from Seattle and tucked his leather shoes under his seat in the roomette. He called Amtrak customer service and the crew on the Coast Starlight was notified.
immediately. As it turned out, an attendant found the shoes and dropped them off in San Luis Obispo, further down the coast. Like magic, the shoes were at the station in San Jose on Monday evening Oct. 10 when my cousin came through on his daily commute from San Francisco on Caltrain.

At San Jose, I met Paul Archambeault who is a station host. The station host program, part of the Station Host Association of California, is comprised of a mostly retired group of men and women who are railroad enthusiasts. They help greet passengers who are departing on long-haul trips, answer questions, and guide travelers to the trains. A staunch rail advocate named Doras Briggs launched the station hosts program at the Emeryville, Calif. Amtrak station at the age of 83; she passed away in 2015 at 97.

Archambeault, a 77-year-old retired engineer from HP, is passionate about trains and rail travel—there’s a glint in his eye and a smile on this face when he spoke with me. His father worked for the Union Pacific Railroad and he’s been a train buff his entire life.

Traveling on the Coast Starlight

The journey from San Jose to Los Angeles on the Coast Starlight was one I had been most excited about. It would bring me through some of the most picturesque areas in California with stops in Salinas, Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Simi Valley, among others. For most of the 10-hour trip, there were sweeping mountain views, crop fields embraced by mountains on either side, parched fields, and Pacific Ocean views for about three hours of the journey. I didn’t sleep at all because I didn’t want to miss anything.

We eventually reached an isolated stretch of ocean—part of the coastline is protected and off-limits around Vandenberg Airforce Base near Lompoc, Ca. on the Central Coast. Top-secret stuff has always gone on here and there are no signs of life near the coastline. We had clear views of the crashing surf and I wished I could have thrown open the windows to hear the
waves.

When we began to see jaw-dropping views of the coastline, everyone in the observation car grew silent—all you could hear were the clicks of camera phones. My fellow passengers and I grew very quiet during this stretch but truth be told, it was remarkably quiet throughout the entire 10-hr. trip to L.A.

Most of the trip from San Jose to L.A. is inland. Among the things that stood out to me was just how dry and parched California really is. The drought is very real and it’s been going on for a long time. Outside of San Jose, approaching Salinas, the mountains are dry and brown. The soil in the fields is like dust. Where there are crops planted, there are low-profile sprinklers watering the fields. I remember driving through these parts when these used to be giant sprinklers. No more.

The fields are being plowed and in many places, and in others, they’re full of green crops. There are migrant labor crews actively working. I saw horses, goats, sheep, horse trailers, regular trailers, and some trampolines in many backyards in these parts. Cattle graze on hillsides on what, I can’t tell, since the grass is so dry. There’s plenty of sagebrush and other dry-looking bushes along the railbed. A few miles outside each stop along the route, there were more housing developments than I could count clustered close to the fields.

During the afternoon wine tasting, one passenger sighed, “This is California, there’s always more development.” Another woman explained to an Australian man that when she was growing up in Southern California, there used to be orange groves. They don’t exist any more, she related with dismay. Houses appear where acres and acres of orange groves once stood, she explained.

**Some highlights of my journey on the Coast Starlight from San Jose to Los Angeles:**

- The infamous horseshoe curve where the crew told us that you can see the front and the back of the train at the same time. I attempted to capture this in video and photos—it was hard.

- The mesmerizing linear patterns on the crop fields. Green crops growing in the fields,
alongside fallow, parched fields.

- The fast pace of migrant labor crews working the fields.
- Steep mountainsides surrounding the fields. Occasional trees sprouted on the hillsides and they were green. How did they survive the dryness?
- Houses clinging to seemingly razor-thin mountain ridges; I didn’t spot any access roads. How do people get up there?
- The massive correctional facility, dubbed the “California Men’s Colony,” northwest of San Luis Obispo, clearly viewed from the train. A sprawling complex of truly ugly buildings that house nearly 4,000 inmates on 356 acres. I swore seeing this wouldn’t wreck my day.
- A former nurse, who said she’s given up on the healthcare system and now works three jobs to get by, played Irish folk tunes on her violin in the observation lounge. It was the sweetest music I’ve heard in a long time. Passengers who weren’t wearing headphones or earbuds visibly enjoyed her playing as we stared out onto the mountains between Salinas and San Luis Obispo. She disembarked at San Luis Obispo and I was sad to see her leave.
- A police supervisor from Portland traveling to a conference in L.A. who spoke with me about policing issues in his city and explained to me what a “foamer” is. A “foamer” is someone who “foams at the mouth” at the sight of a passing train—all those railroad buffs who stand by the side of the road and wave to the conductors of freight and passenger trains as they roll by. Foamers ride trains and notice every single detail of the experience. They’re intimately familiar with routes, stops, lines, crew members, schedules, and more. The guy from Portland was taking the train down; his wife, a police psychologist, flew down to L.A.—she doesn’t share the same passion for rail travel.
- Alexis, a crew member, who conducted a wine tasting. She had been working on the train for four days straight and was as pleasant as can be despite days as long as 18 hours. Based in Los Angeles, she shared her schedule with us and details about her job.
- Fun announcements from a crew member recognizing two colleagues’ birthdays. “Don’t forget to say ‘happy birthday,'” she told us over the public address (P.A.) system.
- The artist I met who emigrated to Los Angeles from Bogota, Columbia at age 10. She spent time in the foster system, earned a scholarship to college in Colorado where she embraced her love of the outdoors, entered a social work program at age 40, spent 15 years helping children and families in the L.A. County system, and now paints (plein-air) full-time. She always travels by train to visit her daughter in Salinas, to New Mexico, Mexico, and other places. She brought four siblings and her mother to the U.S. and passionately believes that if someone wants a job and an education, they can get a job and an education in the U.S. She worked at film festivals in order to get to pretty places where she could paint. She and her husband are thinking of retiring to Mexico as expenses skyrocket in the U.S.
- The café car attendant who made us laugh with his entertaining announcements over the P.A. system about last calls for drinks and food.
Today is Yom Kippur, a day of atonement for Jews around the world. I'll atone by throwing all my sins into the ocean (too bad I'm nowhere near it) and meditating. Then I'll tour the Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles (founded in 1917), along with some other sights with a friend who used to live in New York and moved back home to L.A.

It was a super sunny, warm day. After lunch at the Market, which is a must-visit, Heather and her friend Teruko took me around on a walking tour of downtown L.A. – around Olvera St., the oldest street in L.A., and pointed out The Museum of Contemporary Art, The L.A. Philharmonic, and other key buildings and told me about their history and architecture.

After hanging out on Olvera St., which is right near the station, I shove off at 6 p.m. on the Southwest Chief. The train will bring me to Chicago, a 40-hr. trip, through the Southwest and close to the Grand Canyon. Signing off until the next juncture or junction, or both…

Aboard the Southwest Chief, there isn’t much out here but the landscape and I enjoy that. The voice in my head said, “more, please!” When the train pulls into towns like Gallup, Albuquerque, Lamy, and Las Vegas, New Mexico, there are signs of life. I’ve driven through parts of Arizona and New Mexico more than once, and have visited the Grand Canyon twice, so I’m familiar with various parts of these states. But viewing the landscape from the train is an entirely different experience.

I exit the train every chance I get on what Amtrak attendants call brief “smoke” stops. I get off for the fresh air and to look inside the stations. I de-trained in Gallup to get some fresh air and take in the view. Others go for an actual smoke. Attendants have had to make announcements on several occasions on the Southwest Chief to tell marijuana smokers to please refrain from smoking on the train. Amtrak will put people off the train for smoking anything on the train!
Today, I’ve ridden next to mountain ranges that are far off into the distance, viewed ranches, ramshackle houses, trailers, adobe dwellings, livestock, elegant wild horses, and all manner of vegetation from the observation car. Sure, if you’re driving, you can get out and explore, but riding the train and seeing America by rail is like going to a movie. You can sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride. I haven’t dozed off because I’m eager to see everything I can during the daylight hours.

In the observation car after a quick breakfast, it’s pretty quiet. We’re near Grants, New Mexico and paralleling Interstate 40. We can see the truck traffic in the distance. Small communities sprout up through the landscape—a house here, a few there, trailers, adobe, mud, and log homes sitting on arid fields.

**A highlight of my trip:** The same group of Amish I’ve been traveling with since Oct. 3 from Chicago, keeps popping up on the trains I’ve taken. They’re now riding with me on the Southwest Chief, heading home to Indiana—they’ve been to Montana, Eugene, Oregon, Catalina Island, Calif., and Los Angeles. There are two couples I’ve already met (a married couple, plus a brother and sister), and now two additional couples I hadn’t seen before until we boarded in Los Angeles last night. I’m interested to know more about them but hesitant to break into their conversations.

The original two couples have been super friendly and accessible. I sat with one of the new Amish couples for lunch. I sense they’re as curious about me as I am about them. The language they speak is peppered with English phrases—I hear “Glacier Park” and “Southwest Chief” and other phrases, but most of their conversation with one another is in a heavy Germanic-dialect. After lunch, I chat more with one of the original couples I met in Amtrak’s Chicago’s Metropolitan Lounge. We talked about highlights of their trip, what they’re reading, observations about the landscape, their lives, etc.

As the day wears on, I watched the shifting light and landscapes, cattle herds scurrying away from the tracks as the train approached, viewed Native American lands, searched for wildlife (only saw deer), and enjoyed the vast stretches of prairie that rolled out before me. I couldn’t enough of the scenery. Throughout most of the trip, the trees don’t appear to be the type that change—they’re mostly green shrub-like things in the Southwest. Occasionally, I saw a burst of yellow but rarely any red. As the light began to wane, I retired back to my roomette until dinner.

In the dining car, I met a couple who’s been married 60 years. What’s the secret to a long marriage? She says compromise. He says “do whatever your wife wants.” Sounds like an interesting formula. She says there’s far more to it than what they’ve said. Peaks and valleys.

My other dinner companion used to watch and occasionally appear in films that were shot in Gallup, N.M., not far from where she grew up. Her father worked on the railroad and she got a lot of free rides back when train travel was luxurious. Meals were served on china, there were
Pullman cars, and people dressed up for dinner. She recalls double-decker cars and entertainment. After our dinner, I retired to my roomette with a takeout dessert—a gooey caramel cake that I wouldn’t eat at home but I’m on a train. Needless to say, it’s a real treat.

Tucked into my roomette for the evening, I feel cozy. I’m in a cocoon. I stare out the window into pitch black. I can’t see Kansas. Tried to sleep. Not that successful. Read. Dozed. The train is taking me for a ride.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residency, October 13, 2016

October 14, 2016
We’re reaching the end of the line on the Southwest Chief as I wake up in Kansas City, Missouri this morning. It’s a gray day but later, it’s gorgeous. I ate breakfast and ventured back to the roomette to write and observe all the farms flying by. I’m in Missouri, then Iowa, and then it’s a steady march to Chicago by 3:15 p.m.

Flat farm fields. Dairy country. Fallow fields. Some cattle herds. Lots of grain silos. I love the patterns cut into the fields. Where is everyone? No migrant labor here, at least not that I see from the train. Well-tended farms but no signs of life.

Signing off for now until I board the Lake Shore Limited from Chicago to New York.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residency, October 14, 2016

October 15, 2016
This morning, I woke up to the train pulling out of the station in Buffalo. It’s hitting me that this train is taking me home to New York and that my adventure is coming to a close. After two weeks of some of the most amazing
experiences, exchanges, conversations, rail history, and scenery, I'm truly humbled to have “seen” America from the train and also off the train.

I’ve been writing and interviewing, organizing thoughts, observations, making notes, and reading my notes.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention all the people who took care of me while I was on the train. On the Lakeshore Limited coming home, Alvin, was particularly kind. On the Empire Builder from Chicago to Whitefish, Dorothy was my hero.

At the Albany, N.Y. station, Amtrak changed from a diesel to an electric engine. I was in familiar territory now. The Lakeshore Limited runs along the Hudson River on a very familiar route for me, back to New York where my journey began. I will be watching the fall foliage and seeing if the trees have changed. Even around Syracuse, they hadn’t changed that much yet.

Pulling into Penn Station around 6:15 p.m. ET, I was surprised by how much I still found the train rolling underneath my feet as I made my way home. This is the end of
the line but I'm sure I'll be back.

Tobi Elkin
Amtrak Writer in Residence, October 15, 2016

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