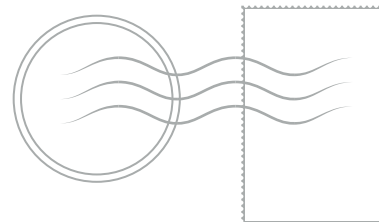


POSTCARD *California*



Forget driving – let the train take the strain on California's Pacific Surfliner, writes rail expert **Daniel Puddicombe**

In the land of the road trip, you might be surprised to find there is a better alternative to driving along California's famed coastline – swapping road for rails to enjoy unblemished views of the Pacific Ocean.

Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner route links Los Angeles and San Diego – though some journeys go as far as Santa Barbara or San Luis Obispo – and is an underrated jewel in the crown of America's national rail network. Taking around three hours to travel between the two cities, the double-decker train offers big, comfortable seats and equally large picture windows.

The first hour or so of the journey is nothing to write home about (unless you really want to see the suburbs and freight yards of LA), but the journey comes alive when the railway line throws a left turn around San Clemente then hugs the coast.

This section reminds me of travelling along the sea wall at Dawlish, where the train is just a stone's throw from the water – except here, the skies are clear, the sun is shining and the sea is the perfect shade of blue. The line continues alongside the Pacific for mile upon mile, giving perfect views of surfers, sandy beaches and the occasional pier.

With 13 round trips per day between LA and San Diego, the frequency of trains along the route is impressive by European standards, let alone in the US where you're usually lucky to have one or two services a day at best.

I take advantage of this and hop off the train at Oceanside, about two hours from LA. The station is centrally located and the town is – as the name implies – very close to the water, with a lengthy pier, multiple restaurants and the California Surf Museum. An afternoon strolling around is a gentle contrast to the hustle and bustle of LA.

Back on board, it's only an hour to San Diego and for half of that, the train runs alongside the coast before veering inland. At times, we run adjacent to a highway and overtake slow-moving traffic – another plus point for rail.

Unlike some US stations, the Santa Fe Depot terminus is centrally located in San Diego. As I step off the train, the sun is setting and I've ticked a superb rail journey off my list – I can't think of a better way to experience California's coastal scenery than by train. **TW**



BOOK IT

American Affair has a nine-night California Highlights by Rail tour from £1,992 per person, based on two sharing for an October 5 departure. The price includes Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner and Coast Starlight services, with sightseeing bus ticket in LA, tours of Monterey, Carmel and Santa Ynez vineyards, accommodation and flights. americanaffair.com



TOP: Pacific Surfliner hugs the California shoreline
ABOVE: Santa Fe Depot, San Diego

PICTURES: Matt Donnelly/Amtrak; Shutterstock/Mikhail Grachikov