

# On the right track

Tamara Hinson hops on the California Zephyr train to test out the scenic route from San Francisco to Chicago

Just hours after boarding the sleek, silver bullet that is Amtrak's California Zephyr in Emeryville station, just outside San Francisco, I've crossed the Sacramento Valley's farmlands and hit the snow-dusted Sierra Nevada. There's something wonderful about seeing snow flurries swirling outside, from a sleeper car's cosy confines. And railway fan Joe Biden, who's clocked up 7,000 round trips on Amtrak, might agree. Biden recently pledged to invest \$66 billion in America's rail infrastructure. And as growing numbers of travellers look for more sustainable modes of transport than flying, I wanted to see for myself if trains could be a better option, for international visitors on multi-destination trips.

Cosy is definitely the operative word when describing the cheapest sleeper accommodation I'm in for the two-night, three-day journey to Chicago. It's a 3ft 6in x 6ft 6in two-person roomette, (there's an additional bedroom category for those needing more space).

It's big enough to allow me to keep my cabin bag with me without it becoming an obstacle, although if my partner was with me, I'd have relegated his bag (if not him) to the communal luggage rack.

The two armchair-like seats flatten to create a single bed, while a second folds down from the ceiling. Various nooks and crannies accommodate items such as water bottles, slotted with jigsaw-

like efficiency alongside essentials such as an air conditioning dial and two-pin socket.

My Superliner train has two levels of accommodation, unlike the East Coast's single-level Viewliners. Don't panic if you're on the ground floor – the views are still fantastic, and for a change of scenery, there are observation and dining cars on the upper level too.

I'd recommend stocking up on supplies (especially fresh fruit) before boarding – the small, cash-only shop at Emeryville station is hardly Whole Foods, and neither is the onboard shop, although the impressive alcohol section helps soothe concerns about skipping my five-a-day. Luckily, for sleeper passengers, three daily meals are included. And these were an unexpected highlight: at breakfast, there are delicious omelettes and muesli, while lunchtime offerings include Angus beef burgers and vegan chilli. For dinner – three-courses with an alcoholic drink – options include crab cakes, flatiron steaks and chocolate tortes. Suddenly, the choice on the South West Trains food trolley seems rather plain.

My top tip? Book dining times for lunch and dinner as soon as the restaurant manager announces, over the tannoy, that you can do so. Passengers can also eat in their accommodation, which I do once, when I forget to reserve and I'm asked to share a table with a stranger (and feel horribly guilty when I notice his offended look as I scurper back to my roomette). ➤

Amtrak's California Zephyr travels from Chicago to San Francisco

PICTURES: CHASE GUNNOE

## ASK THE experts



**Gareth Jones, senior product manager, Railbookers**

"Advise passengers to make time to check out the observation car during the journey – with floor-to-ceiling windows, these lounges bring the wonders of the passing landscape to a whole new level. Remind them that they can take their own food and drink on board, but the dining car is an experience not to be missed! This type of journey can be an epic coast-to-coast adventure or a smaller part of the overall trip – it's flexible."



**Sally Hauser, product and sales manager, Fred Holidays**

"I would refer to Amtrak services as 'functional' across all aspects, from accommodation to catering. But they offer an easy, affordable way to get around, and they allow for periods of rest between sightseeing – with some truly spectacular views."



Although it can get busy, the restaurant carriage is only available to sleeper passengers – a Covid measure that will hopefully be dropped by the end of the year.

My carriage has a shared shower and toilet, and self-service coffee station – although no tea.

Luckily I've got a stash of teabags and my travel kettle, and make illicit cuppas in my cabin. Former inmates at Alcatraz, which I visited days earlier, would be proud.

Staff announce passing landmarks, notify passengers of the two time changes, and

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LEFT: The California Zephyr takes in amazing scenery ABOVE: Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco PICTURES: Mike Danneman

explain which stops are purely to pick up passengers, or are long enough to grab breaths of fresh air. Without their announcements, I'd have missed highlights such as elk bouncing through the snow in Colorado, or California's Stanford Curve, where the sharp angle

means passengers can photograph the train curling around the bend.

The journey is surprisingly smooth, and I sleep like a baby, leaving the curtains open to be woken by the sun illuminating the latest landscape, whether it's the Nevadan deserts' sand-

blasted monoliths or Iowa's rolling farmlands, with their colourfully painted grain silos.

Yes, at times I envy those who left San Francisco on Chicago-bound planes, such as when I'm woken by a screaming baby in the roomette opposite. And no, chocolates aren't placed on pillows as they were during my trans-Australia adventure, travelling onboard the Indian Pacific, but that's part of the appeal.

With new trains being added for new and existing routes in the next 15 years as part of Biden's plan to revolutionise rail travel in the US, it wouldn't be surprising if comfort levels improve. But for now, forays through the observation car and coach section – where reclining seats replace beds – are part of the fun.

On a leg-stretching stroll, I meet a student who's taking the journey as a tribute to his mum, who took

BOOK IT

**Amtrak Vacations'** seven-day California Zephyr Rail Exp-erience, which includes two nights' coach class accommodation and four nights in a hotel, starts from £569pp. [amtrakvacations.co.uk](http://amtrakvacations.co.uk)

him on the train when he was a toddler. Later, I spot an Amish lady cradling a baby at one end of the observation carriage, metres from a tattoo-covered skinhead.

A final word of warning – there's no Wi-Fi on many of the services, including the California Zephyr. But as we rumble into Chicago, it dawns on me just how much I'd have missed if there had been – all those views, and interactions with other passengers. It's a journey I'd happily do again – screaming baby and all. **TW**

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