

# 8 FACTS THAT WILL MAKE YOU STOKED TO TRAVEL AMERICA BY TRAIN

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Photo: [amtrak](#)

## 1. You will meet some of America's finest eccentrics.

Train tickets (especially long cross-country trips) are not necessarily cheaper than planes, nor are they always faster than cars (thanks to track delays). So who uses them? It often seems like a potpourri of oddballs unable to pass a driver's license test, conspiracy theorists that don't trust the TSA, ex-cons trying to avoid building a paper trail, small-time drug smugglers and the Kerouac types who want to be among the

people when they are tripping on mushrooms. Fortunately, the Way of the Train ensures that everybody gets along (and that talking is mostly reserved for the lounge car after 10pm). Just be prepared to have a moderately uncomfortable conversation with a woman who will emphatically try to convince you that your inability to write in cursive is a sign that the government had successfully altered your brainwaves using fluoride.

## **2. You'll experience perfect layovers in Chicago where you can leave the train station for an afternoon swim in Lake Michigan.**

Anyone who has ever traveled by plane knows that layovers are the straight-up worst (especially if you have to go through security checkpoints again). But for train travelers, layovers are practically the best part of the trip. Firstly, Amtrak doesn't have security checkpoints. At all. Secondly, a lot of the older stations in major cities like LA, Chicago and New York are located smack dab in the center of the city. So you can organize an essentially stress-free day trip to see the Metropolitan Museum, or the French Quarter, or Venice Beach before hopping back on your ride to the next town, still dripping from your afternoon swim or munching on some crawdads from the Mississippi.

## **3. You'll learn \*all\* about the history of rail travel.**

The history of America's rails is much longer than that of its highways, and arguably the train system has had a greater influence on the nation's infrastructure, migration patterns and even its time zones. Most of the cross-country tracks used today follow the same paths of the lines laid down 150 years ago. Some of these pass through the earliest settler routes (including those of the infamous Donner Party). There is also the history of the great African-American northern migration, which relied heavily on trains, preserved in the murals and architecture of the Midwest's most stunning stations. This is the kind of info you will

typically get from your friendly chain-smoking conductor during a three-hour delay outside of Spokane while inspectors make sure the ancient drawbridge up ahead won't collapse under the weight of the train.

#### **4. You'll finally get the world to "chill out for a minute."**

Although passenger trains average about 100mph, there are times when the going is much slower than that. Unscheduled stops in the middle of nowhere thanks to line traffic are also not unheard of. Sure, this isn't ideal if you're the type to insist on getting somewhere on the dot, but this lackadaisical approach of getting from A to B allows travelers to saturate themselves in the dramatic scenery as the nation drifts by the window. It also gives them time to wax nostalgia about lost lovers, dead pets and a time before social media trivialized such things to the point of meaninglessness.

#### **5. You can fall asleep to the sound of grinding steel in the Rocky Mountains only to wake up in the Great Plains.**

Sure, cars allow you to drive essentially wherever you want at your own speed. But for someone who loves the gentle rocking motion of a two-story Amtrak car, falling asleep in one region and waking up hundreds of miles away feels almost magical: as if the steel ship you are riding has crossed through a wormhole that transports you from one world to another.

#### **6. You'll finally have the chance to explore the plethora of train stations that have been left abandoned for decades.**

Thanks to mass defunding of passenger rail projects in the last 70 years and the rise of the automobile industry, there are countless opportunities to see the rotting corpses of America's premier beaux art homes of

mass transit along today's train tracks. Collapsed bridges, ghost towns and monuments to an era that celebrated public transit can be seen along many of the North Eastern lines in particular. Just try not to freak out if a stoned Vassar student convinces you to do a night shoot in an abandoned girls' asylum outside of Poughkeepsie.

## **7. Or fulfill your lifelong dream of becoming part of a pop-up folk band in a lounge car full of inebriates at 3am.**

The most important car for social acolytes in every train has always been the lounge car. From the cigar-smoking monopoly men of the late 19th century to the folk-singing nouveau beatnik of today — passengers have always taken full advantage of the booze and snack stocked social melting pot on wheels. This is where they go to talk, eat, read, play music or card games with otherwise perfect strangers. A park in Manhattan struggles to keep up with the number of casual acquaintances made in the late hours between El Paso and Baton Rouge on the Sunset Limited over a mandolin Johnny Cash cover. Bear in mind, however, that giving head to your fellow rail pilgrim in the handicapped bathroom of a rocking 200-ton train car is not easy as it sounds. Nor as clean.

## **8. Let's be real, trains are the perfect place to write a novel (or read one).**

Being in a lounge chair or bunk with nowhere to go or be and having the perfect view of the world for hours on end is bound to stir some inspiration within any of us. Just hope that your neighbor isn't simultaneously trying to convince you to only use fluoride-free toothpaste so Obama can't change your sexual orientation and make you a devil-worshipper. 🖕