

out and about

NIGHT

Thirty-five hours, 1,377 miles, and a clickety-clack soundtrack: riding the rails from Seattle to L.A. in a family sleeper cabin.

BY LORA SHINN

TRAIN



The ocean views from Amtrak's Coast Starlight are fantastic.



Emmett and Isabelle hang out in the café car and their cabin, right. Below, a scenic stop in San Luis Obispo, California.



IF YOU GO

Amtrak offers more than a dozen overnight train routes around the country, including the iconic California Zephyr that links San Francisco and Chicago. A family bedroom that sleeps four on the Coast Starlight starts at \$683. amtrak.com



LEFT PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN COOPER/LAUNCHPHOTOGRAPHY.COM; PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORA SHINN(G)

MAKING THE LONG TREK down the West Coast by train seemed like a great idea when I booked our family cabin, but in the days before our departure, the 3 A.M. doubts started to creep in. What if my often carsick son got rail sickness? What if my kids chanted “Are we there yet?” the entire time—in unison—and I met my husband in L.A. looking like a train-drained mess?

I had no real reason for concern. Emmett and Isabelle, then 8 and 14, were game for an old-timey rail adventure, and I relished the idea of not having to drive or herd them through interminable TSA lines. But still, I tossed and turned. My worries evaporated when the Amtrak

attendant welcomed us aboard the Coast Starlight at Seattle’s historic King Street Station. “Sparkling apple cider or champagne?” he inquired, as we settled into our cozy Superliner Family Bedroom.

Long-haul train rides are more than just another mode of transportation; they’re a complete vacation experience. In addition to age-appropriate drinks, our tickets for the 35-hour trip included all of our meals, as well as access to a wide-windowed lounge car, a parlor car, and a dining car with real tableware, a kids’ menu, and tablecloths covered with crayon-friendly white paper. Our 5- by 9½-foot family bedroom—tidy like a ship’s cabin—featured foldout beds,

a reclining sofa, tables, reading lights, outlets, and a closet. A shared bathroom and shower/changing room were just down the hall.

Unfortunately, the train’s movie room was out of commission on our trip; someone had stolen the DVD player, a reminder that this is very much “public transportation,” for better or worse. I worried that the kids would get a little restless, but I was wrong.

To the train’s soothing rhythm, Isabelle and I lounged and read books on our cabin’s roomy couch, while Emmett built a Lego Star Wars fighter on a sturdy fold-down table. From the route guide I’d downloaded, we learned the names of the charming towns, majestic mountains, and other landmarks that rolled by our windows.

At night, the car attendant transformed our cabin into a bedroom, folding seating into beds and pulling additional bunks from the wall. The train’s sway lulled us to sleep among the firs and snowy peaks of Oregon’s Cascade mountains. And in the morning we woke, magically, to California’s mist-kissed shoreline and waving palms.

For entertainment on our second day, we grabbed chips and soda in the café and played cards in the Sightseer Lounge, which gave us sweeping views of waterfalls and orchards. The Starlight’s





1950s-era, brass-trimmed Pacific Parlour Car—exclusively for passengers with sleeper car tickets—offered WiFi and plush purple, spinning seats for cozy daydreaming and wildlife watching. My eagle-eyed kids spotted cows, deer, llamas, seals, falcons, and, yes, eagles.

I brought craft projects and coloring books, on the advice of train-experienced friends, but it turned out we didn't need them. We found ourselves captivated by the scenery, which drew us from solo activities into frequent family chats. Even meals encouraged conversation, since our family of three was often seated with a stranger at a four-person table. One of our dinner companions offered tips on the best coastal-sunset spots along our route. We shared a table with another traveler who ate quietly but smiled when Emmett's Star Wars figure ended up in the butter dish.

"Mom, look, they're waving at us!" Emmett exclaimed in the middle of one meal, pointing out the window at a family stopped on bikes. "Well, wave back," I said. "But put your fork down first!" This started a new game of greeting cars, boats, and bikers. By the time we reached L.A., Emmett felt like a minor celebrity.

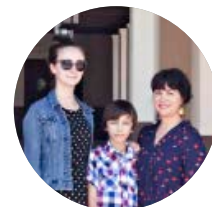
One downside to the journey: there were limited opportunities for free-range exploration, which may be tough on younger kids. You

can walk the length of the train if you're staying in a sleeper car, but the narrow hallways are unsuitable for running. And though we pulled into a host of grand old stations and tiny "Amshacks" along the way, the stops were so brief—often under 10 minutes—that we barely got to stretch our legs. (When the conductor announces that the train is about to depart, it's leaving with or without you.)

As the sun slowly sank into the Pacific on our second evening, we played cards in the golden light while chugging past Southern California's stunning bluffs, boats, and beaches. I wasn't navigating a freeway or worrying my way through the airport; the kids weren't nose-down in video games. All aboard, we rediscovered the old-fashioned luxury of time.

And no, I never heard, "Are we there yet?" Just the request, "When can we go on a train again?"

> meet the family



Formerly of Seattle, Lora Shinn and her family now live in Los Angeles.