

Climb Aboard

The Canadian



GREG MCDONNELL/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



stroke of its scheduled 9:55AM departure time. Reaching for a sullen, steel-gray sky, office and condo towers and generic skyscrapers loomed above the curved glass of *Glacier Park*'s dome as we emerged from the train shed. The cityscape would quickly fade behind us and we'd trade towers of concrete, steel, and glass for the snow-covered splendor of towering maples, birch, and evergreens as Train 1 dove headlong into winter on Canadian National's Bala Subdivision.

We were a sight to behold — a silvery thread twisting and curving through a snowy wonderland of forests, rivers, frozen lakes, and the Precambrian rock of the Muskokas and the Canadian Shield. Fifteen perfectly matched Budd stainless-steel passenger cars (including three domes) trailed obediently behind VIA F40PHs 6452 and 6456 — fifteen mid-20th century passenger cars dutifully fulfilling their intended roles well into the 21st century and seven decades after



WINTER. By virtue of geographic and climatic circumstance, winter has contributed defining characteristics and qualities to Canada and Canadians. "We Canadians are a winter people," Pierre Berton wrote, "— a wintry people, some would say, frosty of mien, cool of temperament, chilly of countenance." Winter puts the nation and its people to the test throughout a season as beautiful as it is harsh. Winter highlights the spectacular beauty of the Canadian landscape and the tenacity of its people. There is no better season in which to see the country and no better way to do it than aboard the grand dame of all transcontinental streamliners — VIA Rail Canada's *The Canadian*. Which is precisely the rationale that put our party of five in the dome of *Glacier Park* — a streamlined 1954-vintage Budd dome-sleeper-observation-lounge car — as VIA No. 1, *The Canadian*, stood ready to depart Toronto for Vancouver, B.C., on December 28, 2022. That, and Steve Bradley's brilliant notion to ring in the New Year rolling through the Rockies ensconced in Budd stainless steel in the company of our spouses.

The stars aligned. *The Canadian's* twice-weekly schedule sees No. 1 departing Toronto for Vancouver on Wednesday and Sunday while No. 2 leaves Vancouver for Toronto on Monday and Friday.

PREVIOUS PAGES: Saskatchewan! The view from the dome of *Glacier Park* as VIA No. 1, *The Canadian*, threads the S-curves on the CN Wainwright Subdivision east of Vera, Sask., on December 30, 2022.

ABOVE: Passengers detrain for fresh air and a pre-dinner walk on the platform as *The Canadian* pauses at Capreol, Ont., where engine crews change, and the locomotives are refueled.

OPPOSITE TOP: Everyone's at lunch. Empty space in the *Park* car dome is a rarity, but there's room to spare as Train 1 cruises through the snowy landscape west of Blue River, B.C., on December 31.

RIGHT: Silver and snow. Budd stainless steel shimmers in the late afternoon light as VIA No. 1 rolls through Richan, Ont. It's day two of our Toronto-Vancouver odyssey aboard *The Canadian*; we're still in Ontario and will be until after dark.

No. 1 out of Toronto on December 28 would be deep in the Rockies west of Kamloops, B.C., at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. We booked Prestige-class tickets for the four of us in late summer. The train was all but sold out when our friend Brad decided several weeks later to come along. No matter the season, book early.

With a gentle tug, Train 1 got on the move from Toronto Union Station at the





ABOVE: In preparation for the second sitting, the dining car crew cleans and sets tables in Budd-built diner *Imperial* as Train 1 makes its stop at Capreol, Ont. We'll be savoring caviar appetizers, sipping wine, and anticipating prime rib before the train gets underway again.

RIGHT: The tables are set, and dining car *Imperial* is quiet in the short interval between lunch and dinner sittings as Train 1 races through the snow west of Messiter, B.C., on December 31.

RIGHT BOTTOM: Dining is a delightful part of *The Canadian* experience. Caviar appetizers get dinner off to a perfect start on the first day out of Toronto.

they rolled out of the suburban-Philadelphia Red Lion works of the Budd Co. in 1954-55.

N.R. Crump's Train

We're indebted to legendary Canadian Pacific Railway President Norris Roy "Buck" Crump for the very existence of *The Canadian* and its magnificent Budd equipment. Championed by Crump, *The Canadian* made its debut as Canadian Pacific's new transcontinental flagship on April 24, 1955. Rolling stock for the new train formed a considerable portion of CP's 1954 order for 173 Budd-built stainless-steel cars to modernize its transcontinental services. Though CP in later years did its best to discontinue it, *The Canadian* survived as a daily Montreal-Toronto-Vancouver service through the VIA takeover in 1978 and for a dozen years more. Devastating budget cuts forced VIA in 1990 to eliminate transcontinental service on the CP route, but 33 years later, Buck Crump's Budds and *The Canadian* live on in cross-Canada service. In vacating the CP route, VIA transferred the train name and former CP equipment to its CN-routed Toronto-Vancouver counterpart. With the stroke



of a pen, the former *CN Super Continental* became *The Canadian*.

The Canadian has been a VIA train for 45 years, nearly twice as long as it was operated by CP, but "the world's greatest travel system" is imprinted in its DNA as surely as the ghostly but indelible outline of cast CP beaver shields that once adorned the aging Budds remains etched in their stainless-steel panels.

VIA holds title to nearly 150 of the original 173 CP long-distance Budds including baggage cars; coaches; "Skyline" dome-lounge-café cars; full-service dining cars; *Chateau*- and *Manor*-class sleeping cars; and the celebrated sleeper-buffet lounge, dome-observation *Park* cars. Sleeping car accommodations available on *The Canadian* range from traditional open sections with upper and lower berths to conventional roomettes, double bedrooms, compartments, and drawing rooms.



A handful of cars, including eight *Chateau* sleepers and four *Park* cars, have been rebuilt and reconfigured with cabins for Prestige-class service. Our cabins in *Chateau Maisonneuve* were like nothing Edward G. Budd or Buck Crump would have dared imagine — enlarged picture windows; an L-shaped corner couch by day, double bed by night; a small fridge and minibar; closet; and a private ensuite bathroom and shower. The flat-screen TV on the wall was an unnecessary accoutrement.

Who needs television when a seat in any of the train's three domes (as many as five in the summer) offers an unobstructed, 360-degree panoramic view as Canada in all its natural splendor rolls past the curved glass in real time. Day or night, there's nothing like riding the dome. And as dome cars go, there's nothing like a *Park* car.

Canadian Pacific commissioned 18 of the one-drawing room, three double-bedroom, 24-seat sleeper-buffet-lounge-dome-observation cars from Budd Co. in 1954. The signature bullet-end cars, each named for one of Canada's national or provincial parks, have been the exclamation point punctuating a train worthy of one for 68 years and counting.

In our case this was an asterisk — *Brock Manor*, an unoccupied sleeper was coupled behind *Glacier Park* as a so-called "buffer car." VIA in fall 2022 faced controversy regarding the crashworthiness of the aging Budd equipment. Until the matter could be resolved, VIA added a buffer car to each end of all trains operating with the heritage Budds. Destructive testing of selected cars of each type revealed what those familiar with the Budd equipment confidently predicted — the cars were proven to be safe and structurally sound. The edict was canceled, and the buffers vanished. Short of the restricted rearward view from the bullet lounge, our experience was undiminished by the presence of a buffer car.

Built to Last

From a passenger's perspective the venerable Budd only hint at their age; they're well maintained; ride like a dream; and add character, charm, a sense of history, and inimitable class to

LEFT TOP: Reaching for a sullen, steel-gray sky, generic offices, condos, and the iconic CN Tower loom above the curved glass of *Glacier Park*'s dome as Train 1 emerges from the train shed of Toronto Union Station.

LEFT: Ice and snow on the couplers between Skyline dome 8512 and sleeping car *McKenzie Manor* at Sioux Lookout, Ont., hint at the rigors of winter railroading *The Canadian* encounters on its cross-country run.



ABOVE: Rain and wet snow spatter the dome glass of *Glacier Park* as Train 1 meets eastbound CN Train 710 with ET44AC 3176 and ES44AC 2929 at Wolfenden, B.C., on December 31.

RIGHT TOP: Crews converse and passengers get some exercise as VIA 6452 and 6456 are refueled during Train 1's stop at Capreol, Ont. The venerable F40PHs will handle Train 1 for the entire 2,765-mile journey from Toronto to Vancouver.

RIGHT: Rolling across the prairie in the low winter sun, *VIA Glacier Park* casts a handsome shadow on the snowbanks near Vera, Sask. Serving as a buffer car, unoccupied sleeping car *Brock Manor* is coupled behind the *Park* car. A temporary measure since dispensed with, the buffer restricted rearward vision from the *Bullet Lounge*, but the onboard experience was undiminished.

the journey. It's the people, though, the friendly, attentive, considerate, and efficient onboard staff, who put the experience of riding *The Canadian* over the top. Impeccable service, extraordinary meals prepared and served in a full-service Budd dining car, and superb scenery — in that order — have established *The Canadian* as one of the world's greatest railway journeys. And the hardworking crew keeps it so.

Working culinary wonders in the close confines of the kitchen galley and serving a full house for three sittings, three meals a day, the staff in dining car *Imperial* went above and beyond the call to uphold the train's world-famous reputation. We could see the crew cleaning and setting tables in *Imperial* in preparation for the second dinner sitting as we took a walk on the snowy platform during the station stop, crew change, and locomotive refueling at Capreol, Ont. We were savoring caviar appetizers, sipping wine, and anticipating prime rib by the time Train 1 got underway from Capreol.

There's nothing like an after-dinner walk. When that walk involves pushing through the noisy vestibules and quiet corridors of a couple of Budd sleeping cars, a stop at a full-service bar for a wee dram of single malt, and a short climb



up the staircase to the comfort of a Budd dome, well, that's my kind of walk. And so, we pushed away from the dinner table in *Imperial* and relocated to the darkened dome of *Glacier Park* for a nightcap in what would become a nightly ritual.

West of Nakina

It was still dark the next morning when I poured a cup of coffee in the *Bullet Lounge* of *Glacier Park* and went upstairs to join Brad and Bradley and greet the day. We were somewhere west of Nakina, 21 hours and a little more than 700 miles out of Toronto. Day two and we're still in Ontario; it would be dark again before we crossed the Manitoba provincial boundary more than 1,100 miles west of Toronto Union and less than half way into our 2,765-mile, five-day/four-night cross-country adventure.

"Clear to stop." Flashing yellow-over-red signals pierced the predawn blackness as Train 1 approached Exton, Ont., population 0. A diverging signal at Exton confirmed our routing into the siding to clear a westbound CN freight. Moments

OPPOSITE TOP: Our extended station stop in Kamloops, B.C., afforded time for a walk and some fresh air before a New Year's Eve dinner highlighted by Nk'Mip Cellars Qwam Qwmt Cabernet Sauvignon and rack of lamb. To the delight of a young family, two girls took advantage of the stop and fresh-fallen snow to build a snowman.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Budd stainless steel reflects a morning sky radiant in shades of crimson and orange and red and gold as the sun climbs slowly over the horizon at Watrous, Sask., on December 30, 2022.

later, CN SD70M-2 8006 roared by with manifest freight M331. *The Canadian* keeps a relaxed pace, its schedule padded by necessity to accommodate heavy freight traffic on CN's transcontinental main line.

Daybreak revealed the breathtaking beauty of a boreal forest delicately laced with hoarfrost. Fresh snow sifted past the windows, stainless steel glistened in the low morning light reflecting the colors of lineside signals and the dimmed headlights of opposing trains. We'd



meet four more freights as well as VIA Train 2, our eastbound counterpart, by the time we reached Sioux Lookout for a late-morning crew change and refueling stop.

VIA in recent years added another night to the schedule of *The Canadian* to compensate for the increasing volume of freight traffic. An extra night aboard this magnificent conveyance — in the words of Pete Townsend of The Who, "I'd call that a bargain."

The pace is easy, but the time goes



quickly. It was 14-below and snowing as we pulled into Winnipeg just after dinner on Thursday evening. The train is refreshed and restocked and recreated during its scheduled two-hour stop in the "gateway to the west." Baggage carts and wagons piled high with fresh linens, and produce, and groceries crowd the platforms. We bid farewell to Nathalie, Chelsea, Daniel, Lynette, and the rest of the onboard crew who had been with us since Toronto. The incoming crew would take us through to Vancouver.

Sunrise, Sunset: Saskatchewan

A large white snowshoe rabbit hopped along an empty street as I opened my eyes and looked out on Melville, Sask., at 5:30 Friday morning. Melville is a railway town, a CN division point built by predecessor Grand Trunk Pacific. Other than the rabbit and a few railroaders concerned with VIA No. 1, Melville appeared to be sound asleep. Things were likewise peaceful in Cabin D of *Chateau Maisonneuve*. Maureen slept soundly as I slipped away to the *Park* car for an early



coffee. Somewhere west of Nokomis, the first hint of dawn traced a crimson line along the horizon.

At Watrous, the sole surviving grain elevator stood in stark silhouette against a crimson sky. Still below the horizon, the rising sun illuminated the underside of a small cloudbank to the east. The snow turned azure as daylight banished the night. Budd stainless steel reflected a morning sky radiant in shades of crimson and orange and red and gold as the sun climbed slowly over the horizon.

Sunrise comes late and the days are short in the depths of the prairie winter. The sun stays low in the sky and on the second-to-last day of December, VIA Train 1 saw just over nine hours of daylight, and spent all but the last few minutes of it getting across Saskatchewan. We spent most of those hours in the dome of *Glacier Park* enraptured as Buck Crump's streamliner sped through a magical world of swirling snow, blue skies, and sparkling hoarfrost. We raced through prairie hamlets without slowing, passed solitary grain elevators, soared over massive steel trestles, crossed coulees, dove into and climbed out of deep valleys, and met a parade of CN freights and intermodals along the way. Eight hours and change after we'd seen sunrise silhouette the elevator at Watrous, we watched the setting sun drop behind a lonely wooden elevator at Butze, Alta., just a couple miles west of the Saskatchewan boundary.

I married a prairie girl, a Winnipeg girl who put Manitoba behind her as quickly as she could turn her newly earned teaching certificate into a position with the Etobicoke Board of Education and life in Toronto. Me? I fell in love with the girl and the prairie. Through 44 years of marriage, she could never understand the latter affection. Imagine my surprise when she offered this unsolicited reflection at the journey's end — "You know my favorite part?" she queried without waiting for an answer, "Saskatchewan." The prairie seemed a world away as



TOP LEFT: Prestige attendant Chelsey keeps vigil outside sleeping car *Chateau Maisonneuve* as Train 1 makes its station stop at Sioux Lookout, Ont. Engine crews will change and the locomotives will be refueled at this northern Ontario division point established by CN predecessor National Transcontinental Railway.

ABOVE: Kicking up the snow, Train 1 races past the former Saskatchewan Wheat Pool elevator at Bradwell, Sask., in the early morning sun on the second-to-last day of the year. Sunrise comes late and the days are short in the depths of the prairie winter. The sun will be setting as *The Canadian* crosses the Saskatchewan/Alberta boundary a little more than seven hours later.

OPPOSITE TOP: The icy stainless-steel flanks of dining car *Imperial* glisten in the platform lights at Winnipeg Union Station. The ghostly outline of the cast CP beaver shield that once adorned the car is evident beneath the "A" of the VIA logo.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: It's standing-room-only in the dome of *Glacier Park* as *The Canadian* exits the tunnel at mile 6.6 west of Jasper on the Alberta Sub on the final day of 2022. Cameras, phones, and faces are pressed close to the curved glass, and there are audible gasps and expressions of delight by passengers wowed by the scenic spectacle that is the Rockies in winter.

the first traces of daybreak highlighted the jagged profile of the Rockies east of Jasper, Alta. Our extended station and servicing stop in Jasper would give dawn time to catch up with the train. With splashes of steaming water and the thump of scrub brushes, the glass of all three domes received a ritual cleaning in anticipation of the train's journey through the mountains. The very first rays of sun kissed the snow-capped peaks as No. 1 departed Jasper.

We paced a westbound grain train out of Jasper and threaded the needle to overtake it and meet an eastbound intermodal at Geikie. The eastbound *Canadian* was holding to meet us at Yellowhead. The domes were standing-room-only.

Cameras, phones, and faces pressed close to the curved glass, and there were audible gasps and expressions of delight by passengers wowed by the scenic spectacle that is the Rockies in winter.

Low clouds and mist hung in the canyons as we continued westward. The temperature rose as altitude dropped. A mix of wet snow and rain spattered the windows as we drifted through Boulder and Chu Chua. Passengers took advantage of the mild temperatures and fresh fallen snow at Kamloops and strolled the platform as engine crews changed and a fuel truck quenched the thirst of our two F40s. Two young girls built a snowman on the platform as a young family looked on in wonder. It was New Year's Eve.

Dining car Service Manager Sylvie presided over a festive crowd as we gathered at the table in *Imperial* for a New Year's Eve dinner highlighted by rack of lamb accompanied by a Nk'Mip Cellars Qwam Qwmt Cabernet Sauvignon from an indigenous winery in Osoyoos, B.C.

As midnight (Eastern Time) drew near, we adjourned to the bar section of *Glacier Park* as Train 1 traced the banks of the Thompson River through Walachin, McAbee, and Ashcroft. In the good care of *Park* car attendants Jenay and Alina, we rang out the old, toasted the new with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot Brut champagne, and called it a night — and a year.

Bon Voyage

The new year was less than six hours old as I settled into our table at the far



end of dining car *Imperial* to await Maureen, Steve, Maria, and Brad for a first cup of coffee and the last meal of our cross-Canada odyssey. The table was set, the lights were dimmed, and the car quiet as the crew readied for the 6:00 call for breakfast on VIA Train 1. *The Canadian* had pulled into Pacific Central Station in Vancouver about three hours early; passengers are permitted to stay on the train until 8:00 and enjoy breakfast in the diner.

Breakfast was delectable but bitter-sweet as we reflected on our adventure and bid farewell to the crew who had made the journey a positive experience and pleasant by all measure. We dined at Pacific Central Station and went by taxi to YVR for a perfect connection with a 9:00AM Air Canada flight to Toronto. Cruising at 37,000 feet and nearly 600 mph, the Boeing 777 retraced our cross-country route in less than five hours.

But I'll take Budd over Boeing any day — five glorious days of splendid meals, spectacular scenery, and good company as we crossed the country in style is as good as it gets. The enchanting allure of *The Canadian* is potent and the urge to ride grows stronger every time. *The Canadian* is a modern-day marvel and a national treasure. ■

