



NORTH AMERICAN INTERCITY

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Two enjoyable rail trips: A report



ABOVE: Amtrak's *Auto Train* at Dumfries, Va., 13 miles south of the Lorton terminal. Two locomotives are standard for the three-quarter-mile-long train, given the relatively flat territory on the route between Virginia and Florida. AMTRAK

A positive person by nature. I really dislike having to frequently point out the shortcomings of rail travel in the United States. Writing *PTJ's* "Window on the World" column is enjoyable because the good news beyond North America far outweighs the bad. For a long time, I have looked for a positive domestic topic for this "Intercity" column without resorting to reminiscing about the "good old days." That opportunity took shape when Brightline opened its long-awaited Orlando extension last September. Tallahassee-based *PTJ* correspondent Jack Turner was able to cover it in person, while I wrote an extensive background feature from my home office here in North Carolina. 554 miles to the north of Brightline's nearest segment of new rail.

The plan at the time was to do an in-person follow-up about six months after last fall's inaugural. The second part of the plan was to ride Amtrak's *Auto Train* to get there. Although the original *Auto Train* operated between 1971 and 1981, and Amtrak revived it (minus the hyphen) in 1983, I had not ridden the unique train until April of this year. Doing this required me and my wife to drive north to

go south. It is 318 miles from Pinehurst, N.C., to *Auto Train's* northern terminal at Lorton, Va., and this drive was spread over two days, the first day ending in the pleasant town of Ashland, Va.

Ashland is an excellent train-watching location, seeing 22 Amtrak trains a day and approximately as many CSX freight trains, with the double-track main line running right through the middle of town. Behind the Ashland station is the Henry Clay Inn, a bed and breakfast that also has a dining room available to the general public. The next time Nit and I visit Ashland we will stay there, but on this trip we just sampled the Inn for dinner, and it was wonderful. Great food, great service, and on this Sunday night, after two people left, an unexpected private dining room for us!

While we were there the southbound *Auto Train* rolled by, quite a sight at approximately 3/4 of a mile in length, the longest regularly scheduled passenger train in the world. Three Northeast Regional trains also visited Ashland while we were at the Inn. We wished the *Sil-*

ver Star would at least make a flag stop there, so next time instead of driving we could take that train from Southern Pines, step off the train at Ashland, and walk across the street to the Inn.

Ashland to Lorton is only 74 miles up Interstate 95, but it took more than two hours the next morning to reach the *Auto Train* terminal, thanks to two major back-ups on the highway. As we approached the Lorton exit we could see a third jam ahead and were thankful to take the off-ramp.

Auto Train check-in starts at 12:30PM and the cut-off for vehicles is 3:00PM. We arrived at 12:32PM and a line had already formed. By 1:00PM we had turned the car over to the loading crew and entered the terminal, a very basic box of a waiting room and somewhat dated (no electrical sockets anywhere), with an airport-style shop featuring snacks, beverages, and souvenirs at airport shop prices. There is a waiting area outside as well, and a small children's playground.

Access to trackside at *Auto Train's* Lorton terminal is, surprisingly, wide

open. I walked the length of the 16-car Superliner consist, which — from front to back — included four coaches, a Cross Country Cafe "diner lounge," five sleepers, a dining car, another lounge, and four more sleepers, including ours which was conveniently just after the lounge car.

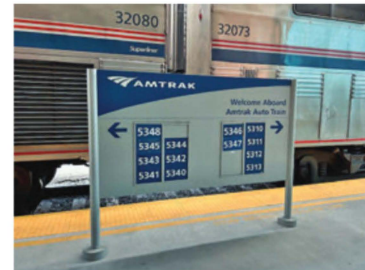
In many ways, *Auto Train* seems unconnected to Amtrak. The check-in people outside and in the station, our car attendant, the lounge car attendant, and the dining car personnel were all pleasant and had an enthusiastic attitude, as if part of a small team (as was the original *Auto Train*) and not part of a nationwide operation known for inconsistent travel experiences. The only reminder of it being an Amtrak train was the unwashed equipment (including windows) and the unexplained delay in boarding from 3:00PM to 3:30PM. As we were free to move about, we headed to the train and car 32505 around 3:15PM and found attendant Paul (and all the other car attendants) ready to receive passengers.

The passenger cars started moving at 4:13PM and were coupled to the auto carrier cars to form a 50-car train, which departed for Sanford at 4:36PM, 24 minutes ahead of schedule. Southbound passenger loads are lighter this time of year, hence the lower, reasonable fares that made it possible for me and Nit to get two roomettes, located across the aisle from each other. Neither one of us can handle the upper berth anymore, something to consider when designing new long-distance/inter-regional equipment, and especially because the older demographic is a prime target for rail travel.

Our *Auto Train* was probably about half full, but still had 284 passengers and carried 174 vehicles. Paul, who would work the next day's northbound train, said that train would be 100 percent full.

After enjoying a drink in the lounge, cheerfully prepared by Holly, a 15-year veteran of the train, we went to the diner for our 7:00PM reservation, the second of three dinner time options. The car had a dining car look, with real flowers at the tables. However, the food was served on "high quality" plastic and the salad dressing was in tear-apart packets, Amtrak-style. We and the two dinner companions we met had the "Amtrak Signature Flat Iron Steak" and all approved. Other entree choices included Pan Roasted Chicken Breast, Grilled Atlantic Salmon, and Rigatoni Bolognese. The White Chocolate Blueberry Cobbler Cheesecake dessert did not disappoint either. The dining car was full and the noise level loud, but in a cheerful way. Everyone was talking, it seemed, and apparently enjoying the *Auto Train* experience.

Our roomettes in the lower level were next to an empty family room, and there was only one other roomette occupant on



LEFT: *Auto Train's* first class lounge has the bar conveniently placed on the upper level of the Superliner car.

ABOVE: Sign at *Auto Train's* Lorton, Va., terminal directing passengers to their assigned cars. BOTH, KEVIN MCKINNEY

that level. It was a convenience to have the bathrooms and the shower room just down the hall. Amtrak blankets have improved since the last time I rode an overnight train several years ago. The ride on the former Atlantic Coast Line main line was a bit rough at times, especially when the train frequently entered double-track territory and returned to single-track at a fast clip. The *Auto Train* makes just one stop, at Florence, S.C., and that is only for servicing and changing the operating crew.

Breakfast the next morning was in the dining car, although some food and beverage items were also available in the lounge car for passengers preferring a light breakfast. Actually, the dining car offering was relatively light as well, with a

menu featuring only a continental breakfast, a breakfast sandwich, or a bacon, egg, and cheese souffle. The souffle was fine, but having expected a more traditional dining car menu and presentation, the experience was a bit of a let-down.

After breakfast, there was a delay due to trackwork on SunRail's extension to DeLand, so the 10:00AM scheduled arrival at Sanford was instead 10:30AM. Fine with us. We were enjoying the train trip and the fact that we were not on the highway. Passengers can pay extra to get their vehicle off the train first. Not in a big hurry, we chose not to. Our vehicle emerged from one of the seven cuts of auto-carrying cars at 11:55AM, and we were soon on our way to nearby Orlando.



A toast to Brightline and its Orlando extension! *PTJ* Founder and Senior Editor Kevin McKinney enjoys a Mimosa and other Brightline Premium Class perks on his Orlando–Miami round trip, and stands at the street entrance to MiamiCentral station. ALL, KEVIN MCKINNEY



New mileage on Brightline

The next day, April 10, we took the airport shuttle from the DoubleTree hotel to the Brightline station, which is connected to, but not in, Terminal C at the Orlando International Airport. I checked in at the Brightline gate using my mobile phone and the gate opened. After passing minimal private security, passengers can either head to the Mary Mary Bar (Brightline explains the name: “Henry Flagler had three loves, the railroad, and his two wives, both named Mary”) or to a waiting lounge. Those traveling Premium, as we were, can enter the spacious Premium lounge where a wide variety of complimentary food and beverages are available, such as cheese and cold cuts, pastries, fruit, eggs. Ghirardelli chocolates, coffee, juices, beer, and wine.

There was a boarding call at 8:37AM for the 8:50AM train, and passengers headed for the escalators down to the high-level platforms where trainset *Bright Blue* was waiting. The train departed precisely at 8:50AM and within a few minutes we were moving at 125 mph, easily passing vehicles on parallel highway 528 (formerly known as the Bee Line Expressway). We enjoyed Mimosas while on the higher-speed stretch. By 9:18AM the maximum-speed run was over and the train slowed to join the Florida East Coast main line at Cocoa. After the curve to the south (near where a future station will be located) the train soon resumed a fast pace at what seemed to be 90 mph.

A suggestion to Brightline: Add the train speed to the video display in the center of each car.

Walking the four cars to determine the number of Orlando passengers, I counted 17 in the Premium (first class) car and 88 in the three Smart (coach) cars. In the Smart cars, passengers may purchase drinks and food at their seat from an attendant pushing a cart along the aisle, while in Premium passengers are served complimentary food and beverages from another cart. Our train stopped at the new stations Boca Raton and Aventura

in addition to the three original south Florida stations: West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, and MiamiCentral. Many more passengers joined the train — and detrained — at the south Florida stops, with one woman traveling in Premium just from West Palm Beach to the next stop at Boca Raton! By the time our train reached Miami on time at 12:20PM, there were 29 passengers in Premium. I did not get a Smart count but the passenger load was substantial.

My only complaint was that the *Bright Blue* trainset’s exterior advertising wrap made the view out the generously sized windows less appealing than it should have been.

The return from Miami precisely at 1:45PM was on the *Bright Red* trainset, which fortunately was not wrapped. While most station stops seem to take two minutes, or no more than three, the Fort Lauderdale stop took six minutes because of a problem with a door in our Premium car not functioning. An announcement was made to henceforth detrain from the next car instead.

Food service in the afternoon was even more plentiful than on the morning train. In addition to snacks that were offered first, the meal provided either an Italian Ciabatta sandwich or a Caprese Ciabatta sandwich. Along with either choice was a fresh fruit salad and a tomato and mozzarella salad.

With hourly service from early morning into the evening, it’s likely six Brightline trains in the opposite direction will pass your train on a journey between Orlando and Miami, some with a closing speed of as much as 160 to 180 mph. In addition, this day we passed two Florida East Coast freight trains, one a mix of intermodal cars and general freight cars (which is how FEC operates its fast freight service), the other an aggregate “rock” train, and at one location a local freight was doing some work. This, I thought, is how a railroad should run. In fact, once upon a time, it was. Railroads could run fast, relatively frequent passenger trains and freights trains without delay to either service. That this is happening today on FEC, a freight-only railroad for decades since the 1960s, is a miracle and proof that it can be done.

As I wrote when we experienced Brightline the first time 4½ years ago on a Miami–West Palm Beach round trip, it is almost hard to believe this is real and not a dream. With fast, clean, on-time trains all day long, friendly personnel and excellent onboard service, not to mention impressive, attractive stations, Brightline is a model for what corridor service should be.

Despite the brief delay at Fort Lauderdale, we pulled into Orlando on time at 5:20PM. When detraining — at all stations — an announcement is made “Have a Bright Day!” Yes, indeed.