

# tripreport: VIA's Venture fleet

by Ira Silverman



I never anticipated in the 1970s, when riding new Amfleet cars (the carpet is plush!), that I would ride a subsequent generation of short-haul passenger cars. But capping off a recent trip on VIA's *Canadian*, I rode the new standard for North America, Siemens' Venture cars, between Ottawa and Montreal. In this short two-hour trip I may have missed some features, and it is not clear if VIA has duplicated Amtrak's interior features. Speaking of carpet, there is none to be seen on the walls. From the ceiling down, a shade of white is the predominant color. The only accent is light gray carpeting and the gray/black seats. While it has a new-car look, it is also very spartan.

These cars represent the fleets of the next half century for VIA, Amtrak, and Brightline. I have not yet had the chance to ride the U.S. versions of the Siemens product. After more than a quarter century of Budd-constructed or -inspired (Superliner) stainless-steel cars, a new manufacturer is now dominant. My impression is that, after a long gap in the

construction of new intercity cars, a new generation of engineers has lost the institutional memory built up by Budd.

Overhead signage in the cars is a step above, showing location, washroom occupancy, and even speed. I was unable to determine how the cars would ride at 125 mph because our top speed was only 95 mph. On jointed rail the ride was solid, but the joints were noticeable. On welded rail the ride was smoother, but still did not have the gliding quality that most European equipment features.

Probably the worst aspect of this brand-new fleet was the seats. Designers have thrown out decades of experience in passenger cars and started from scratch. Despite a long history of "reclining" seats in Canada and the U.S., these seats have the European sliding bottom, whose only advantage is the design of the tray table. The seats are very firm, and I would judge them maybe seven on a scale of ten. When working with the French designer Complan on an ill-fated Amtrak long-distance seat, I learned how difficult it is to have one seat fit humans of differ-

ent sizes. An adjustable lumbar support and headrest would be a big help but are not included. But don't worry, VIA and Amtrak public relations will tell you how wonderful they are.

The bad news continues. Amtrak passengers will appreciate the large windows (which VIA riders already have in the LRC fleet). But seat and window spacing don't always line up. Our assigned space gave my wife, in the window seat, a view of a few inches if she craned her neck back. In the aisle seat, I could get glimpses through windows on the other side of the aisle. A quick walk down the aisle determined that almost half the seats on one side of the car were fully or partially obstructed. It makes an Amfleet coach look almost panoramic. Apparently each VIA Venture car series (five at present) has slightly different seating configurations, so the same seat number could have different amounts of obstruction on different cars. As long as passengers can choose their own seat the damage could be minimized on a lightly patronized train, but VIA assigns seats, and Amtrak

LEFT Running in push mode with cab car 2306 leading, VIA Train 33 crosses the Ottawa River at Sainte-Anne-Bellevue, Que., on November 15, 2023. Business Class cars are marshaled closest to the Charger diesel locomotive (at the far end of the train in this view), and are outwardly distinguished by a darker shade of gray below the windows. *KEN GOSLETT*

TOP RIGHT Interior of a VIA Venture coach. *IRA SILVERMAN*

MIDDLE End-of-car luggage storage and waste receptacles. Luggage capacity can be an issue for the many passengers connecting at VIA's Dorval, Que., station and from Montreal's adjacent airport. *BOTH, IRA SILVERMAN*

BOTTOM RIGHT Each five-car trainset includes three large fully accessible washrooms (as shown here) and four smaller non-accessible washrooms. *IRA SILVERMAN*



is likely to go down that road. This could have been addressed somewhat with narrower window panels or different seat placement, but obviously the damage is now done.

Depending on the car series, washrooms are either a large accessible design or a smaller space that isn't fully accessible. In the five different car series of a standard five-car VIA Venture trainset, a total of seven washrooms are available (three accessible and four of the smaller variety). Washrooms have paper-towel dispensers but lack electric hand dryers, and the one small refuse container in each washroom will fill up quickly. The crew said that on a crowded Toronto-Montreal train they had to empty the containers three times.

Cars equipped with fully accessible washrooms also have accessible seating areas with wheelchair anchor points.

Luggage storage appears to be a problem. The overhead storage racks are not deep, so even carry-on bags must be placed lengthwise, taking up more space. The airlines are addressing this problem with new pull-down deep containers that allow bags to be placed transversely to the cabin. There is a luggage storage tower at one end in VIA's Venture cars, but none at the other end of the car. The crew said that during busy holiday periods they used an unoccupied car as a baggage car.

Compared to Amfleet, the big windows, brightness, and accessible washrooms are all positives. But unless the design of Amtrak's forthcoming Siemens Airo cars is significantly different, it will be living with these flaws for another 40 or 50 years. **PA**

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