

TRAVEL

Canada via rail is the leisurely way to go

By PATRICK IVOBY
SPECIAL WRITER

Want to go on a train trip, eh? Maybe leave the country, meet people from around the world and see some beautiful scenery? If so, a Can Rail pass on Canada's VIA Rail would be all you would need.

A Can Rail pass allows 12 days of travel in a 30 day period. In low season which is Oct. 15 to May 15, with the current rate of exchange, the cost is \$286 U.S. In high season, which is May 16 to Oct. 15, the cost is \$420 U.S.

Rooms in the sleeper cars are available, but for the average traveler the cost is a bit pricey. For instance, for the trip I took from Toronto to Vancouver and back - the price would have been over \$2,000.

So, for me it would be the economy class which provides a nice wide seat that reclines 45 degrees.

When I was booking the ticket, I asked the ticket agent if it was possible to survive the four day and 3 night trip without a sleeping berth. In a charming French/Canadian accent he headbanned. "Well, we haven't lost anybody yet."

Having completed the trip to and from the west coast, I can verify that on the trains I was on there were no casualties. Sleeping in a chair is not easy, but it is also a part of what makes it an experience.

I had the benefit of two seats to myself and was able to lay down with my head on my armrest and put my legs wherever I could fit them. It was far from perfect, but with the help of some ear plugs and with confidence of having survived a couple of nights I eventually learned to let the motion of the train rock me to sleep.

Older passengers, whether it was because they were more experienced train travelers or because they simply had more patience, were better at getting themselves to sleep. There were men and women in their 50s on up that would be out like lights and snored through the night (remember ear plugs!) and looked refreshed in the morning. The younger ones, which included college students from across Canada, couples from Europe and several solo sojourners from Australia and New Zealand, would writhe and contort in an effort to get comfortable at night and take naps throughout the day to compensate.

But sleeping was the only hard part and it also made it a bonding experience. Everyone on the train, young and old, was extremely friendly. By the time I reached my destination I felt I had gotten to know a lot of people. Several people from Canada and even Switzerland invited me to their homes. I had a French lesson as the train crept through the mountains and there was plenty sharing of food, magazines and CDs.

The tables in dining cars were covered with cloth. The silverware was tinkled whenever the train

would pick up speed. Limited space meant having to share a table. This took a little getting used to, but it was great for meeting and talking to interesting people. There was a man on his way to Sioux Lookout in Northern Ontario, almost 90 years old, who shared his memories of when he was a child in England during World War I; there was a man in his 20s who was a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer in the Yukon Territories; and there was a miner from New Zealand who was working his way around the world, just to name a few.

The food was surprisingly good although nothing very fancy. And considering we were captive customers, the prices were quite reasonable. A meal was usually \$5-\$8 Canadian. The first meal I had, I paid for it with an American \$20 bill. With the rate of exchange at 30 percent in favor of the U.S. dollar, I received more than \$20 change in Canadian currency.

While all of this was going on inside, on the outside the continent was slowly changing shape.

There are more lakes in Canada than the rest of the world combined. I suggest this trip if you need any convincing. Between Toronto and the Ontario/Manitoba border - a stretch that takes almost 26 hours - the train snakes its way through a thousand miles of rocky hills, lakes and streams. It is rather slow going due to the lack of straightaways, stops to let freight trains pass and picking people up and dropping people off in the little towns along the way. There were stops in towns like Hornby, Gogama and Sioux Lookout. Once, the train stopped, two backpackers got off and vanished into the woods.

Just before reaching Winnipeg, the Great Plains begin. With the perspective of riding in a train, which is higher than riding in a car, the prairies seemed even more immense than I remembered them to be. There

were several farms where there was not a barn or farmhouse anywhere in sight. The only variation in the landscape was what looked like huge white sand dunes in the distance, but what was really potash being mined.

The scenery was not as interesting, but it felt good to be making time. The train rolled across Manitoba, Saskatchewan and into Alberta through the course of the night. It is roughly the distance between Toronto and Manitoba but took about half the time.

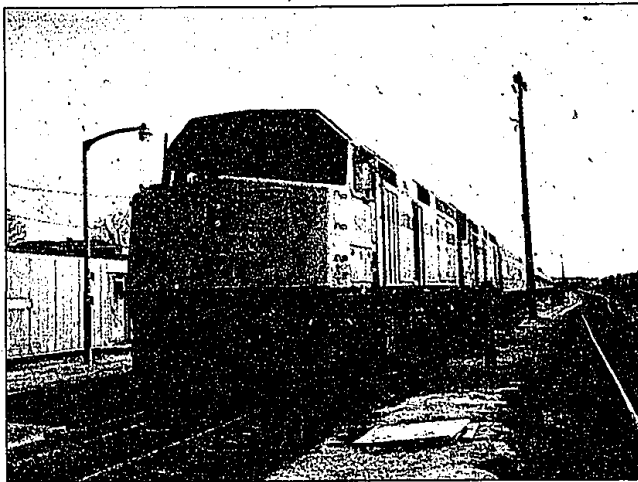
In the morning the train was about 150 miles from Edmonton and the landscape began to change. We were still in farmland, but the farms were on rolling hills with an occasional river or lake. It was in this area I saw a gray wolf running at full tilt about 200 yards from the train.

On the other side of Edmonton there is a stretch that is surprisingly similar to Northern Michigan. It featured gently rolling hills, forests and farms and some large lakes surrounded by cottages.

The comparison stopped around the town of Hinton, which is where we got our first glimpse of the Canadian Rockies. At that point the train trip became a scenic tour. First, there were rocky cliffs and by the time we reached Jasper, some 30 miles later, we were surrounded by snow covered peaks. By the side of the railroad tracks were elk and big horned sheep.

Jasper is the highlight of the trip and for many of the train's passengers was their destination. Jasper offers skiing, mountain climbing, mountain biking, bus tours, restaurants and lodging. It is touristy, but it isn't overbuilt.

If you are not in a big hurry it might be a good idea to get off the train and spend some time sightseeing. But if you do get off it will be a couple of days before the next train comes through. Just beyond Jasper the train



PHOTOS BY PATRICK IVOBY

Across Canada: The VIA Rail train makes a stop at Sioux Lookout, Ontario, on its way west to British Columbia.

crossed the continental divide and into British Columbia. It also began its long descent toward the Pacific Ocean. Just to the north at this point we could see Mount Robson, the highest point in the Canadian Rockies.

Unfortunately, a good amount of time in this part of the mountain is in the dark both coming and going, although on the way back, a full moon silhouetted these huge hills all night long.

When I awoke the next morning on the trip west, we were near the town of Hope, British Columbia. It is the beginning of an area known as the Fraser River Valley. It is one of the fastest growing areas in Canada

and it is easy to see why. When I was there, in early May, this area was lush and green.

Vancouver is similar to Seattle, which is only 140 miles south, in style and vibrancy. The downtown features sparkling modern skyscrapers and miles and miles of new housing developments around the city.

Unlike Seattle, mountains rise up immediately to the east of the city. The combination of the skyline and the mountains is stunning.

It may say more about the

modern traveler than it says about train travel that four days on the train might seem daunting. We have become accustomed to hopping on a plane and in no more than a few hours arriving at our destination. And when you are given only two weeks vacation it's hard to decide on spending half of it getting to and from where you are going. But if you've got the money, the time and are willing to give up a little comfort in return for an interesting experience, a trip on the VIA Rail is a trip you'd never forget.

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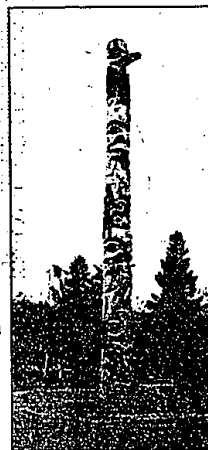
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