

“Paranoid people. You get plenty of them on here.” His partner shoots him a slightly disapproving glance. He laughs, knowingly. “Yeah, lots of scared folks. And nostalgic folks. And the eco-warriors. Oh yeah, and everybody who doesn't want their head cut off on a Greyhound.” More laughter, and some even sterner disapproving looks. “Which one do you reckon we are, then?”

I'm spared the fumbling for a polite answer, as he quickly exclaims how much he enjoys the journey, and how great the staff are at making do with all the cuts thrown their way over the years. This is met by a raucous chorus of approval from behind the counter.

We're sat facing them, the old hands at this journey. They know how to enjoy it, and, perhaps most importantly (although this may be cynical), they know how to tip. There's nothing that makes an American service employee's heart sink more than a “British” accent. They've done well to set us up like this, though – we didn't know you needed to tip for inclusive food.

Some time in the past day, we left Chicago's Union Station on the California Zephyr train San Francisco. Well, actually, to Emeryville, California, but that doesn't sound nearly as good, and the final bus ride, for all its impressive views as you enter the city, isn't the best part of the journey. I say 'some time in the past day' because time increases in fluidity on such a long journey. It's scheduled to take 54 hours, but take around 60. There's nothing like being stuck behind a coal train in the Nevada desert for several hours to make you appreciate the varying scenery that follows.

We have a 'roomette', the smallest size of sleeping compartment. Unlike European sleepers, which tend to lie across the carriages with a corridor at the side, these compartments come off a central corridor and are arranged lengthways. By day, they convert to two huge armchairs with a picture window. At the end of the carriage, there's snacks and some infeasibly strong coffee. Downstairs (ah yes, it's double-decker), there are showers. Our diner friends tell us of other trains where the toilets are inside the compartments. I'm particularly glad this isn't the case here.

Roomettes being treated as first class, you're treated to dinner in the diner (could anything be finer?) Just choose your sitting, listen out for the chorus of announcements, and come along, where you'll be sat down, side-by-side, opposite another two people (most people seem to travel in pairs). If this enforced sociability at first seems slightly uncomfortable, or even contrived, that quickly disappears. Mind you, not everybody can cope with such arrangements. On our last evening meal, we were sat opposite some Belgians, who made a huge fuss about it and demanded to be sat opposite each other, while next to us. This was enough to set off a whole America-bashing tirade. I just wanted to watch the Sierra Nevada roll past outside the window.

The meals aren't gourmet. There may have been a day where this was the case (if the earlier loud chorus of approval is anything to go by), but you basically get a decent ready meal, fairly similar to chain pub food. It's not bad. Breakfast is perhaps the most impressive meal of the day, particularly because I had no concept of the sheer quantity of food it's possible to eat at that time in the morning particularly when you're doing nothing but gazing out of a window. The Bob Evans grill (who is Bob Evans? I think we should be told) consists of a huge plateful of fried stuff, that would put a Little Chef Olympic Breakfast to shame. With the option of extra sausage meat. We sat in awe watching two women travelling the length of Utah (and only just fitting into the diner booth) demolish these legendary platefuls.

But what do you do for 60 hours on a train? We had iPods and books. Lots of books. Truth is, though, neither of us read much (other than the Bradt USA By Rail guide, which gave plenty useful, and plenty trivial information about the various towns and outposts we passed). Apart from that,

though, I got through very little in the way of reading, which is unusual for me at the best of times. There were some DVDs being shown in one of the carriages, and even a viewing carriage, with talks from the National Park experts who occasionally join the train for a section at a time. The best entertainment was a combination of watching the changing scenery (through the huge window in our compartment) and watching the mix of paranoid, nostalgic eco-warriors among us.

You start off in Chicago's Union Station, a classic American grand terminus worth visiting in its own right, if only to drink coffee and read a paper in the vast, marble-and-dark-wood clad main hall. The rest of the station is quite rabbit warren-like, but the smell of cinnamon quickly lures you to some incredibly unhealthy-looking breakfast treats. Luggage is checked in, airline-style, and first-class passengers get access to an airline-style lounge, with more dark wood, green leather(ette) and the standard array of newspapers, biscuits and hot drinks.

Perhaps to set our expectations early on, it's announced that the train is 20 minutes late. Nobody quite knows how or why. Is 20 minutes in the scheme of a 54-hour journey significant? Well, yes, it is when you're waiting to leave! People start queuing. They can't all be British, surely? But then I remember the obsessively hierarchical airport queuing observed all over the US ("no, you can't board yet, we've only done mega-platinum and platinum so far"). The flood gates open, and we're led, in an odd penguin-parade, across tracks to our towering, steely, double-deck sleeping carriage, greeted by a carriage attendant who looks after us all the way down to California (yes, you tip them too).

And we're off! We leave Chicago, and the suburbs slowly turn to small-town Illinois. By the time you reach Nebraska, vast corn fields dominate the landscape, and you cross the surging Ohio river into, well, Ohio, a good place to be rocked to sleep at a slow trundle. When you wake up, you're in Colorado, and the corn has given way to vast cattle ranches. You're going up and up to the mile-high city itself: Denver. Many people end their journey here, including, on our trip, the Green Family, all dressed in bright green t-shirts sporting an impressive "Green Family Vacation" logo. At least, I assume they were called Green. Maybe they were the eco-warriors we'd heard talk of. Still, there's enough time for a quick wander round here (unlike Ottumwa, Iowa) and sample the shimmering cleanliness and bright natural light of the city.

Then, it's off to the Rockies, amid miles-long freight trains. The track curves up and up and the scenery becomes more and more dramatic. The long descent follows the course of the Colorado River, which seems to carry endless gaggles of canoeists down to Colorado Springs. The trains are air-conditioned, so walking out into a dusty Colorado station at the height of Summer has that classic 'walking into an oven' effect. On into Utah, although disappointingly, the section by the Great Salt Lake is passed in the dark.

Another night's sleep, and it's Nevada. Rocky desert as far as the eye can see, punctuated occasionally by the all-American sight of giant trucks, bound for California. Unfortunately, this section is also punctuated by the all too familiar experience of severe delays due to freight congestion. They have priority here, after all. The vastness and emptiness of a desert is always impressive, and you need time to come to appreciate it. Spotting ever silverier, ever larger Mack trucks in scenes straight out of *Convoy* is also fun. After 6 hours of barely moving, though, you'll be glad you brought those books and that iPod. Or else, when you reach Reno, you'll want to shoot a man, just to watch him die.

Luckily, it wasn't more, so it's still light for what is probably the most impressive section of the journey: the Sierra Nevada. You've gone from desert to snow-caps in a matter of hours. The first

hint of what lies ahead is at the climb up to the Donner Pass. The train then winds past lakes and through shelters, as a perfectly-timed sunset casts a soft light on the whole scene. If it wasn't for some rather upset Belgians in the diner, it would have been a perfect ending.

Actually, if it wasn't for the last 2 hours through California in the dark, followed by a rickety bus from Emeryville, it would have been a perfect ending. The bus journey was not without its charms, though. Our favourite Belgian couple tried to get the bus to divert via their hotel, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, despite the tip-me hints from the driver. Most of all, though, the entrance to the city over the East Bay Bridge (not the Golden Gate Bridge: geography is against you on that one) provides a suitably epic ending to an impressively epic journey.

California Zephyr tickets can be booked on [amtrak.com](http://amtrak.com), from US\$xxx (£xxx) for a seat, US\$xxx (£xxx) for a roomette (like us), or US\$xxx (£xxx) for a luxury suite.

Open-jaw fares into Chicago and out of San Francisco are available from British Airways and United Airlines from £xxx.