

Clevelanders enjoy boarding an Amtrak train in daylight

Clevelanders enjoy the ride and departing at a decent hour
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Debbi Snook - Plain Dealer Reporter

Margie O'Connor of Concord had not been on an Amtrak train in 18 years, the whole time she had lived in Ohio. But one day this summer, she stood on the downtown platform, kissed her husband, Bill, goodbye and boarded the Lake Shore Limited for New York City.

She likes rail travel. It's been a comfortable part of her life, including several trips across Europe with Bill. But when it came to Amtrak in Cleveland, the eastbound departures left in the middle of the night, around 2:30 and 3:30 a.m.

She always chose the airport.

Then two things happened: Her sister decided to fly in from overseas to meet her in New York. In April, Amtrak officials changed the eastbound rail schedules out of Cleveland.

The call for "all aboard" to New York was ringing out in broad daylight for the first time in years. Passengers could get on at 7 a.m. in Cleveland and get off at 7 p.m. in Manhattan.

"It's the only reason I'm here," said O'Connor.

She is not alone. Since the schedule change, ridership for the Lake Shore Limited route from Chicago through Cleveland to New York is up over last summer - 4.2 percent in May, 4.9 percent in June and 6.9 percent in July. That's a total of 4,666 extra passengers hopping aboard.

Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said there's no decision yet whether the daylight schedule will continue when schedules are posted in October.

And there's no news yet on the possibility of a daylight trip from New York to Cleveland. Returning Clevelanders now board at 3:45 p.m. in New York and get back here at 3:30 a.m., once again rolling into the circadian blur of the wee hours.

While the response to the new eastbound schedule has been popular, it was not created primarily to please Cleveland travelers, said Magliari. Trains from the western part of the country were getting into Chicago so late that passengers missed their connections eastbound.

Amtrak's policy is to put them up overnight. By delaying the Lake Shore Limited's departure for five hours and allowing for delays, the railroad hopes to cut costs.

Not all cross-country passengers have been happy with the new five-hour layover in Chicago, said Magliari. Amtrak has instituted a program of early boardings in Chicago to appease them.

I hope the daylight schedule continues. Dropping it would be a cruel act for those who have tried it and loved it. I took the trip over the Fourth of July weekend - not the 12-hour to New York City, but the 8-hour to Schenectady, N.Y.

My mom lives there, and the 8½ hour drive has always been forbidding on my own. When I do it, I usually head to Rochester, stay a night in a bed-and-breakfast or motel near the highway, and finish the trip the next morning.

That costs \$65 to \$85 each way for the room, not to mention the gas. I could easily spend \$300 driving. A round-trip Amtrak ticket, purchased a month in advance, cost a little less than \$140, and I didn't have to buy gas.

Rail tickets, like airline tickets, are cheaper the earlier you buy them. I checked the next-day prices to New York and Boston last week. A round trip to New York, staying a week, would cost \$252; and Boston, \$264. Lots of things will cause prices to vary depending on date of purchase, days of travel, discounts and holidays. Check prices at www.amtrak.com.

In addition to affordable prices, rail travel can make time luxurious again. I could nap, chat with other passengers, listen to music, talk on my cell phone, read and eat. I could embrace the pleasure of the landscape, of water, farms and cities. Way to go.

Why the trains are often late

A big kink is that Amtrak tends to be tardy. Magliari reports the line's on-time success is 30 percent, a figure that would put an airline out of business.

There are extenuating circumstances, of course. The rail lines used by Amtrak are owned by freight companies such as CSX, which have the right of way. This is a busy era for moving coal, cars and anything else by rail. The passenger trains have to wait.

"We're dealing with a record volume of passengers and diminished capacity" because of the increasing traffic, said Magliari.

Amtrak owns the tracks on some popular East Coast routes, where schedules are more often met. Legislation has been proposed to give Amtrak more traffic clout and improved timing.

My 7 a.m. train didn't leave Cleveland until 9 a.m., two hours late. Fortunately, when I picked up my ticket the day before, a clerk gave me the phone number at the Cleveland station (216-696-5115) so I could check ahead on the train's status.

This also avoided a "conversation" with Julie, Amtrak's robot receptionist (1-800-872-7245). She is helpful enough, but I'll take a human anytime.

I called early and, discovering the delay, ate a full breakfast at home and read two newspapers before heading to the station.

This was a whole lot better than the last time I departed Cleveland a few years ago. The train was scheduled for a 3:30 a.m. departure and didn't leave until 5:30 a.m. I didn't know it was going to be late until I got there. Neither did several families waiting it out. The cries of tired children really hit home at that time of night.

This time I was reminded that parking is a breeze at the Amtrak station. There is no fee. Right, no fee. But the lot is locked down from 1 to 9:30 p.m., when the staff is not around. Small price to pay.

The bigger price can be finding your way there. Is there a sign-theft problem or doesn't anybody care whether it takes you a few loops around the Shoreway to get to the station? The signs that are posted are small and sparse, along with the thinking.

But Margie O'Connor made it and so did Chardon resident Tina LaCasse, who dropped off her mother-in-law, Aundree, who was headed to see her children and other relatives in New York, New Jersey and Canada. Tina said the daytime schedule made a big difference for her mother-in-law.

Some passengers were oblivious to the changes. Levi Byler drove from Hartstown, Pa., with his son, Mike, 29, and Mike's wheelchair. They boarded in Cleveland, headed for Albany, N.Y., and planned to turn right around and come back.

"The destination doesn't matter," said Levi. "Mike loves trains."

"It's economical, too," said Mike.

The elder Byler works a full-time job and milks a herd of cows twice a day.

"We're just sitting here, watching the world go by," he said.

Dave Dvoroznak of Lakewood rode with his son, Jacob, 17, headed to see relatives near Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Amtrak offered him an alternative to a car he couldn't trust.

Passengers get a look at Cleveland in daylight

Carol Lincoln, a retired librarian from the Chicago suburbs, takes the train to visit relatives in Rochester, N.Y. The new schedule allowed her to view Cleveland in daylight for the first time.

"I didn't know you could see the lake here," she said.

Other passengers got off the train and snapped pictures of Browns Stadium, the Great Lakes Science Center and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Andrew Jameton was among them. The ethics instructor at the University of Nebraska College of Medicine in Omaha was thrilled to talk about riding the rails, calling it an economic, environmental and social advantage.

"It's a big national secret that some people want train travel," he said.

There were others on the train who don't like flying. One family wanted a calmer travel experience for a newborn (and for surrounding passengers). Another passenger rode because his relatives would be happier to meet him at a small train station outside Chicago rather than at O'Hare airport.

Lots of folks just didn't want to drive alone. Amish passengers would not have driven, period.

My train arrived two hours late to Schenectady, even with some effort to make up time. I appreciated the attempt, but when the train goes faster, that gentle rocking motion gets more frenetic.

My return trip was a lot different because a friend gave me a gift of a sleeping-car ticket. That's about \$250 more (than my \$67 coach seat) for the two-bunk roomette with sink, toilet and attentive attendant.

A bedroom with a full-size bed, single upper bunk, sink, toilet and shower would have run around \$408 more.

The on-time ride home never seemed long enough. I had a private place to sit, a double-windowed view and a place to fully recline at night. I waltzed into the dining car, got a decent dinner and a glass of wine, and watched the light slowly fade over the serene banks and wetlands of the Mohawk River.

It reminded me of the pretty rides from Albany down to New York City along the Hudson River, shouldered by sunsets, the Catskill Mountains and the river's lower palisades.

Margie O'Connor might have seen that view on the way to New York, but not on the way back.

She planned to fly home.

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