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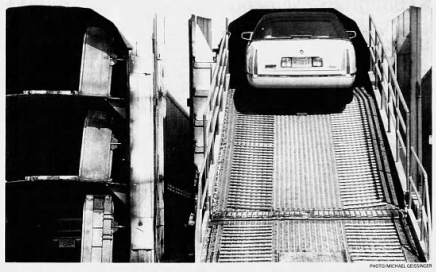
# Travel



PHOTO/MICHAEL GEISSINGER

A car is driven up a ramp and into a train car for the 900-mile trip between Lorton, Va., and Sanford, Fla.

## Driving to Florida can be fun — by train

By Fern Reiss
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

This is what I was taking to Florida: seven suitcases, three musical instruments, two car seats, one backpack, one laptop computer, one printer, six boxes of books, a bunch of gifts, several favorite stuffed animals, one husband, and three children. I was certain this would not fit in the overhead bin nor under the seat in front of me. Just the thought of an airplane trip was enough to give me a migraine.

So we decided to try Amtrak's Auto Train. We may never fly again.

The children, like most of the adults to whom we have since mentioned our Auto Train infatuation, weren't clear on the concept. We explained that the Auto Train, the only such train in America, would carry us, our car, and our luggage to Florida. "You mean we're going to have to ride all the way to Florida in our trunk?" our 6-year-old asked in horror. We told him that the vehicles travel in a separate part of the train; the people ride in seats similar to first-class airline travel. This, too, did not impress, since my offspring are unfamiliar with first-class plane rides. However, having had several lost-luggage experiences on economy-class flights, they were enthusiastic that their stuff was guaranteed to arrive with us.

We got to the Amtrak station in Lorton, Va. (a half-hour south of Washington), at 2 p.m. An attendant checked our tickets and gave us a numbered placard for the car. We drove toward the terminal, took our carry-on luggage and valuables (the children) out of the car, and left our keys in the ignition. (We didn't see the car again for 900 miles — which is only a problem if someone forgets to pack the teddy bear in the overnight bag.) We walked into the newly renovated glass-walled terminal, checked in, and collected our free Amtrak coloring books and crayons.

Our children — ages 9, 6, and not quite 2 — were thrilled to learn that the train ride included dinner, and we were given a choice of three seatings. We opted for the earliest dinner so we could watch the scenery from the dining car before dark. Next, the children explored the terminal, which housed a gift shop, snack bar, and playground (there's one at the Florida end, too). We watched the Amtrak employees load cars onto the auto carriers. "This is the best vacation!" gushed our 6-year-old — and we weren't even on the train yet. By 3 p.m. we were on board and they were closing the doors.

On the way down we opted for the less-expensive coach tickets, earning us wide recliner seats with leg- and footrests, along with fold-down trays for games and individual reading lights. (On the way back we sprang for the deluxe family sleeping car, which netted us a small private room with bunk beds. Those beds alone, given the children's reactions, were worth the price. We thought so too, unlike on every airplane we've ever traveled, we were actually able to sleep.)

We stashed our carry-ons and immediately headed for the lounge car, where the children overindulged on the complimentary chips and fruit. They spent the next two hours racing up and down the lounge car, bonding the ears of unsuspecting passengers, and generally having a grand old time. (We came home with seven new sets of grandparents.)

**On the way back we sprang for the deluxe family sleeping car, which netted us a private room with bunk beds. Those beds alone were worth the price.**

Dinner was a highlight of the trip. Served to 60 people at each seating and included in the ticket price, the meal takes place at four-person booths in the dining car. Coach passengers get paper; first-class passengers get china and linen. Waiters and waitresses serve salad, rolls, a choice of entree (precooked meat loaf, cod, or lasagna in coach; freshly cooked beef medallions, grilled chicken breast, seared salmon, or vegetarian stuffed potatoes in first class), a choice of dessert (cheesecake, ice cream, chocolate cake, or Jell-O), and beverages, including complimentary wine. Kosher, reduced-sodium and reduced-fat, and vegetarian meals may be ordered with 72 hours' notice. There are dinner choices for children (chicken fingers or macaroni and cheese) but no highchairs or booster seats. Sleeping-car passengers may be served in their compartments if they prefer.

Eating on the early shift allowed us to enjoy the view from the picture windows while we dined. The children were, of course, more interested in the ice cream.

After dinner, we headed back to the lounge cars, where video monitors showed a PG movie. The children found more complimentary munchies and several seniors who indulgently watched many renditions of magic tricks and card games. A little while later, we overruled the younger set (they wanted to watch the second viewing of the same movie) and turned in for the night. Amtrak tries to put all the families traveling coach in one area and aims for lights-out at 9 p.m. Coach comes with small pillows and blankets; private compartments come with large pillows, sheets, blankets, towels, and a semiprivate bathroom.

PHOTO/MICHAEL GEISSINGER

**In addition to an observation car, the Auto Train offers a dining car, sleeping cars, and lounge cars.**

My 9-year-old, having studied up on the promotional material, informed me that the only stop during the night was in Florence, S.C., where the two modern diesel electric engines are refueled, fresh drinking water is pumped onto the train, and the staff changes. (The route is Fredericksburg and Richmond, Va.; Fayetteville, N.C.; Charleston, S.C.; Savannah, Ga.; Jacksonville and Deland, Fla., before arriving in Sanford, if you're following on a map.)

In the morning, first-class passengers can order juice to be served in their room, another first for us. Around 7, the chief of onboard services awakened still-sleeping passengers with an announcement of estimated arrival time and weather. A light breakfast of juice, fresh fruit, cereal, and bagels, also included in the ticket price, was served in the dining car. At 8:30 the train arrived in Sanford, and we waited a few minutes while it was divided into segments and positioned alongside the platform. We then walked to the waiting room (with its conveniently located playground) until our car was unloaded and driven up. If the train is crowded, it can take more than an hour for the last car to be unloaded, but a half-hour is average — and we waited only a few minutes. (They say the process is random and has nothing to do with the order in which the cars are loaded, but mostly vans emerged first.) As soon as your car's number is called, you can drive away — assuming you remember your number. After 10 minutes of frantic searching through our carry-on, we located ours.

And back home, when Grandma and Grandpa asked the kids about their favorite part of the trip, they didn't tell them about Disney. They told them about the train. We didn't take the Auto Train for fun; we took it to avoid flying. But it turned out to be one of the highlights of the vacation. Next year we're going to skip Disney and just ride the train.

*Fern Reiss is a freelance writer who lives in Newton.*

### If you go...

**How to get there**
**Amtrak Auto Train**
800-USA-RAIL
www.amtrak.com/trains/autotrain.html
You can reserve tickets without charge for one week. Family compartments can be particularly difficult to get on short notice; book ahead, and if you aren't successful, keep trying, given that there are typically last-minute cancellations. Only a limited number of vans and SUVs can be accommodated. No pets are permitted on board.

**Prices**
Adult charges range from $366 to $372 round trip; children under 2 travel free; children 2 to 15 ride for half-price when accompanied by a full-fare-paying adult. (Each adult can bring two children along with this half-price discount.) Vehicle round-trip charges range from $260 to $800, and first-class round-trip charges range from $226 to $1,200 for a compartment. Thus, a round-trip price for a family of four could be anywhere from $758 to $1,916 for coach seats or $984 to $3,116 for a family compartment. To get as low a price as possible, book early. Advance booking can halve the price. Or upgrade to first class (if there's space available) when you get to the station for a one-way fee of only $200 for a compartment. Prices are also less expensive if you're traveling off-season. And using your AAA or AARP card entitles you to a 10 percent discount.

**Seating choices**
The Auto Train offers a choice of private compartments (first class) or seats (coach class). If you're traveling with children, the "family bedrooms" sleep two adults and two children comfortably. The windows are fairly small, and the "rooms" somewhat noisier than coach (they're closest to the wheels) but more comfortable. The compartments are not equipped with toilets, and there's no space for a portapotti. For just two passengers, the "standard bedroom" is nice, but small; if you want to add a private washbasin, toilet, and shower, couples should go for the "deluxe bedroom." "Accessible bedrooms," are designed for mobility impaired passengers and companions, and include a sink and toilet. Each sleeping car has a designated attendant who provides assistance. If you book a seat, try not to sit too close to the front of the car; the view is better a little farther back. Also, the seats on the stairway side have two more inches of legroom. Window seats have a better view and something to lean against when sleeping; aisle seats provide more accessibility. You can get a free Amtrak Travel Planner brochure with 100 pages of tips and information, including diagrams of the seating and compartments, from any Amtrak office.

**What to pack**
Remember, there's not much room in the sleeping compartments for luggage, and on a crowded train even less in coach. Take no more than two small carry-on bags.
Don't forget the following:
- A bathrobe and slippers (unless you're in a deluxe bedroom, the showers will be in the hallway)
- Extra pillows if you're traveling coach
- Munchies and bottled water for midnight snacks
- Medications you will need en route
- For the children: books, tapes and tape player, non-noisy toys, games, cards, pajamas, and favorite stuffed animal and blanket
- A small pair of binoculars for sightseeing
- Earphones for your radio or CD player
- Summer clothes for your Florida arrival

**Other tips**
- Remember that you'll be leaving the keys in your car's ignition. Keep your valuables with you, including toll money and cellphones.
- Be aware that the train departs early if it is loaded. Don't be late: Last check-in is 2 p.m.
- When checking in, you'll be asked to choose a time for dinner. For the best selection of dinner seatings, check in at the station by 1:30 p.m.
- Lights are turned out in the family car at about 9 p.m.
- For in-depth information, several books about Amtrak trains and a 75-minute Auto Train video can be purchased at www.pentrex.com/autotrn.html.

**Cost comparison**
Is the Auto Train more expensive than flying? It depends on a lot of things: The week we took the train to Florida, plane fare for our family of five would have been $250 each for four of us, and free for the child then under 2, for a total of $1,000. The cost of renting a car in Florida would have added another $437 for the week, for a total of $1,437. The Auto Train cost $1,390 and included dinner (cooked by a trained chef), breakfast, snacks throughout the day, and a movie. Plus, we didn't have to drag car seats around the airport.
On the other hand, we had to drive to Washington, D.C., which added expenses. We stayed with friends en route to avoid hotel bills. The drive can be done from the Boston area in nine hours if your crew travels well.

### Coming Sunday

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