

IF I RAN THE RAILROAD PART ONE—THE TRAINS

by Michael Kiesling

In March of 2002, I took the best rail trip of my life. It was from Berlin to Munich, through the former East Germany, on a brand new set of German Railway ICE-T equipment, similar to the ICE-3 trains used on high speed lines. Why was it the best? I was pampered and soothed by the train's interior of wood, leather, and brushed steel. This trip forced me to reevaluate California standards of rail passenger comfort and design. Riding through the Saxon countryside, I began to consider what features could be adopted to California trains. It is from that experience, and the research that followed, that the following expectations come.



German ICE-3 set at Leipzig. Clearly superior standard of amenities and comfort on board.

The amenities laid out here are for California's state-supported intrastate trains, like the Capitols, San Joaquins, or the Surfliners. These are trains where you expect to ride for a few hours, expecting a light meal or snack, but not a place to sleep, like Amtrak's long-distance Coast Starlight. Many of the same amenities are also applicable to the regional commuter trains, like the ACE, Metrolink, Coaster, or Caltrain.

Every train should have restroom facilities, comfortable seats, and power outlets for electronic devices. Additionally, cafe service and wireless communication connections make the trip better, and realtime arrival and performance information completes the package. What makes additional amenities so appealing? Read on...

Restrooms are a given. They are the only amenity that is currently consistent throughout the commuter and intercity rail fleet in California. Every train has at least one restroom on board. Hopefully, well-designed and clean. Beyond that, it's mix and match.

Comfortable seats are a matter of preference. Some seats can look comfortable, but be fatiguing to sit in for a long time due to age or poor design. Some aspects of seating are objective. Each inch of additional width provides luxury and a bit of privacy to work. Airlines know this and charge a premium for better seats. California's commuter and intercity trains ignore the issue. For example, the only Business eats on California's state network, on the Pacific Surfliners, are indistinguishable from the regular seats.



First class in the ICE-3: leather seats, beech paneling and tables. Seats with a forward view through the cab are the first reserved.

Included with seating is the provision for some seats to have a fold-down tray or a set of seats to face a table. Productive use of one's time during the journey is a big incentive for some people to choose the train, and often a

flat space to write or place a computer is needed.

Power outlets are increasingly important, yet current California rail travelers find them few and far between. This is unfortunate, as they can serve so many purposes. All new cars should have outlets at every other seat, at a minimum. Longer journeys eat up battery capacity, especially when using a computer to watch a movie on a DVD.

Fancy Valley Meatloaf
Homemade meatloaf served with ga
Served with Italian green beans, a g

The promise was California cuisine. Somehow that got transformed into "Valley" cuisine.

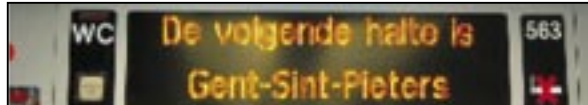
Cafe service on trains is a complex issue, and everyone has unique expectations about food, but Caltrans obviously needs to upgrade its menu to keep pace with Californians' tastes. The growth of outlets with high-quality food means Bay Area and Los Angeles commissaries can easily provide it. For years, the Cascades have used Ivar's clam chowder and other great local vendors. On California trains, the effort to serve a "dining car" meal no longer has to equate to an overpriced TV dinner (apologies to Chef Mario).



Classy bistro on the ICE-3 Photo: Krause/DB AG

An agreement to utilize existing commercial brand-name commissaries to stock cafe cars on trains should be a simple goal to reach. High quality baked goods, sandwiches and soups, after all, are easily available these days from mainstream vendors. Many sandwiches widely available are also healthier than the microwaved chicken wings and pizza available on the trains today. Something better than a high school kid's culinary favorites should be the norm on California trains, not a hopeless wish.

Wireless communication is exploding, and people's appreciation of internet access and desire for a strong cell phone signal are approaching universal levels. Wireless systems require little space in cars for boosters or antennas, but can give rail travel a big advantage over air and road travel. While some commuter systems are testing the service, gratis (to the user, possibly advertising supported) wireless services on trains will hopefully become as standard as restrooms in coming years.



Finally, the child's mantra for every family trip, "when are we going to be there" should be easy to answer on a train. The first California Car GPS system may have been a dud, but the Cascades GPS has worked for years. California on-board and waiting passengers deserve to be apprised of expected arrival times. Displays in each car should offer remaining time to the next station, the name of the next station, remaining time to the destination, and the speed of the train (very popular among foamers, but also an effective marketing device).

None of these amenities should be seen as luxuries beyond the reach of California's ever-improving railways. Many of the amenities exist in part on many trains today. It should be a goal to see that all exist on all our intrastate trains as soon as possible, and to see many of the same amenities implemented on the regional services, as well.