

Travelling in style to AGU

Cameron Patterson expands on the latest plans for his upcoming train odyssey to AGU

As you may have read in the last few issues of A&G, I am planning to travel by train to San Francisco for the 2023 AGU Fall Meeting in December. I will be crossing Canada and the United States from east to west by train, in the hope of networking (as I will be stopping off along the way to meet collaborators and talk about my PhD research), and drinking in the scenery, all while travelling sustainably. In this issue's update, I will discuss routes and options for anyone tempted to take the train to AGU.

Where to start?

When deciding where to begin a train journey across the US, look no further than Chicago, whose airport has many direct flights from Europe. It is also a railway hub, where most of the cross-country trains begin their journeys and there are plenty of rail options from the US east coast, such as Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited with a direct route from both New York and Boston. On a long-distance Amtrak train, you have the option of travelling in coach (a seat) or a sleeper-car (a private room). This really depends on your budget. A seat is worth considering, seriously! You can travel the entire length of the US for only a few hundred dollars. If you are imagining a grotty UK commuter train seat with squeaky broken springs and mysterious stains, stop right now. Amtrak seats are more like business class aeroplane seats – spacious with plenty of legroom, and they recline by about 40°. All seats have power sockets for charging phones and laptops, and there are water dispensers in each carriage. To be on the safe side, I recommend a sleep mask, ear plugs and a blanket and/or pillow if you do not want to buy them on-board. The biggest downside to the seat option is that you don't have access to the showers. You may not want to be in a seat for more than one night (especially without a shower), which is why I am breaking my journey along the way. If your budget is bigger, or if you were planning to do the whole route non-stop, I'd suggest the sleeper-car. You have a choice of room types, both of which are fit for two people: the cheaper roomette – a smaller room with a pull-out sink and tables, with shared toilets and showers outside the cabin, or the pricier bedroom – more spacious with a private shower and toilet. On some routes, there are also larger family rooms. Booking a room includes breakfast, lunch and dinner in the dining car, as well as tea, coffee and juice. The big downside for the solo traveller is that you have to pay for the whole room; there is no sharing, unless it is with one of your companions. It is undeniably expensive, with rooms starting upwards of a thousand dollars. But if you can convince a friend or colleague to tag along, the price is effectively halved. One of my taller friends mentioned that the beds in the roomette can be small for those with longer legs, and that he would always choose a seat in the future, even for longer journeys. He also recommended bringing your own pillow, as the Amtrak ones were a little flat.

Pick your route

What routes are there from Chicago to San Francisco? Only two of the four options here are both time and cost-effective, but if you were looking to visit specific collaborators or institutions, they may still be worthwhile. The only direct train between Chicago and San Francisco is the California Zephyr, known as one of the most beautiful train trips in North America. This route winds across Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California, crossing the Rockies and the Sierra Nevadas. This is a no-hassle, straight-through trip from A to B, and the route I will be taking, with a break in Denver, Colorado. The Southwest Chief runs south of the Rockies to Los Angeles, then the Coast Starlight continues up to San Francisco. It's another popular sightseeing journey, through Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and California, coasting just south of

the Grand Canyon. A longer and more pricey option is to hug the border of the US and Canada on the Empire Builder to Portland, and then take the Coast Starlight down to San Francisco. The route lies through Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California, including Glacier National Park. For an even longer trip, you could take the Texas Eagle to Los Angeles, then switch to the Coast Starlight up to San Francisco. This route passes through Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, hugging the US-Mexico border along the way. Whatever route you decide on, you will be embarking on an adventure that can be both pleasurable and productive. Take in the views outside the train window while you work on your laptop, relax, and embrace the many benefits of travelling by train versus plane. And if you would like to do some further research into rail travel across the US and elsewhere, I highly recommend the website 'The Man in Seat Sixty-One' (www.seat61.com).