

AN AFTERNOON ON BRIGHTLINE

by Terry Brown- TCMC Newsletter Editor

Summary

This 70-mile ride is almost entirely in urban or suburban surroundings. It's almost like riding a Chicago Metra train for 75 minutes entirely within the City of Chicago.

Almost the entire stretch is a No Train Horn area. There is only a small collection of grade crossings that allow the engineer to wail away. Boca Raton and Aventura are new stops on this 70-mile run added exactly one month ago today.

January 20, 2023 - It was 82 degrees when I boarded a Brightline Train this day at West Palm Beach heading south to Miami. The weather conditions were fine for me in West Palm (what the locals call it.), and I thought the comfort inside the train was perfect.

The neon-colored lighting you've probably seen in pictures of the Miami and West Palm Beach stations were there in perfect condition. I found it a little unusual to see travelers with bags being subjected to screening identical to airport security, but I guess that's a growing trend with passenger trains.

The track from West Palm through Boca Raton to Fort Lauderdale is in very good to excellent shape. My Speedometer App clocked the train at 79mph for much of this stretch. Fort Lauderdale to Aventura is a little less excellent, and farther south to Miami was the worst stretch, but not horrible by any standard of measure.

Almost the entire stretch is a No Train Horn area. Is this why Brightline has had so many train vs car collisions since resuming operations in November 2021? The few times I heard the horn, it wasn't the usual grade crossing sequence. No telling what made the engineer hit the horn.



STATIONS AND RELATED DEVELOPMENT

– One of the well-known features of the Brightline train story is creativity in designing and constructing their stations. The multi-colored neon lighting with plenty of windows allowing the South Florida sunshine into waiting areas is a compelling combination. The second asset is the construction surrounding the station, a smart mix of living spaces, professional office space and retail.

Boca Raton and Aventura are new stops on this 70-mile run, newly added stops exactly one month ago today. The station properties are

not developed like the original three, but many of the charming features that make it a Brightline station are here, including a parking garage next door. Additional development may require a significant amount of work and money since those two areas are reasonably developed already. For example, immediately south of

Aventura station is a traditional shopping center. This may alter or push back some of the other Brightline developments if they happen at all.

LET'S FOCUS ON BOCA RATON - The Brightline Boca Raton Station Now Open

This information provided courtesy of the myboca.us/1774/Brightline website.

Service to and from the Brightline Boca Raton Station began on Wednesday, December 21, 2022. The new station and parking garage are located adjacent to the Downtown Library and steps away from everything in Downtown Boca. The highly anticipated rail service connects visitors and commuters to all the city has to offer and residents to neighboring cities to enjoy.

[Update: December 20, 2022](#)

NW 1st Avenue Beautification Project Completed by City

As part of the Boca Brightline Station opening, the City enhanced NW 1st Avenue with a \$3.9 million beautification project, which was completed within 12 months. Improvements include:

- New signalized intersection to improve traffic at NW 1st Ave. and NW 2nd St.
- Landscape and irrigation upgrades
- New shade trees, lighting, bike racks and benches
- Pedestrian enhancements including sidewalks and shared use paths ranging in width from 6' - 12'
- Shared travel lanes for bicyclists with the addition of bike boxes
- Utility relocations

[Update: December 15, 2022](#)

Boca Brightline to Start Service December 21, 2022

The highly anticipated launch of service for Brightline in Boca Raton is less than a week away! The first day of service for the Boca Raton station is December 21, 2022. One-way tickets are now on sale for as low as \$10 and can be purchased on Brightline's app or website, gobrightline.com.

Brightline's initial schedule for each new station is designed to optimize commuter patterns and will focus on peak morning and evening weekday service. During non-peak hours and weekends, Brightline will provide service approximately every other hour. Regular hourly service will continue in West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Miami Central.

This picture of the Boca Raton Station from the Sun-Sentinel newspaper.



[Update: November 23, 2022](#)

Brightline Garage & Station Wall Mural Approved

As we get closer to the opening of the Brightline station and garage, check out the proposed public art mural that was recently approved at the November 22 City Council meeting. The proposed mural will be installed on the north wall connecting the main entrances of the parking garage and the train station. The artist for the mural is Boca Raton-local, Ben Heller.

As explained by Heller during a [presentation at the Council Meeting](#), the mural will incorporate local and historical imagery to provide a sense of place and pride to the community. staff and community partners, will host a ribbon cutting ceremony on December 20, 2022.

RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE -- Fort Lauderdale to Aventura was a single track. That's a trick for the frequency of these trains. Aventura and Boca Raton have only one boarding platform on the west side of the two mainline tracks. Dispatchers need to shuffle the trains to address boarding properly. The original three stations are between two active tracks. You could have an arriving train simultaneously with a departing train. All stations had proper height boarding platforms eliminating the need for step stools. Walking into trains was



easy, but I could see the gap between the boarding platform and the trains' level platform would require wheelchair users to have a strong and secure push from behind to roll over the gap.

This 70-plus mile ride is almost entirely in urban or suburban surroundings. There were limited areas of forest, maybe surrounding a river, creek, canal, channel, or some other body of water. Otherwise, you're frequently viewing City life. It's almost like riding a Metra train for 75 minutes entirely within the City of Chicago. I never witnessed a rolling freight train during my entire round-trip experience.

RIDERSHIP Currently Brightline offers 18 round trips on weekdays between West Palm Beach and Miami, with reduced numbers on the weekends. The first train departing West Palm heading south leaves at 5:05am. The last train leaving Miami heading north leaves at 11:45pm.

According to a January 2023 report from Progressive Railroading, Brightline had 1,230,494 passengers in 2022. (This reporting is apparently based on the calendar year.) This is obviously a post-pandemic number. There is another note that Special Train Events were not included in this number. With 18 trains per weekday, do you really need Special Event Trains?

Ridership on Brightline in 2019 is not so clear. A variety of reporting sources differ on the number. Some are simply reporting "over one million" riders. Others including Wikipedia are reporting 2019 service had 885,000. Brightline resumed service in November 2021, which resulted in a very low number of riders reported that year at 159,474.

PASSENGER COACHES The exterior of the Brightline trains is a mix of pastel colors you've been looking at for years. Everything is visually kept in the best condition possible, both inside and out. The Siemens coaches here are earlier creations of models slowly appearing in service throughout California and others heading east, all assembled in California. The updated Amtrak Midwest version could be seen soon on the Hiawatha service in 2023. These coaches have the traditional 21st century amenities: Wi-Fi is a must, power connections from the traditional 3-prong AC plug to a traditional USB-A (rectangular shape) connector supplying power. You do have to bring your proper charging cable, though.

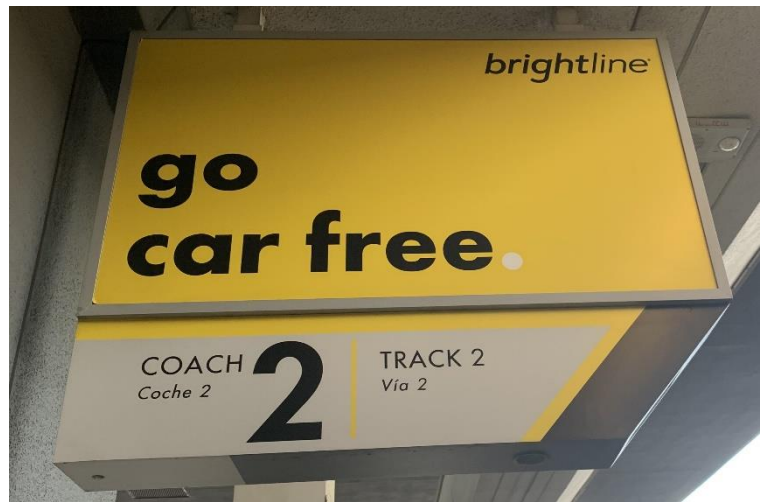


The picture is Siemens Charger SCB-40 engine #105 dragged our train back to West Palm Beach to finish my ride.

An airline style cart rolled up and down the aisle twice per trip serving snacks and light drinks. Just like the snack offerings formerly on the Hiawatha service, I noticed very few takers patronizing the service cart. A 75 to

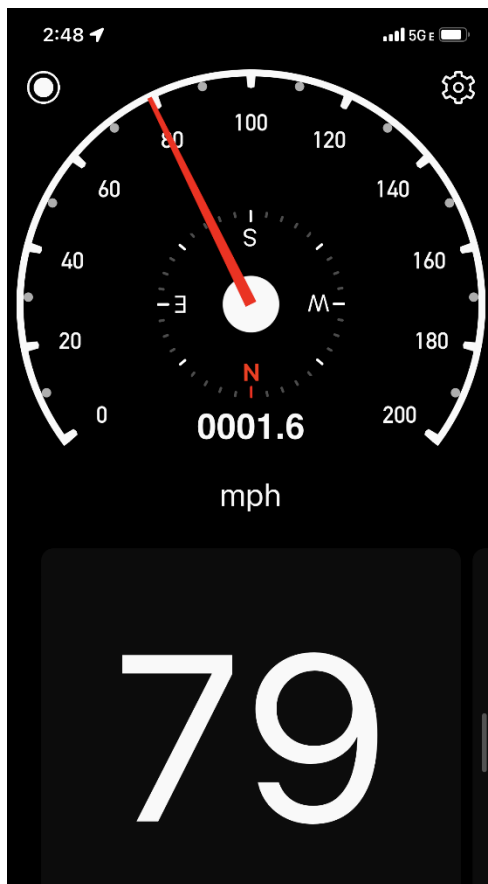
80-minute ride may not be long enough for most riders to purchase on board, particularly when an appealing bar and convenience store stares you down in the lounge, just outside of the boarding platform.

MARKETING Hands down Brightline scores big with marketing, on the train, off the train, in the parking ramps, and more. I'm not aware of any other fixed rail passenger service that compares to this company. If you engage an employee whether it's on the train or in the waiting lounge, you feel like almost every conversation is another marketing opportunity. Even the signs on the boarding platforms speak Marketing.



Brightline has said from the start they were interested in the tourist traffic. Yes, business travelers are welcome. But on the day I rode, my rough estimate was 25 percent of the riders acted like business travelers. The return trip leaving Miami going north left the station at 5pm on Friday. That's prime business time travel on the Hiawatha.

There's no better advertising and marketing than the way much of the track and adjacent highways are laid out. I estimate that less than half of the route parallels US Hwy 1 or another usually well-traveled road. Friday commuters on occasion tried to keep up with the train, but it was always futile in the end. How does it look when you're stopped in your vehicle and here comes that pastel colored train zipping by at 79mph?



BRIGHTLINE vs HIAWATHA Many have asked me over the years about Brightline coming to the Midwest, and maybe Wisconsin. After viewing this roughly similar performance from Miami to West Palm, Chicago to Milwaukee looks and feels much different. (Particularly when you make your comparison visits during the month of January!) Let's review some facts that are easy to document. The early Census.gov tabulations of population for the 2020 Census have the State of Illinois population at 12.81 million and Wisconsin at 5.89 million. The State of Florida is 21.54 million. Have you ever thought of the Hiawatha train for Chicago-area residents going to Milwaukee?

Ridership for the Hiawatha was reported over 882,000 in Fiscal Year 2019. The calendar year 2019 Brightline service reported 885,000. For Fiscal year 2022 the Hiawatha ridership is estimated at 531,000. For the calendar year 2022 Brightline is reporting above 1,230,000. Why are these services going in different directions?

Remember, WisDOT knew the bread-and-butter rider on the Hiawatha was a business traveler. Various reports show the in-office worker in the Upper Midwest is reporting between two to three times per week at the office now. As you've probably already noted since summer 2022, tourists were flooding the roads, airports, and even the train stations.

For 2022, the State of Florida reports their largest tourist attraction was the Disney Theme Parks in Orlando. Both Disney's Hollywood Studios and Epcot Center drew over 12.5 million tourists. The largest tourist attraction in Wisconsin is Wisconsin Dells,

including the Water Parks and the boat traffic on the Wisconsin River. The estimate for annual tourist traffic in The Dells is 4 million tourists.

The trainset that Brightline has used since its inception is four Siemens coach cars capable of carrying 248 passengers total. The Siemens cars used by Brightline do not turn to face the direction the train is going. On any given train ride, half of the seats will face forward, and half will face backward.

The Hiawatha at its strongest performance before the onset of Covid-19 had six Horizon cars in each consist, not counting the “table cars”. Horizon cars could be uniquely configured, but the estimate is the six cars could seat about 450 passengers. The northbound rush hour train, 5pm departure from Chicago typically could have used more capacity using the “table car.” This specific discussion supports the high frequency running of the Brightline trains. But 18 round trips in the Milwaukee to Chicago corridor seems impossible right now. Both services are currently assigning seats when you make ticket purchases.

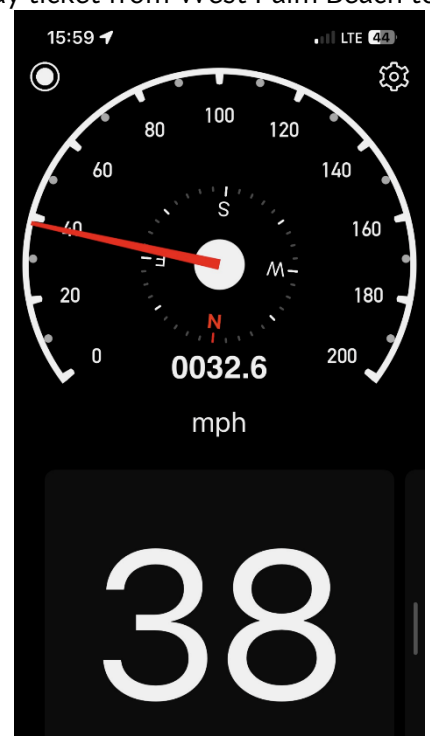
HOW MUCH ARE TRAIN TICKETS? A one-way Hiawatha ticket from Milwaukee to Chicago as of March 1, 2023, still cost \$25, generally regardless of the day chosen or the time of day of the ride. I did find a few \$18 seats, but only for the last train of the day heading from Chicago going north. This train is 86 miles and 89 minutes by schedule.

Brightline from the endpoints has a Dynamic Pricing model. A one-way ticket from West Palm Beach to Miami can be as little as \$20 if during late nights, to \$47 during rush hours. The average ticket price for this trip is \$32. I noticed “Buzzer Beater” trains immediately after Miami Heat NBA basketball games are all \$47 one way out of Miami. This train ride is 72 miles (approximately) and 73 minutes by schedule.

For another similar comparison, try traveling the Virginia state supported NE Regional Extension train between Washington DC Union Station to Richmond, VA at Staples Mill Station. Dynamic pricing is used on this route like Brightline. The average ticket is \$44, with some off-peak trains priced at \$32. Peak or rush-hour trains can be \$70 or more. Weekend one-way tickets can rise to \$106. The train ride is 107 miles and time varies from 2 hours-nine minutes on weekdays to two hours-40 minutes on weekends. This train *never* goes 79mph.

Amtrak state supported trains like The Hiawatha and the Virginia Regional Extension trains ticket pricing is typically set by the state DOTs. The long-distance train pricing is set by Amtrak.

All photos in this story by the author except where noted. The picture to the right was taken on a VA-NE Regional Extension train to Richmond.



MARKETING PART2 *added March 12, 2023* – During the month of March Miami is hosting some of the games for the World Baseball Classic. Pools C & D will be played at loanDepot Park, a ten-minute (free for Brightline customers) shuttle ride from Brightline MiamiCentral Station. Including the United States team, nine teams from nine other countries will be filling the Miami area, and some teams might just travel well for fans.

Think about Canada, Mexico, and Great Britain in Pool C. Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela and Nicaragua are in Pool D. You may think of these as poor countries, but don't be surprised at the following these teams have during their games.

Visit < www.gobrightline.com > and check out (during the month of March) what Brightline is offering for passenger train riding customers connecting to the WBC games. This is aggressive marketing all made possible



by having 18 trains per day. And don't forget to upgrade to a PREMIUM fare. Think about the added cost Brightline is taking on with the free shuttle and what amounts to a grand Tailgate Party at the West Plaza at loanDepot Park, Brightline is betting more than one train worth of passenger riders will be coming to watch international baseball.

Why couldn't this happen for a Green Bay Packer game? Or maybe a Wisconsin Badger game? It could, but those would truly be "Special Trains," just running for those home football games. What Brightline is doing compliments their 18 trains per

day, whether there is an international baseball tournament being played in town or not.

The picture of loanDepot Park is from < thestadiumreviews.com > and < loanDepot.ballparkMIami.org >.

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