

AMTRAK AUTO-TRAIN THE BEST-BAD AMTRAK TRAIN

By Terry Brown – TCMC Newsletter Editor

Is Amtrak's Auto Train the only train that truly generates a profit?

The Auto Train was not on my bucket list. Shooting a video of it was. This story is already messed up.

January 2023 I finally realized one of my bucket list items: Bicycling the Florida Keys in January. Do you rent a car? Do you rent a bicycle? Do you fly to Miami? Or the costlier options of flying to Marathon or Key West?

How about the Auto Train? How about taking my own car with my road bike attached to my car on the Auto Train? How about taking the Auto Train without spending any personal funds? This bucket list trip sure starts out easy enough using the Auto Train. And this will be one of most unusual Amtrak review stories you'll ever read.

Why would I want to shoot a video of this train? According to the Virginia Vacation Guide the Auto Train is the longest passenger train in the world. They are stretching the point a bit with up to 33 auto rack cars on the train, but a train led by those aging GE Genesis diesels that's over ¾ of a mile long, that's a sight.

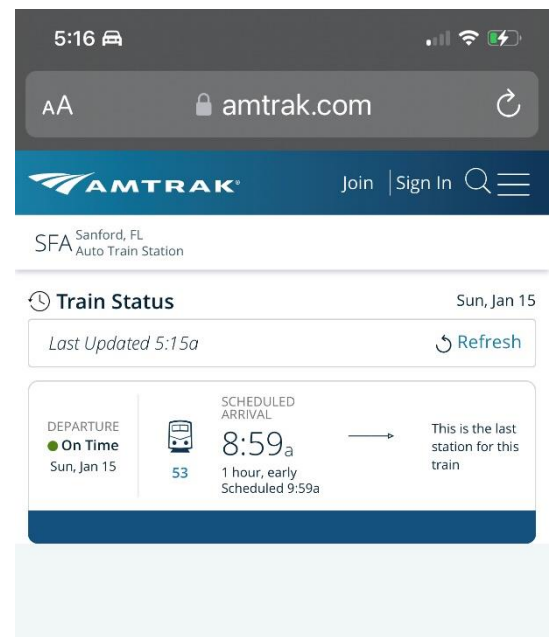
How is it that, relatively speaking, the most expensive to ride Amtrak train is the most "sold out" Amtrak train? There are so many issues to consider when discussing this train. Most people riding this train would highly value the capability of taking their own vehicle to Florida without driving to Florida. That would have been in my top three for sure. If you aren't riding in a personal vehicle entering the station at Lorton, VA, you are not getting on this train. Having a personal vehicle is a prerequisite for getting a seat or a bed.

Have you ever ridden on a train for 800-plus miles? Sure, you have. This train covers that distance quicker than any Amtrak long-distance train you've ever been on. Guaranteed. Unless you took this train on January 10-11, 2023, behind a CSX train that derailed in South Carolina. Fortunately for me, my trip began on January 14, 2023. I think everyone had that ill-fated experience at the top of their mind.

If you don't know why this train is the quickest performer over 800-plus miles in Amtrak's timetable, it's not rocket science nor is it Top Secret. There are no scheduled stops between suburban Washington D.C. and the eastern side of Orlando, FL. There is a crew change at Florence, South Carolina of about 15 minutes. On my trip there was only one stop in a siding for freight traffic before the Florence stop. For most of the trip the Amtrak app Status page had this train arriving one hour early. Yes. *One hour early!* This train ended up arriving 20 minutes early thanks to slower travel speeds beginning roughly at the Georgia- Florida state line and the track condition from Jacksonville going south.

Have you ever ridden on an Amtrak train for 800 miles that didn't have a baggage car? Trick question. That's because your baggage is in your auto! Most if not all passengers had a small carry-on bag. In my case it might mean your money, or your cash wallet was left in the car. You wouldn't need it on this train, would you?

Shortly after the train pulled out of Lorton station an announcement was made that the Snack Counter in the Lounge Car and the Dining Car would only be taking cash. Credit Card terminals were down, and no cards would be accepted for payment. Dandy! And I have no cash. Fortunately, I stopped at Subway on my drive to Lorton for a hefty sandwich, and filtered water was available in my car. But so much luck for that typical bottle of Heineken on this train ride!



In the third decade of the 21st century, can you genuinely imagine any small business retail vendor getting along without a Square Terminal? (Let me know if you don't know what a Square Terminal is.) And I know from first-hand experience Square has the capability of capturing cards when no internet connection is available, if the total amount is under a threshold based on your merchant account. When stable internet is secured, the terminal spews its information, and all is well. Will someone in those marathon congressional hearings going nowhere with Steven Gardner please explain this to him?!? How can something as basic retail as a credit card terminal not be functioning on Amtrak's premier passenger train in the 21st Century? I guess that's Amtrak.

Have you ever been a passenger on an Amtrak train that didn't have, or didn't seem to have a Porter?

An attendant? A willing company representative? I certainly hope for legal reasons the train had a Conductor! I guess this is another casualty of a post-pandemic Amtrak. Staffing shortages. I can verify this train I rode had at least two decent engineers. (I would have left the engineers a tip, but the train wasn't taking payments via credit card. Serious!)

Honestly, on the east coast this is not the first time I've heard of one conductor only and no one else on Amtrak trains. Or maybe this is the reason they wouldn't accept my credit card? Because they didn't have anyone to staff the Snack Counter? Around 600-plus passengers in nine passenger cars, over 99 percent full according to the Amtrak booking website, and they didn't have ONE employee capable of working the Snack Counter, that would make me wait 35 minutes for one lousy half-warm Heineken?

There was an attendant when I boarded the train. I was in the first Superliner Coach car right behind the two Genesis diesels. More on that in a moment. After the car was loaded and the door shut, the attendant made an announcement that I'll translate and paraphrase for you: "Please behave. No credit cards accepted." This would be the last time I would see or hear this distinguishly dressed man.

Have you ever been on an Amtrak train where all the passengers in your car didn't behave? What do you think seasoned Amtrak riders without dining car privileges are going to do on a train that doesn't stop for 17 hours? What do you think non-seasoned riders are going to do on that same train? DRINK. And in some cases, drink heavily.

I am not exaggerating here. I saw more bottles of wine in my coach car this trip than I've ever seen on an Amtrak train in my 20 years of somewhat regular riding. My first guess was these are all repeat passengers, and they know of the journey that lies ahead. I don't believe this practice was condoned on the Amtrak website.



Let me tell you, riding on a train on CSX rails isn't exactly like flying in an airplane on a calm day. You rock to your left. You rock to your right. You slightly but gently repeat this sequence over and over thousands of times. I'm overstating this a little but roll with me. For most of us that were sober, it really didn't matter. But for a few passengers, or maybe just one, it mattered. And then locating that bathroom on the lower level of a Superliner coach that was nothing like those Amfleet cars all the other

Florida long-distance trains have, it really did matter. *The picture on the left is courtesy of Amtrak.*

That was not a normal noise I've heard on a train trip from the lower level. For the next couple of hours every passenger that descended to the lower level came back up in a slight daze, maybe holding their head in their hands, maybe trying to clear their sinuses out, or maybe just simply looking for reasonable oxygen to inhale again. Unless I'm mistaken, the passenger that was responsible for the abundance of white liquid matter on most of the lower-level floor, did not pass around what was left in their bottle. I did manage to find the bathroom in the next car as needed for the remainder of the trip.

About 6am a totally unrecognizable man in a Covid-style Hazmat suit entered our car with cleaning equipment in tow. He went downstairs and I never saw him again. When I exited the car at Sanford, I admit the lower level was clean, but it now had the distinct aroma of Ammonia.



This was not high-speed train travel. For those of us used to the Hiawatha and the Empire Builder in the Upper Midwest, I have learned Amtrak train travel along the Eastern Seaboard and south of Washington D.C. isn't quite the same. The comment about rocking left and right aside, I've learned CSX doesn't seem to keep their rails at quite the standard Canadian Pacific does. On much of the train travel within Wisconsin my Speedometer App registers 79mph. For almost the entire Auto Train trip 70 mph was tops. For easy math's sake, multiply nine by 12; nine miles per hour on average slower over 12 hours. For this math puzzle, that's 108 fewer miles covered in 12 hours.

We all know the Empire Builder isn't always running 79mph down the track outside of the station stops. But you must understand the point I'm trying to make. For the lifelong residents of the Eastern Seaboard that are regular Amtrak riders, save for the Northeast Corridor, 70mph is normal. To us from the Upper Midwest, it seems a little like a compromise. This discussion here does bring to light the complex issues Amtrak has to deal with when creating a timetable for the On-Time Performance standard.

Have you ever been on an Amtrak long-distance train and not visited the diner? Even once? On this trip, I was a coach seat rider. In this post-pandemic era coach seat riders don't rate for the diner. The dining car today is for sleeping car passengers only. It wouldn't have mattered regardless since I didn't have cash. (Is Amtrak looking to amend this policy going forward through 2023?)

Many Auto Train Sleeping accommodations sell out four to six months in advance. Since I committed to this trip roughly four days before, there was no chance of me getting a room. I guess you won't be reading a bad dining car food review this time.

Since I purchased my ticket four days in advance, with Amtrak's dynamic pricing in effect for their most profitable train, that means I must have paid top dollar. The two passengers I had extended conversations with did confirm this pricing model. (They felt good about how much they paid!) But wait, I didn't shell out any cash or credit for this train ticket, including the fee for my car. (Equal or greater to my seat ticket.) I used my [Amtrak Rewards](#) account points. SWEET!! But once on the train, that privilege amounted to ZIP since even the Amtrak credit card didn't work on the premier Amtrak long-distance train.

Returning to the lack of a baggage car issue. As previously mentioned, I was seated in the first Superliner coach car, upper level, one seat to the forward of the center staircase access. This trip was in January. The sun set about 90 minutes into the trip, or about Staple Mills Station on the north side of Richmond, VA. It's dark out, and you're not going to see much.

I was periodically checking the GPS on my phone to see where we were, and maybe prepare myself to catch some outdoor symbol in the darkness. I admit I'm not very knowledgeable about the CSX track corridor in the State of North Carolina, other than it loosely parallels Interstate 95. It sure seemed like the engineer was almost constantly wailing the horn throughout the entire state. There were several maybe three-to-five-mile segments of silence. But otherwise, it was long-long-short-long after long and longer. No doubt some of the towns and cities had grade crossings close enough that the engineer simply never let up on the horn button. Some kind of buffer between the two Genesis engines and the first coach car would have been appreciated. Are "No Train Horn" bans illegal in the State of North Carolina?

This constant situation seemed to cease immediately upon crossing into South Carolina. Relief. Finally. And a little sleep. I'm not a deep sleeper normally, and a train ride wasn't going to rock me to sleep in the first place.

After reuniting with my car and beginning the journey to South Florida, I'm not exaggerating when I say I was constantly hearing train horns for about the first hour of the drive. The Florida Turnpike does not closely parallel any train tracks. Turning the radio on did not help.

Is there a problem riding on a non-stop passenger train? For those that are seasoned long-distance train riders, regardless of your assigned seat, tell me you don't get up and stretch and walk around a little bit when the train comes to a station stop, particularly the ones that are announced as extended stops regardless of the reason. You're not likely going to do this routine on a moving train that rocks a little bit to the left, and then the right, and back and forth thousands of times over hundreds of miles. *I'm so glad that passenger made it to the lower level before chucking their business.*

When the train arrived in Sanford and the sole conductor announced you could depart the train, just like an airplane, everyone stood up at once and crushed the exit paths creating instant gridlock. For the purpose of this train, many of the passengers waiting to step out started talking, mostly about the train ride experience. Most of the men that were speaking all echoed the same comment: I'm never riding this train again. Most of the women were silent. Maybe still sobering up?

Imagine riding a Hiawatha train for more than 90 minutes. For 11 hours straight. Or try 17 hours straight. I'm sure the passengers that had beds reported a different experience. But for those of us in the coach cars, I admit that was a tougher ride than I expected, which wasn't made any easier since I wasn't drinking Heinekens. For future rides I might have to consider bringing a cooler full of "road" stock. Other repeat customers were obviously doing something similar, obviously including their own booze on board. Most all did a better job of handling it, too!

How many Amtrak employees work at the Lorton Station Complex? Obviously, Amtrak has staffing shortages throughout the country. You wouldn't believe this if all you saw were the Auto Train terminals. All able-bodied workers seemed to be working at the terminals at Lorton and Sanford, FL. I can't describe the amazement I had when driving up to the first checkpoint entering the Lorton station complex, over how many Amtrak employees were working and buzzing around the complex. How many Amtrak employees does it take to inspect your car for the Auto Train, clear it, spot it for an Auto Rack, load it on the upper level and secure it inside the train car? Let's just say you don't have enough fingers. And after less than an hour wait my car was handed back to me in identical condition at Sanford. You mean they didn't wash the exterior of my car while the train was in route?

The picture at the right shows Amtrak 511 switching out the Auto Train consist and

preparing it for an immediate return trip north back to Virginia. As soon as the train stopped at Sanford Station, there was a 90 second wait before it was announced we could begin exiting our train. This delay was likely so the Auto Racks could be detached from the train and be immediately spotted for removing personal vehicles. Not long after the last passenger left the coach or sleeper cars, 511 seemed to be at the ready to move the coach and sleepers to a different area for quick cleaning. This is an air-tight, quick-step process that obviously has a clock ticking over everyone's head. There's probably no time to light a smoke or check text messages. Get to work!



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The advertisement features a blue background with white text. At the bottom, there is a photograph of an Amtrak train, specifically the Auto Train, with the number 511 visible on the side.



Get there early. Don't mess with these instructions. Your instructions when purchasing the Auto Train ticket is to arrive several hours early. The principal reason is that the Auto Rack staff has time to properly spot and secure your vehicle for the train ride. Obviously, it also allows Amtrak to easily verify your identity, seat on the train and handle additional questions easily without haste. If you arrive too close to departure time, you might find your train has already boarded and left!! My train began rolling about 25 minutes early. Which means we began boarding at least 45 minutes early. (We arrived in Sanford 20 minutes early. Imagine that.)

The Lorton Terminal in no way compares to the expanse and concourse options of a Chicago Union Station. Bring plenty of reading material. Bring snacks and maybe drinks if that's important. (There are a limited number of vending machines. The Sanford Terminal had a Gift Shop-type convenience store.) Bring your electronics with full battery at the start. And do bring your patience. Since you don't have the expanse of CUS, if you have a full train like I did, that means the waiting room will also be full.

Would I ride this train again? As I'm composing this essay it's been over five months since that January train trip. Dozens of people that have learned of my trip have sought me out for comments and opinions. No stops? This is a train ride to beat all other American long-distance train rides. If you can afford the roomette or better, get your reservation in as early as possible. Seventeen Hours in a coach car didn't kill anyone on this train, this month or this year. But on my train, it did drive one passenger into disgusting peril and possible embarrassment if traveling with friends or family.

Let's refresh some of the obvious: This train, regardless of season, nearly sells out if not completely sells out. Amtrak will tweak the size of the train depending on the season. There are no short distance intermediate travelers on this train. Everyone is traveling from end-to-end. What certainly would have enhanced the experience for everyone would have been a fully stocked Lounge Car accepting credit cards. How much of a self-inflicted hit on profits did Amtrak and the associated vendors take because of a lack of credit card acceptance? Maybe that's why this train was understaffed? Porters, servers and all the others that might accept and appreciate being tipped, including by credit card, were going to go short this weekend. *"Boss! I just came down with a temperature. I shouldn't be around others in tight quarters. I don't want to be responsible for starting a super-spreader event!"*

Would I ride this train again? If the appropriate set of circumstances would appear again, conditionally Yes. I would do everything reasonable to get a sleeper, short of paying \$2,000.00 or more just for the bedroom. Does Amtrak have to meet me half-way by providing amenities on the train that would demand I go for a walk to get them? Absolutely. And be able to accept my Amtrak MasterCard as a form of payment, with gratuities when appropriate. (That last statement is so important these days.)

Most likely, this is also a lesson for Amtrak but just in one, small, defined area. I see in 2023 Amtrak will increase its lounge food offerings, and that might even extend to the dining car on other long-distance trains. Great! But it means nothing if they aren't accepting a 21st Century form of payment: The Credit Card. Or Apple Pay. Or Google Pay, which I occasionally do with some retailers on a terminal that looks just like a credit card terminal.

I revert to my former comment about Steven Gardner in Congressional testimony in front of scores of people that have never been on any kind of train before; grilling (pun intended) him on issues they might not know anything about, and it won't move the needle increasing passengers in any way. Yet he needs to hear about going the "last mile" in earning profits by having a functioning credit card terminal on every train. You and I might think that's an absolute foundation for customer service. Apparently, Amtrak doesn't agree with us. ***There are so many things wrong with this paragraph, and I'm not talking about grammar.***

A few related items. Post-pandemic airplane travel is making large strides returning to 2019 levels. But it's not quite the same without the business traveler. The same goes for train travel. Amtrak and Passenger Rail advocates often compare train travel times to driving by car. It's a valid comment, but different circumstances exist in all major urban areas.



On my drive to the Lorton Terminal, I encountered a common circumstance on I-95 north of Fredericksburg, VA, and I think it's common in other select areas across the US: weekend traffic is heavier than the weekday commute. In my instance it's a Saturday, and I have about 15 miles to go on I-95, which is 120 yards from the Lorton Terminal. I could hit a golf ball from the shoulder of I-95 onto the awning of the boarding platform. One of the frustrations between Fredericksburg and DC is there are no highway alternatives. The Potomac River is just off to the right about a mile behind those trees.

If you look down at the pic, I'm going about 35mph. That'll be roughly the top speed to Lorton. Look up, I know the pic is blurry, but it's almost entirely red lights in front of me. Look back at the dash, and those familiar with the Toyota RAV seeing 29 miles per gallon will rightfully assume, I have a 50mph head wind (not!) or this is true stop-and-go traffic. I've documented in other blogs that people are paying over \$100 per seat for a 110-mile train trip between DC and Richmond on the weekends that's just under three hours long. Amazing.

I mentioned previously the 70mph top speed for the Auto Train. Those of you that are familiar with track construction will make some obvious notes on the picture to the right.



I took this picture near Fredericksburg in early June. The track at the bottom of the picture is a dedicated track for the Virginia Railway Express, a commuter train for northern Virginia into Washington D.C. This track is for access to the Spotsylvania Station, the southern terminal for VRE. Notice the concrete ties. Those curly rail straps are synonymous with European rail.

The middle and far tracks are the CSX mainline used by CSX and Amtrak. It's traditional American railroading, quite honestly. The ties look aged, but they're still holding together. All three tracks are using welded rail.

After personally viewing these three tracks for several minutes, it was clear to me why the Auto Train and other Amtrak trains are assigned the 70mph top speed. CPKC feels confident of their track structure to allow Amtrak a 79mph top speed in the state of Wisconsin, with some urban exceptions. Be happy for that.

*This version of **The Best-Bad Amtrak Train** revised on July 16, 2023.*

[Auto Train - Wikipedia](#) Check out Auto Train on Wikipedia.