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How to Take the Train for Business

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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on life, death, and how to fit into your bed with three dogs.*

I love trains. The proof is in the pudding I once ate for dessert on the Empire Builder. Or was it the California Zepher? Or maybe the Capital Limited? I've ridden coast to coast by rail several times. Once I took the northern route from New York, which left me off in Seattle. The other time I traveled along the southern states and wound up in Los Angeles. I've also ridden trains up and down both the East and West Coasts. The latter runs along the Pacific Ocean -- talk about a knock-your-socks-off view.

Throughout my career, my colleagues have scoffed at the idea of riding on the rails for business. Everyone has said trains were too slow, too inconvenient, too unreliable. Considering the horrific state of air travel, I suspect those objections may be coming to a halt faster than more locomotives. I'm aware of significant movements afoot in this direction in five different arenas.

First, Congress is working on a multibillion-dollar plan to increase train's share of the transportation budget. Highways currently get 80 percent. Railroads get only 20 percent. Second, legendary investor Warren Buffet recently sunk \$26.3 billion -- his largest investment ever-- into Burlington Northern Sante Fe Railroad. If that doesn't bode well for trains, what does? Third, research continues on ways to get Amtrak's 60-mile-per-hour trains up to the speed of Europe's and Asia's super-fast systems. The Eurostar, for example, hurdles at 186 miles per hour between London and Paris. Fourth, trains are much more environmentally friendly than planes and cars. According to former Vice President Al Gore and others, they spew significantly less carbon into the atmosphere -- certainly a selling point in this era of global warming. Fifth, Vice President Joe Biden is a passionate train fan. For decades, while a U.S. Senator from Delaware, he rode Amtrak daily between Wilmington and Washington. During inaugural events last January, Biden asked his regular train conductor to introduce him. In my book, that request gave new meaning to whistle-stop tour.

Until recently, most of my train-ridiculing business associates assumed that I suffer from fear of flying, which is not the case. I have a fear of being stuck on a tarmac for eight hours with overflowing toilets, wailing babies, and unnerved passengers. Considering that pilots hardly are immune to today's stressors, I worry incessantly about the fact that they may now legally tuck guns into their flight bags. A frequent flyer, I have little trouble imagining a pilot breaking out of the cockpit and going postal in the coach section. Long-distance trains are like cruises. You climb onboard and, for two, three, four days, you have no worries about anything other than falling off the platform. There's no packing, unpacking, or dealing with traffic congestion.

Here's a story that explains, in part, why I love trains so much. On one of my cross-country trips, I stayed up several nights until the wee hours with former strangers playing games such as Trivial Pursuit and Monopoly. Within a few hours of competition, I had come to know these once anonymous passengers as Carl the Builder, Joy the Model, Jim the Retiree, and Marilyn the Librarian. They called me Chatty Kathy, marveling at my ability to pull completely useless but

1 of 3

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point-scoring information from my addled brain. The five of us were booked all the way to Seattle, except for Carl the Builder. He was getting off in Montana. By the time the train pulled up at Carl the Builder's stop, everyone had bonded so well that the four of us piled into the station to meet his awaiting family. Have you ever heard of that happening on an airplane?

Daisy Finer recently put together a photographic spread on train travel for Vanity Fair magazine. She writes: "We have rediscovered the train. We abandoned her for the convenience and speed of the airplane, and vowed never to look back. But there's something relaxing about the familiar, rhythmic sounds of the rails and looking out the window as the landscape whizzes past you. The great train journey to somewhere special is about enjoying the trip as much as it is about arriving at the destination." If you're new to business travel on the train, as most Americans are, here are some tips:

Familiarize yourself with Amtrak. The company, whose name is a combination of American and Track, publishes a terrific booklet where you can get all the train information you need in one handy place. It shows routes, fares, timing. It also contains fabulous photographs of the scenery you'll encounter enroute. You can get this multi-page brochure at any train station or by logging onto www.amtrak.com.

Travel overnight: I recently took the train from Wilmington to Charlotte, N.C. I deliberately left late in the evening so I could sleep and arrive well rested at my business destination. I spent an hour or so watching Virginia whrrrr by before I was lulled to sleep by the cradle-like motion of the locomotive.

Book a sleeper car. As you may have surmised, I didn't go to Charlotte sitting up all night in a coach seat. I booked myself a sleeping car, which is the ultimate thrill. In one of the most well-designed spaces I've ever encountered, you get two bunks, a toilet, and a washbasin. You also get your own locking door and, therefore, all the privacy you desire.

Enjoy your equipment. If you have business in California, you'll be on the train for four glorious days and three happy nights. Your car has numerous outlets, which you'll be able use throughout the trip. No one ever tells you to turn off your electronic devices until the plane has landed. Take that, US Airways.

Breathe in new sights. Trains west of Chicago have cars with seats facing the windows. I remember gasping in awe as I saw mountains, lakes, and waterfalls from tracks built many miles from roads and highways. Until you've ridden the train, my friends, you've never seen the United States in its full breath-taking beauty.

Plan on networking. Meals are included in many long-distance fares. If you're traveling alone, you'll eat at tables with three other people. Unlike cruises, trains permit you to sit anywhere you want and to switch places throughout the journey. During such meals, I have met music professors, marine biologists, and professional singers. One day, I hope to run into comedian Whoopi Goldberg or singer Aretha Franklin, two notoriously fearful fliers.

Expand your horizons. If you have business travel outside the country, you're in for a real treat in terms of glamour and luxury. The famed Orient Express, for instance, chugs its way from London to Venice; the Golden Chariot traverses India; the Rovos Rail roars you across South Africa. Closer to home, the Royal Canadian Pacific sweeps you across the pristine wilderness of Canada. One influential fan: Bill Gates, legendary business genius and founder of Microsoft. If Gates has time to ride the train, who am I to say I'm too busy? All aboard!



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