

BUSINESS CLASS—A VIA / AMTRAK / AIR CANADA COMPARISON

- by **Don Evans**

The month of June gave your editor a chance to try out several modes of business class service, a pure fluke to start with that turned into a chance to compare the offerings of three carriers—two rail and one air—and to discover that the services can vary considerably. It all started with a ride to Seattle on business, the choice, *Amtrak Cascades* now that it is possible to do with the morning departure from Vancouver. The second, a trip to Montreal on Air Canada in the business class cabin of the A 320, the third then choosing VIA's Business Class for the return segment of a Montreal - Quebec City round trip. All three trips were in the 3 hour to 5 hour range—the shortest being Quebec City—Montreal and the longest Vancouver—Montreal on the plane.

Following are descriptions of the trips, and then some comparisons as experienced.

Amtrak Cascades—Vancouver to Seattle and return

Thanks to the availability of the second Vancouver—Seattle *Amtrak Cascades* train, it is now possible to make a reasonable round trip to the US city from Vancouver. And so, with a short consulting job to do in Seattle on the afternoon of June 2, I decided to take the train south, stay overnight and return the next morning. Arriving at Pacific Central Station at 0600, check in was smooth and I was soon through the US authorities at the station and boarded Business Class car 2 of train 516. The seat assignment put in a single seat facing backwards, however I changed that with the on board and settled into a comfortable seat with a great view. The windows of the Talgo equipment are large and great for a lovely view of the great scenery which this route offers .

We departed on time and the ride was nice, a good crowd was aboard in business class and, by the time we were out of Mount Vernon, the entire train was sold out. Used my \$3.00 business class coupon towards purchase of a breakfast sandwich and coffee in the Bistro car, sat down

in the diner. Nice environment, but just so-so micro waved food. Coffee was good.

The ride was very pleasant and the scenery gorgeous on a perfect day, saw lots of wildlife from the train—eagles, seals, herons and other sea birds, and even a gray whale off White Rock! On board staff were efficient and pleasant, none were specifically assigned business class which, on this Amtrak service, amounts to a bigger and more comfortable seat, available newspaper, and self service in the Bistro car.

Departure and arrival were right on time, all good. The return the next morning was a repeat in every regard, another nice day, on time performance, enjoyable time in the diner in spite of the food, good crew. For the upgrade price of just \$13 each way, I would always choose business

class on *Amtrak Cascades*.

Air Canada—Vancouver to Montreal and return

I fly a lot in my business as most of you know, but you may not know that I always choose Air Canada by choice when I have the option. I rarely purchase at business class fares due their high price, but I often get upgraded due my frequent flyer status. Such was the case when I flew to Montreal on June 17 and returned on June 25.

Equipment on this route is typically Airbus 320 / 321 aircraft, with a business class seating section of 16 to 20 seats. The seats are very spacious and comfortable, and all seats on Air Canada now have in seat screens and entertainment systems. It is a huge difference over economy class from a seating comfort perspective—even more so if you get one of the longer distance aircraft (A 330, B 767 or B 777) which have the sleeper beds and often fly the busier domestic routes as well.

Air Canada's service has come a long way in the last few years, with the airline now being voted North America's best several times this year and last. Compared with other North American carriers that I have used, I totally agree. It is nothing like it used to be.

The guest experience also keeps getting better. In Business Class you now get a menu with your meal selections, and you are welcomed by name at your seat as your meal selections are taken. The multi course meals are served on nice china with proper cutlery and glasses, and the food is really very good. Service is nicely personal, and starts with bar and snack service just after take off, followed by the main meal in two courses (appetizer first), followed by the hot entrée. The bar and snacks are available throughout the flight with frequent water runs and checks on anything you might need. An hour or so before landing, fresh baked cookies (baked on board) and ice cream are served.

Both flights 150 east and 129 back were on time and the service was consistently very good.

VIA Rail Canada—Montreal to Quebec City and return

While in Montreal, we decided to go to Quebec City for a day trip. VIA Rail Canada was the choice, downtown to downtown convenience and the opportunity for a train ride. Business class was busy it seemed, the only fare available was almost \$400 round trip. So, elected to go economy class east and return business class (a \$106 premium on a one way upgrade basis).

Our train 20 departed on time from Montreal's Central Station at 0710, with rebuilt F40PH-2 #6433 for power hauling three LRC cars, one business class and two economy class. A JTB group had most of the business class car filled, accounting for the premium fare for a seat if one was available at all. The LRC equipment is in need of the refurbishment it is now starting

to get, the interiors of the car were tired and several of the windows quite milky, our assigned seats in economy class were fine, however, and the trip to Quebec City was on time and pleasant. Coffee and a muffin off the cart was \$4. We arrived on time.

Returning on Train 027, departing at 1730 from Quebec City, we upgraded to business class and we were able to use the Panorama Lounge, a pleasant environment with newspapers and non alcoholic beverages available. We boarded the VIA 1 car (same train consist as this morning) and settled into our seats, which were identical to the LRC Economy class seats except for fabric colour and having curtains on the windows. We departed on time and had an enjoyable ride back to Montreal, arriving on time as well.

Service was pleasant from the staff assigned the business class car (which was about 1/3 full this trip), we were offered a glass of wine (in a plastic glass) and packaged snack after departure, this was followed by dinner service with a choice of entrees. The dinner was on china with proper utensils and was quite good, I had roast pork which came with a salad and roll and a small dessert. More wine was offered. When the meal was done, the trays were collected, and the staff disappeared for the remainder of the trip (over 2 hours) - sitting and chatting with the conductor and opening doors at stops as needed. More could be done here.

Still, an enjoyable trip and I would certainly choose VIA for a trip of this duration just to avoid the airport hassles that make today's air travel what it is.

So, how do the three compare? Here are some comments from my experiences:

Pricing—Amtrak is the winner here. With just a \$13 upgrade fare (one way) one gets a much improved seat and lots of space, however the rest of the business class experience is really self serve. VIA's upgrade fare was \$106 one way—more than double the economy fare. Air Canada's business class fares vary, I was able to travel on an economy fare with an upgrade certificate. Business fares are usually multiple times best economy fares.

Seating—Amtrak wins this one with the two and one seating in their Talgo Business Class, followed by Air Canada's nice spacious seats and VIA in last place. Both Amtrak and Air Canada significantly improve comfort. The VIA seats in the VIA 1 LRC car were the same size and comfort as those in Economy Class, but were finished with nicer fabrics and there were curtains for the windows.

Meal service—Air Canada wins this one by a good margin over VIA. Amtrak doesn't compare at all. The Amtrak menu is the same for all passengers, business class gets a \$3.00 coupon towards purchases in the Bistro car but there is a pleasant dining car area to sit in. Food quality is basic microwave and just passable. VIA provides a complimentary bar service and snack, and a hot meal with choice of entrees. Food quality is quite good. But when that is done,

the service is over for the remainder of the trip. Air Canada provided a complimentary bar and snack, followed by a hot meal with choice of both appetizers and entrees. Food quality is quite good. Service was offered throughout the flight, with fresh baked cookies and ice cream four hours in.

Staff Service—Air Canada wins this one by a long shot. By the way, staff were friendly and helpful on all three carriers, but Air Canada goes well beyond the norm (this is my experience from many flights on lots of carriers by the way). On Amtrak, it is self service in business class so there is really no distinction at all. On VIA, the service was friendly and quite adequate, but once the serving was done staff sat in business class seats and chatted the rest of the way to Montreal (over half the trip). On Air Canada, business class customers are welcomed by name and service is attentive throughout the flight with frequent rounds of water and beverages between the regular serving times. As we approach our destination, each person is asked if all was ok and thanked for choosing Air Canada, a nice and personal touch.

Entertainment Systems—Air Canada wins this one hands down. There is no entertainment system on VIA at all, and Amtrak's is still more than 10 years out of date with just one movie of their choice played on old monitor screens in the coach ceiling. Of course, there is scenery to watch on the train, much better than other entertainment by my standards!

On Time Performance—A tie here as all trips departed and arrived on time.

My final verdicts—I love to ride trains and I also love to see the scenery, for this reason I would choose the Amtrak ride. The scenery is lovely along the route, and the view from the large Talgo windows grand. I would always choose business class here (it's cheap), wish they offered a higher level of service for which I would be happy to pay more. For food and service, Air Canada leaves both railways in the dust. VIA—hard to say here, although I enjoyed the business class experience it seemed a lot of money to pay at more than \$100 for a one shot airline style meal and a glass of wine. Seats and service not where they could be. I would probably not do it often and stay with Economy class on most short haul runs.