

FEATURE ARTICLES

CAR 12, SEAT 13, TRAIN 14

-By **Don Evans**

This was the scenario as I proceeded to board Amtrak's *Coast Starlight* in Los Angeles on August 23, 2010. The occasion was yet another business trip, this time to Los Angeles, with a decision to supplement it with a visit to see my son in San Jose. How to get there, well a ride on the *Coast Starlight* sounded like a great idea. It had been some time since I had ridden an Amtrak long distance train, and the ride up the Pacific Coast was a lovely one. So, a good chance to enjoy this lovely scenery and also to see how Amtrak's flagship long distance train was doing.

So, after my business and a night at a hotel by LAX, I rode the hotel shuttle to the airport and caught a Flyaway bus (direct service LAX to LA Union Station at \$7, a great value). LA Union is a real classic and an absolute delight, having been nicely restored and now serving Amtrak and Metrolink, as well as interconnecting with Los Angeles light rail and bus systems. I had my ticket already – a great fare of just \$68 for the all day ride. At the station, check in opened 90 minutes before departure, and I got a requested seat assignment for a window on the ocean side. It just happened to be coach #12, seat #13 on Amtrak train #14!



We boarded quite late (to my way of thinking) for a sold out long train – boarding commenced at 1000k for a scheduled 1015 departure. And, sure enough the boarding process took more time resulting in a 1030 departure from the station. A full and long train it was, with locomotives #151 / 54 (both GE Genesis types), a baggage car and then 11 Superliner cars (well almost) – four sleepers, the Pacific Parlour Car (ex Santa Fe high level), dining car, Sightseer Lounge / Café car (photo below), and four coaches. It made a long 14 unit train, a delight to watch as it traversed the curves with the locos far ahead.

There were a myriad of welcomes over the PA – the conductor, the parlour car attendant, the dining car steward, the snack bar attendant, but we were underway. Once tickets were collected, I headed for the *Sightseer Lounge* where the lovely ambiance and large windows were great on this beautiful sunny morning. It was very pleasant indeed.

Heading out through industrial Los Angeles, we rolled along at a good clip until 1053, when we were held for an inbound Metrolink train. We were on our way again at 1102, rolling into our first stop at Van Nuys at 1106 – 19 minutes late. Rolling again, we cruised towards the coast, meeting a southbound Amtrak Surfliner consist from Santa Barbara with F59PHI pushing a 6 car consist. After some pretty climbing over rocky hills, our next stop was Simi Valley at 1130 – now just 7 minutes off schedule, then on to Oxnard at 1200.

Away from Oxnard we caught our first view of the open Pacific Ocean at 1212, and rolled along the coast to Santa Barbara, arriving on time at 1245. Along the way I had purchased lunch at the café (lower level of the Sightseer car), typical Amtrak café fare of sandwich and beverage. It did the job for now.

Departing Santa Barbara, this is my favourite part of the ride. It is three hours until our next stop, and most of the ride will be along the open Pacific Coast with few towns along the way.



The ride doesn't disappoint, it is a wonderful view on a perfect day. We see lots of birds, pelicans, hawks, seabirds and even a school of dolphins as we cruise along. There are also surfers out doing their thing in the waves wherever a beach access allowed. The Union Pacific track is in good shape and the ride is most pleasant. At 1440 we stop in the middle of nowhere, turns out to be a meet with an Amtrak train southbound from San Luis Obispo for Los Angeles. We roll into San Luis Obispo at 1535 – eight minutes ahead of schedule (photo below). Time to stretch on the platform and to take a few pictures of the train while here.

We are reboarded for an on time departure, but this is interrupted by the arrival of the southbound Coast Starlight #11, also on time. We should pull out, however the southbound has three private cars on the rear and is fouling the switch. So we must await its departure. Soon enough it pulls away - GE locos #43 / 507 followed by baggage car / four sleepers / parlour car / diner / sightseer lounge / four coaches / and a Southern Pacific lounge car / Canadian Pacific baggage car *Pony Express* / and dome car *Silver Splendor*. Now in the clear, we depart 20 minutes late at 1604.

This starts another spectacular part of the ride, the climb up the San Lucia Mountains. Here we traverse the 320 degree loop just out of San Luis Obispo, then wind our way in a climb of more



than 1,200 feet to the summit. This climb is noted on the PA as a feat of engineering by the Southern Pacific Railroad. There are several tunnels on this stretch and it is some nice mountain railroading (photo below). At the top we then settle into some valley running, with our next stop Paso Robles at 1706.

Now we are onto faster track and we head across the fertile valley at good clip towards Salinas. Time for dinner in the diner, I go up for my 1715 reservation and am seated with a couple and another single. Like always happens in dining cars, we get into instant conversation and are all

friends by the time dinner is over.

The ambiance is very nice, white tablecloths and flowers on the tables and a menu to order from with a selection of six different entrees. I choose the baked salmon, and we start with salad and a glass of wine. Watching the countryside slip by, enjoying company with conversation in a dinner is absolutely first class. Our server is very pleasant and we are well looked after. Dinner arrives, the salmon is a little dry but quite ok otherwise, and the presentation basic but quite acceptable. China and silverware is used – no paper or plastic here. All in all, the diner rates good and is well worth the price tag.

We arrive at Salinas at 1856 – still 20 minutes off schedule. The crops are in and watering in progress, the fields are green with vineyards, artichokes and other vegetable crops. Now it's the last leg, and we watch the moon rise over the hills as we continue north, then darkness falls as we race through Gilroy. We are now just 30 minutes from San Jose, and we are on time. Sure enough, we pull into San Jose three minutes early at 2025 and disembark after a really enjoyable ten hour ride.

So, how is Amtrak doing? I give it a good rating – the equipment was pleasant, the crews generally pretty friendly (our cafe attendant perhaps could have been better – he seemed to close the café regularly and was a bit curt) and the good crowd aboard all seemed to enjoy the ride. Personally, I can't wait until next time.