



Location D
Track 25 ▪ Track 26 →

Location D
← Track 25 ▪ Track 26 →

The Capitol Limited prepares to leave Washington's Union Station for Chicago. Photo courtesy Mary Charlebois.

4 Days Across America by Rail

Cross Country on Amtrak, Life On & Off the Rails

Story & Photos by Mary Charlebois





The interior of Washington's Union Station.

The trip of a lifetime, coast to coast by train. Four nights and four days. Jacksonville, Florida to San Francisco, California aboard three remarkable train routes; *Silver Meteor*, *Capitol Limited*, and *California Zephyr*.

The trip was my return home from a week of travel around the historic NE Florida Coast. I flew to Florida, now it was back to California by rail. I arranged my schedule with long layovers in Washington, DC and Chicago. While waiting for my connections, I'd wander about in each city. Once aboard the *California Zephyr*, I'd spend two days and nights writing, resting, and gazing at the passing scenery.

Silver Meteor—Jacksonville to Washington, DC

I dropped my rental car at the airport and took Uber 13-miles to the **JAX Amtrak Station**.

The small depot has a timeless quality. It was spotless and peaceful. I checked in, took a few photos, raided the vending machines, then took a seat. I began people-watching as passengers arrived for boarding.

The *Silver Meteor* arrived on time.

Boarding was quick. I found my **Coach Class** seat where I'd be sleeping in the big, comfy recliner overnight. I'd wake-up in Washington, DC. I plugged-in my devices for charging and watched the miles roll by as we headed north and crossed into Georgia.

After considering the **food options**, I decided to try the dining car. A tall, gracious woman was seated with me in the dining car. Neither of us had a reservation for dinner, but the host found us a seat after a few minutes wait. Our conversation covered "strangers on a train" topics like



Dining menu on the *Silver Meteor*. Photos courtesy Mary Charlebois.

where are you headed, where are you coming from, and of course, what do you do?

My dinner was a splurge of steak with béarnaise sauce and a glass of Zinfandel. The food was fresh, appetizing, and scrumptious. I expected airline style, microwaved food. I was wrong. How the staff manages to prepare and serve the quality and variety of meals in such a tiny space is astounding. The table servers made the dinner special. Their welcoming attitudes were infectious.

Back at my seat after dinner, I connected to onboard Wi-Fi and fell asleep watching a movie. My large and restful coach seat reclined to a nearly flat position. Much better than an airplane seat, even a business-class seat, and no seatbelt lights.

Capitol Limited—DC to Chicago

The station was empty at our 7 o'clock arrival Saturday morning. I took the opportunity to photograph stately **Washington, DC Union Station** before passengers began to fill the gilded marble halls.

Still early morning, I headed to the streets hoping for some photos without crowds of people and cars. My



Union Station, Washington, DC.



**Conductor on the Capitol Limited.
Photos courtesy Mary Charlebois.**

eight-hour layover passed quickly. Within a mile of Union Station are monuments, museums, parks, memorials, the U.S. Capitol, and much more. So much, in fact, I wished for a longer layover.

Across the street from Union Station, I went to the **Postal Museum**. It details the history of the Postal Service in the U.S. with interactive exhibits of interest to all ages. It's part of the **Smithsonian Institution**, a DC collection of 17 museums, galleries, and a zoo. Most are admission free.

I spent some time exploring, shopping and eating lunch. Shopping in the station rivals the best galleries anywhere. You'll find everything from a tuxedo to a toothbrush. I bought a box of fine chocolates to enjoy on the train.

At 3:45, I boarded the Capitol Limited. While urban and industrial landscapes rolled by, we crossed the Mississippi River. I got to know my seatmate, a young man returning home from college. When I asked him how far he was going, he beamed and said, "As far as I can ma'am, as far as I can."



Crossing the Mississippi River in Gulfport, IL. Photos courtesy Mary Charlebois.

California Zephyr—Chicago to San Francisco

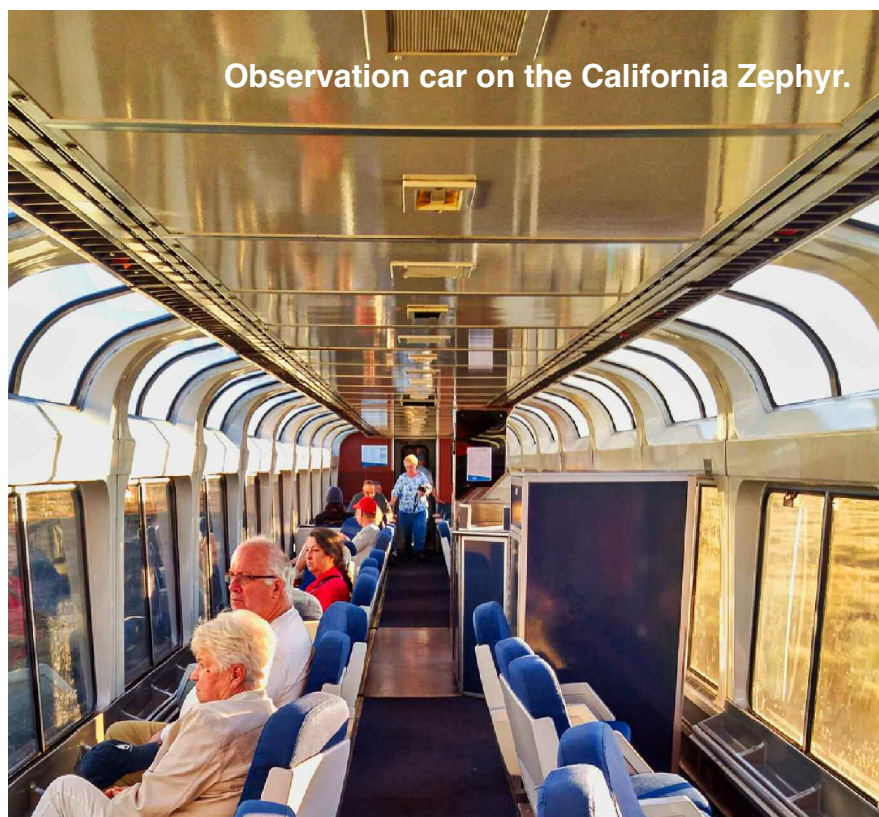
Chicago greeted me at 8:45am. I explored **Chicago Union Station** with camera in hand. The cavernous building is opulent. Crowds began to grow. It was Gay Pride Day in Chicago. Parade goers were arriving by train. Many dressed in costume. Photo ops were everywhere.

Surrounding Union Station are destinations and activities of all interests. Outside the station, you can rent bikes or board a hop-on-hop-off tour bus. I love to wander and see what I uncover.

A four-minute walk across the Chicago River, take a trip to the top and stand on the Ledge at Sky Deck. The tallest building in the Western Hemisphere has glass boxes that extend 4.3 feet away from the building. Have a thrilling city experience and get birds-eye-view photos of Chicago. This is suited for a group or solo activity for all ages.

I spent about two hours in the **Metropolitan Lounge** at Union Station. What a treat. The quiet and comfortable lounge is available to sleeping car and business class ticket holders. While there, I took a shower in sparkling facilities; made good use of Wi-Fi; munched on snacks; and enjoyed a wine tasting. I had help from an

attendant checking in and stashing my luggage until departure time. At boarding call, we were taken the “back way” to our train, avoiding the reveling crowds coming and going to the day’s festivities. You can buy a day pass for the lounge if you’re not holding a sleeper or business class ticket.



Observation car on the California Zephyr.



Life Aboard the Zephyr

My official address aboard the California Zephyr was Car 0533, Room 009; the end room in the last car of the train. I had a Viewliner Roomette, in a sleeper car. Ideal for one passenger, cozy for two. The Roomette is the smallest of four sizes of private **sleeping accommodations**.

A picture window, two seats, and a fold-down table are the daytime arrangement. At night, the two seats unfold into a single bed. A second single bed drops down from the ceiling. There's space for a couple of carry-on sized suitcases and a tiny closet. There is no in-room sink, shower or toilet. Shared facilities are available in each sleeper car.



Coal Canyon, Colorado viewed from private Roomette.





The Continental Divide as viewed from the California Zephyr.
Photo courtesy Mary Charlebois.



Denver's Union Station.
Photos courtesy Mary Charlebois.

All dining car meals are included with a sleeper car ticket. Reservations are needed for lunch and dinner but are easily made. Your car attendant will circulate a reservation sheet for your convenience. Complimentary morning coffee, tea, and juice are available at the beverage kiosk in each sleeper car. Meals may be ordered and delivered to your room if you like.

The first person I met on the California Zephyr was T, my car attendant. T was a tall, muscular woman. Later I realized strength was essential to her job. Each car has an attendant to assist you. When beds need setting up or down, it takes muscle and practiced technique. T had them both. She loved her job, a passion recognizable in her eyes and voice.

My days and nights took on a routine. I'd wake early, dress, and go to the observation car for sunrise, hot tea, and conversation with fellow passengers. After breakfast in the dining car, I'd return to the observation lounge with my laptop and camera.

Lunch and dinner were shared with random travelers. All dining car table service is shared by four guests. I looked forward to each meal and meeting my table companions. I can tell you for sure, the most interesting people travel by train. Each evening my journal was filled with conversations I'd had. I met a woman that designed a space suit for NASA, a librarian from a small Nevada town, a couple farming cannabis, a dog behaviorist, a fellow travel writer, and other fascinating folks.

We crossed mountains, deserts, farmland, cities, and the Continental Divide. We made 30-something stops in





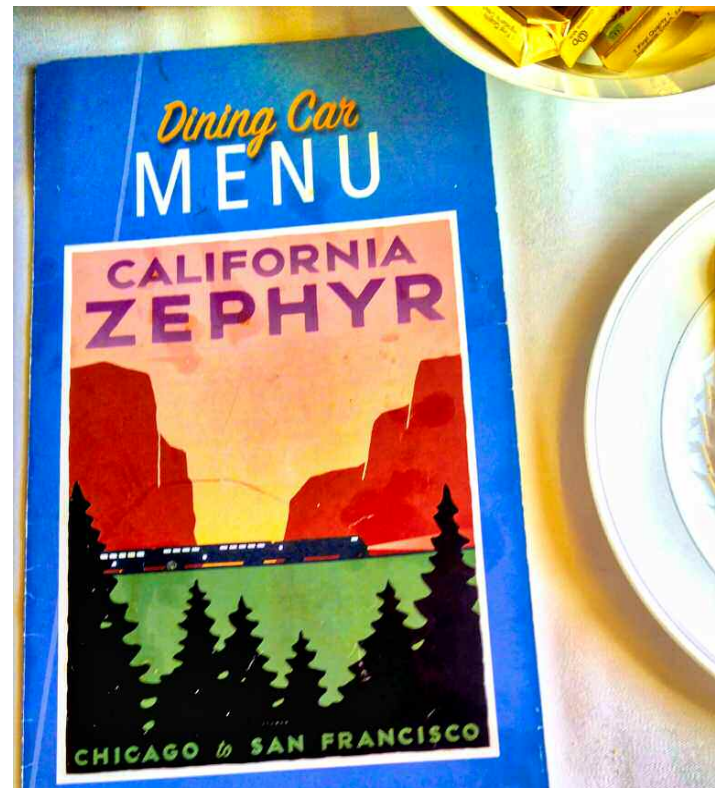
places like Denver, Salt Lake City, and Reno. Most stops allowed no more than 10-minutes to leave the train. In Denver, we had nearly an hour. Denver's handsomely restored **Union Station** has shopping and eateries surrounding a central waiting room. Some cafes have al fresco seating, weather permitting.

We pulled into Emeryville, CA around four. From there I boarded an Amtrak bus and took the short ride across the bay to San Francisco and Fisherman's Wharf. My trip of a lifetime had reached its terminus.

Trains are my favorite way to travel with roomy, comfortable seating, loads of leg room and no baggage fees. I like the time it takes, the ever-changing panorama outside my window, and best of all, my fellow passengers. After all, the most interesting people travel by train.

For a group or solo, visit [Amtrak Vacations](#) for more train travel adventures.

Left, Roomette Corridors. Below, Roomette aboard the California Zephyr.



About the Author:

Mary Charlebois, also known as MaryGo, is a freelance writer, photographer, and videographer. Her daily beat is Mendocino County and San Francisco. She lives in Fort Bragg, Mendocino County, California. Mary is a Journalist member of ITWPA.

See her work at <https://wheremarygos.com>.