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The Rocky Mountaineer winds along the Fraser River in B.C.

LEGENDARY RAILWAY ADVENTURES

by Mattie John Bamman

Train travel is famously relaxing and romantic, but in the Northwest it is also an adventure. Just try to spot a grizzly bear from your seat on your next flight. Or on your next road trip, try to navigate the jagged cliffs of Hurricane Gulch. With train travel, the journeys are as fun as the destinations. You can sit back, order a drink and watch the glaciers, big-horned sheep and isolated coastline pass by.

ROCKY MOUNTAINEER

At 7:15 a.m. in Vancouver, British Columbia, piano and bagpipes filled Rocky Mountaineer's private train station to welcome us aboard. Rocky Mountaineer sets the standard for luxury train tours in North America, offering tours through British Columbia bundled with Fairmont Hotel stays and Alaska cruises. In 2014, it increased its Seattle departures from 4 to 24, making Seattle an ideal departure destination.

I took "First Passage to the West," which traverses five of the world's six geo-climates and ends at Lake Louise and Banff National Park. On the train, our theater-trained concierge educated us on such subjects as the Canadian Gold Rush and the chainsaw-carving capital of Canada, all while canyon walls and mountain peaks loomed majestically through the domed-glass windows. The views on the outdoor vestibule at the end of my train car were even better. There, nothing separated me, or my camera lens, from the fresh Canadian air.

Rocky Mountaineer's dining options were hands down the best food I've eaten on a train. Peeking into the kitchen, I found the chefs preparing delicious meals, such as scrambled eggs with smoked salmon, kelp cavender and crème fraiche, at speeds up to 50 miles an hour.

I didn't spend everyday on board the train. Guided activity options were available at each stop, and in the Rockies, I toured Jasper National Park and the Athabasca Glacier. This is one of the most important aspects of train touring: It's entirely customizable. To learn your options, make sure to consult the rail line's vacation consultants, who offer insights into choosing the best tour level, hotel options, length of stopovers and more.

Rocky Mountaineer operates April through October, and tours leave from Vancouver, Calgary, Seattle and other cities.

ALASKA RAILROAD

Chugging through Alaska's untamed terrain, Alaska Railroad Company connects Fairbanks in the interior to Seward on the coast, with spur lines to other

Alaska destinations. Boarding in Fairbanks, I knew that I was about to see isolated parts of the world, many inaccessible by car. Within an hour, I saw a moose. Spotting wildlife is easy from a train.

Many travelers skip the Fairbanks route, but I cannot recommend it enough. Alaska's second-largest city, Fairbanks has impressive museums and the Riverboat Discovery. At just 198 miles from the Article Circle, Fairbanks is another world. Trees grow stumpy, and in the winter the Northern Lights are virtually guaranteed.

Looking at this landscape, I felt exceptionally lucky to be traveling in the comfort of the train. As with Rocky Mountaineer, the gold service level comes with great perks, including dome cars, an outdoor viewing vestibule and all-inclusive dining with excellent menu options. Hotel stays with shuttles made arriving and departing easy.

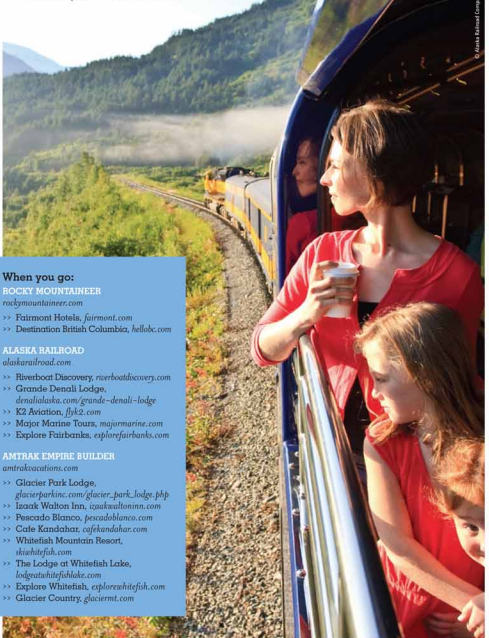
Alaska Railroad promotes on-train exploration. In one car, I found historical photos sharing the railroad's 90-year history and, at the very back of the train, a small outdoor platform with unbelievable views.

In Denali National Park, home to North America's tallest mountain, Mount McKinley, I went white-water rafting and saw one of the world's most amazing sunsets from the bar in the Grande Denali Lodge. The next day, in charming Talkeetna, I found banjos, native artworks and home-baked goods, and I took a tightrope tour of Mt. McKinley with K2 Aviation. Among other things, getting a chance to fly by "the world's most famous outhouse" at nearly 20,000 feet was the opportunity of a lifetime.

My final tour was Seward. There, Alaska Railroad teams up with Major Marine Tours to offer glacier and wildlife cruises. I saw puffins, whales, Dall's porpoises and the Holgate Glacier. Listening to the crackling ice, I could almost guess which portion of the giant glacier would break off next into the sea.

Ranging from budget-friendly to luxurious, Alaska Railroad package tours are available year-round. Basic train fare is also available.

Views from an open air car aboard Alaska Railroad



When you go:

ROCKY MOUNTAINEER

rockymountaineer.com

- >> Fairmont Hotels, fairmont.com
- >> Destination British Columbia, hellobc.com

ALASKA RAILROAD

alaskarailroad.com

- >> Riverboat Discovery, riverboatdiscovery.com
- >> Grande Denali Lodge, denalialaska.com/grande-denali-lodge
- >> K2 Aviation, flyk2.com
- >> Major Marine Tours, majormarine.com
- >> Explore Fairbanks, explorefairbanks.com

AMTRAK EMPIRE BUILDER

amtrakvacations.com

- >> Glacier Park Lodge, glacierparkinc.com/glacier_park_lodge.php
- >> Izak Walton Inn, izakwaltoninn.com
- >> Pescado Blanco, pescadoblanco.com
- >> Cafe Kandahar, cafeandahar.com
- >> Whitefish Mountain Resort, skiwhitefish.com
- >> The Lodge at Whitefish Lake, lodgeatwhitefishlake.com
- >> Explore Whitefish, explorewhitefish.com
- >> Glacier Country, glaciermt.com



Breathtaking views of the Canadian Rockies through the glass domes aboard the Rocky Mountaineer

© Matt Johnson

AMTRAK'S EMPIRE BUILDER

Departing from both Portland and Seattle, Empire Builder covers some of the most scenic track in the nation, Glacier National Park in Western Montana. With a variety of four packages, including a la cart activity and hotel options, Empire Builder can drop you off right on the doorstep of some of Montana's most famous lodges.

I boarded in Portland, and while the sun set I soaked in views of the Columbia River Gorge replete with a double-rainbow. Sleeping on board, I arrived in Whitefish, the first Montana stop, at 7:30 a.m.

The entire history of Glacier National Park corresponds with the railroad. The 161-room Glacier Park Lodge was built in 1913, and with WWI, America's wealthy stopped traveling to Europe and looked westward. The railroad then, as it does now, dropped travelers off on the lodge's doorstep.

Empire Builder also stops at Izaak Walton Inn, which touts lodge-style accommodations, cabins, and train cars outfitted with beds and kitchenettes. Nowhere else in the nation can you

find a locomotive converted into an accommodation, and if you feel like playing conductor the cab's levers are still intact. Izaak Walton also rents Nordic skis and has 20 miles of trails on site, which means you can enjoy a full winter vacation without getting into a car.

For those seeking adventure with a wide restaurant selection, I suggest stopping in Whitefish. Both Glacier National Park and Whitefish offer endless outdoor activities year-round, but Whitefish also boasts Pescado Blanco, serving "Mexican mountain" cuisine and the fine-dining Café Kandahar. Additionally, the Whitefish Mountain Resort offers skiing in the winter plus a family-friendly aerial adventure park and ziplining in summer. At the waterfront resort, The Lodge at Whitefish Lake, travelers find superb food, an array of mountain and

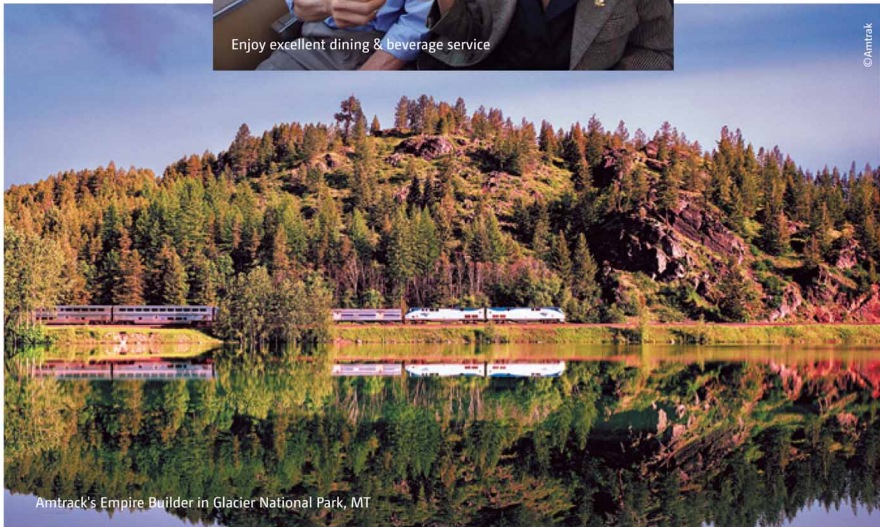
lake activities and plenty of relaxation. Glacier National Park is just 30 minutes east.

Note that the Empire Builder sometimes runs late, which means that your arrival time or pick-up time can be delayed between 30 minutes to several hours. Tour packages or regular fares are available. 📍



Enjoy excellent dining & beverage service

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Amtrak's Empire Builder in Glacier National Park, MT