

MICHAEL HIBBLEN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

THE LONG RIDE HOME

IF IT'S THE JOURNEY, NOT THE DESTINATION THAT INTRIGUES YOU, TAKE THE TRAIN



MICHAEL HIBBLEN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF



IAN MCVEA/FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM



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BY MICHAEL HIBBLEN
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The sun had been up only an hour or so when my train began backing away from the San Antonio station. With the sun at that low angle, the rail cars cast long shadows as we slowly moved backward, passing sights typical along railroad tracks in big cities: a lot full of 55-gallon oil drums, another with a razor-wire fence protecting hundreds of ice machines, the kind you see in front of convenience stores.

The train came to a stop, a switch was thrown on the track ahead and we began moving forward. This was the beginning of a long day of traveling, but one that I had gone out of my way for and had been eagerly anticipating.

When I explained my vacation plans to co-workers and friends, most gave me the same strange look. I was going to visit parents and friends in my hometown of Little Rock, Ark. But rather than fly directly there, I flew

•TURN TO AMTRAK, 7J



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AMTRAK AT A GLANCE

Passengers: More than 25.4 million in 2005
Trains: Up to 300 daily
Network: 46 states, with stations in 500 towns

RAIL JOURNEY: The Texas Eagle rides north of San Antonio, top. Passengers Leonard and Linda Smith of Austin, Texas, enjoy dessert, upper left, and Janet Gill of Farwell Mich., upper right, takes in the view from the Sightseer Lounge Car. Upper middle, Amtrak conductor J.C. Hayes presides over the boarding of passengers in St. Louis. At left, the northbound Texas Eagle pulls out of Fort Worth.

CANADA

Stalking the lords of the Arctic

BY CHRIS WELSCH
Special to The Miami Herald

I saw my first polar bear about 15 minutes after arriving at the airport in Churchill, Manitoba. About 100 feet off the side of the road, the largest four-legged predator in the world stood on the tundra, sniffing the air nonchalantly.

Any sense of reserve I had evaporated in a burst of childlike excitement. "Polar bear! Polar bear! It's as big as a horse!"

Diane Howell, the driver of the Chevy Suburban I was riding in, gave a bored shrug. "That? That's not even a big one. We've got a couple hanging around the compound that weigh over 1,000 pounds."

My enthusiasm was only slightly dampened because she estimated the bear was a "700-pounder," which actually is as big as a small horse. I'd only been in Churchill 15 minutes and I'd already seen what I came to see: *Ursus maritimus*, the bear of the sea.

Polar bears are as reliable an indicator of late fall in Churchill as falling leaves are in places farther south. Churchill, located where the tundra begins and where weather patterns bring Arctic conditions, is uniquely situated at the center of the southernmost population of polar bears in the world. For polar bears, the colder the better: They

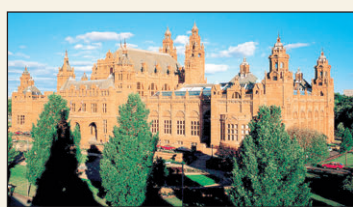
•TURN TO POLAR BEARS, 10J



CHRIS WELSCH/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

IT'S ONLY PLAY: In Churchill, Manitoba, young polar bears wrestling in play resemble dancers or boxers.

INSIDE



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Beloved Kelvingrove Museum reopens, 14J



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RIDING THE RAILS

Aboard Amtrak's Texas Eagle, watching America glide by

• AMTRAK, FROM 1J

from Fort Lauderdale to San Antonio, just so I could ride Amtrak's Texas Eagle for 16 hours up to Little Rock.

I would have loved to have taken Amtrak from South Florida to Arkansas, but that would have required nearly three days of traveling. That's one of the key limitations of long distance rail travel within the United States. A limited number of routes means you often have to go well out of your way.

For me, the trip would have required going up to Washington, D.C., taking another train over to Chicago and then a third south to Little Rock. Even for someone who loves riding trains, that 68-hour trip, including two layovers, was way too long and would have eaten up too big a chunk of my limited vacation time.

But by flying to San Antonio, I could begin my train ride the following morning at the southernmost point for Amtrak's Texas Eagle. In those 16 hours, I would traverse the massive state on tracks that have shouldered trains for more than a century, reaching the Arkansas border in the evening and Little Rock at midnight.

SOMETHING TO SEE

The point most didn't understand was that I was spending a full day on a train not for the sake of getting somewhere, but for the pleasure of the ride. Train travel offers sights that are much more interesting than what you see while driving or flying. I also greatly enjoy the leisurely meals and ample time to read, watch movies, listen to music and get to know my fellow travelers.

But the only way it's practical for me to take this kind of long train ride to Little Rock is to fly to another city along the same route.

A year before, I flew up to Chicago, the northernmost point of the Texas Eagle route, then took it to Little Rock, a 13-hour ride. But since the one daily train leaves Chicago at 3:20 in the afternoon, I got to enjoy only about two hours of daylight.

Once the sun goes down, the view of the world fades away, with only occasional glimpses of places illuminated by street lights or headlights. There are long stretches in between where you see nothing at all.

But by going to San Antonio and taking the Texas Eagle north, I'd start my train ride at 8 a.m. and spend most of it in daylight.

It's not all pretty, especially you're passing through gritty urban or industrial areas. But once outside San Antonio, we passed picturesque scenes of rolling farmland, horses, cows, big bales of hay with barns and silos in the background.

I could hear the wail of the train's horn as we cut through one small town after another. Each had its own water tower and downtown area, all centered around the tracks, showing the importance railroads once had in the development of each community.

MAKING FRIENDS

As fellow passenger Janet Gill of Farwell, Mich., noted, "You see the real America when you're on the train, good and bad."

I met her during lunch. Amtrak insists on having four people at each table in the dining car, so travelers are often thrown together with random strangers. During more than a dozen trips, often by myself, I've never had a bad experience.

For Gill, this her first train trip in 41 years. She had come down to spend a week with her sister in San Antonio and was now heading back.

"I'm tired of driving across the United States and I wanted somebody else to do the driving for a change," Gill said.

Her son bought the ticket as a Christmas gift, offering her the choice of travel by bus or by train.

Gill said she chose the train



MICHAEL HIBBLEN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

OFF THE EAGLE: A passenger and attendant wait after getting off the train at the Fort Worth station.



MARK MATTERN / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

RIDING THE TEXAS EAGLE

The northbound Texas Eagle departs daily from San Antonio at 8 a.m., arriving in Chicago at 2:14 p.m. the following day. Southbound service departs Chicago at 3:20 p.m., arriving in San Antonio at 11:45 p.m. a day later. It's a 1,308-mile run with 26 stops each way and connections with other Amtrak trains in Chicago and Springfield, Ill.; St. Louis, Fort Worth and San Antonio.

- **Prices:** The fare for a one-way trip from San Antonio to Little Rock in a coach seat starts around \$98; from San Antonio to Chicago from \$135. An upgrade to a "roomette" — the smallest sleeper — is \$173 for two people, in addition to the seat fare for two, to Little Rock; \$273 additional to Chicago.
- **Information:** 800-872-7245; www.amtrak.com.



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A BLUR OF SPEED: The view from the Texas Eagle as it passes a crossing in a farming area north of Taylor, Texas.

in part because she had watched officials repeatedly try to eliminate federal funding for Amtrak and feared their efforts would spell the end for money-losing, long-distance routes like the Texas Eagle.

"I thought I'd better take a train while it's still available," she said.

Leonard and Linda Smith, seated across the table from us, boarded the train in Austin, en route to visit his brother in Memphis. It would be a very long trip. While Memphis is just 135 miles east of my stop in Little Rock, it would take the Smiths another 28 hours to get there — 14 hours from Little Rock to Chicago, a 6-hour layover, then 10 hours on the City of New Orleans, headed back south.

Convuluted routes like that are what keep many people from considering rail travel as an option. But the Smiths didn't mind.

"If we wanted to get there fast we could have gotten on a plane. Either way would cost about as much," Linda Smith said. "I have more time to sit back, relax and enjoy it."

What surprised me was how little company we had onboard. On most other trips I've taken, it seemed the trains were at or near capacity. This one, however, was practically empty.

That meant this was almost certainly another money-losing run for Amtrak, which in recent years has lost nearly a half-billion dollars annually.

Despite the slow day during my trip, more and more

people are taking to the rails. Amtrak reports having three consecutive record-breaking years, with fiscal year 2005 hitting an all-time high of more than 25 million passengers.

As the day passed and the train slowly made its way north, the faces of my fellow passengers became familiar. The fact that this train was less crowded meant that it was a little more intimate.

Kicking back in the sight-seer car for a while was quite enjoyable. While a few people gathered around a TV showing the movie *Dukes of Hazard*, I slid on my headphones and listened to music. The world passed by on the other side of large panoramic windows and above, where a curved glass roof offered an expanded view.

I felt almost voyeuristic looking into backyards and at the faces of people in cars waiting at rail crossings.

The view as we rolled into Dallas was quite impressive, with the train running alongside the high-rise buildings. After stops there and in Fort Worth, we finally began the final leg of my journey.

Dinner wasn't quite as good as I've had on other trips. The prime rib wasn't tender, and I ate less than half of it. But a piece of chocolate cake and the clear effort by the Amtrak crew made up for it.

As the sun went down I made my way to the end of the train, marveling as the setting sun illuminated the rails we had just passed over.

I returned to my tiny room

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