

# Travel

How to avoid crowds in Italy's Cinque Terre. T3

## Traveling on Amtrak's trains from Cleveland



Amtrak's lounge cars offer views from all sides; on the Capitol Limited, headed for Chicago. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

### A relaxing ride despite middle-of-the-night departures, delays

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The Amtrak train slowed to a crawl just outside Gary, Indiana. It took us nearly two hours to go 30 miles, stuck behind a slow-moving freight train.

I pulled out my laptop and did some work as we meandered north. Good thing I wasn't in a hurry to get to Chicago.

Maybe there were people on the train who were upset about our late arrival, but if there were, they were quiet in their complaints. This seemed like a pretty laid back group — much more relaxed than the folks I encountered at the airport.

In a span of eight hours last month, I experienced both the highs and the lows of train travel from Cleveland.

**First, the highs:** This is the most comfortable form of transportation I've taken in years. First-class airline seats don't have this much legroom. And the seats almost fully recline. It was much easier to sleep on the train than any flight or bus I've taken in recent years. I brought earplugs, but didn't use them — the low, steady murmur of the train was perfect ambient noise.

And when I wanted to stretch my legs, it was easy to walk around. The lounge car, with glass windows all around, was a perfect destination, where fellow travelers played cards, worked on computers or just stared at the passing countryside.

**Now the lows:** Unfortunately, all four trains that stop in Cleveland travel through the city in the middle-of-the-night, geared for travelers on the East Coast and in Chicago. My train was due to depart at 2:59 a.m. Do I go to sleep at home for a few hours, then trek downtown? Or try to stay up?

Of the four trains that come through Cleveland, two are traveling east and two west. Every one of them stops between the hours of 1:45 a.m. and 5:50 a.m., if they're on time.

Most of the time, they're late. My train to Chicago was two hours late; instead of taking about seven hours, the trip took nearly nine. My train back to Cleveland was 90 minutes late.

Because of the crazy departure times, I was surprised at the hub of activity I found at the Amtrak station when I arrived. While I waited, I chatted with Larry and Jackie Rush, Shaker Heights neighbors, who travel by train often because Jackie doesn't like to fly. They were headed to Florida.

And I met Cindy Brown, who lives in Geauga County and takes the train several times a year to visit family in both Chicago and Massachusetts. "The seating is so comfortable and you meet really nice people," said Brown.

SEE TRAIN, K2



Architect Daniel Burnham designed Chicago's Union Station in the Beaux-Arts tradition. It opened in 1925.



#### Amtrak: If you go

**What:** Four trains pass through Cleveland every day, two traveling west to Chicago and two traveling east, one to Washington, D.C. and the other to New York City/Boston (the train separates in Albany).

The Lake Shore Limited departs from Cleveland at 3:45 a.m. traveling westbound, arriving in Chicago at 9:50 a.m.; and 5:50 a.m. going eastbound, arriving in New York City at 6:35 p.m. and Boston at 8:01 p.m.

The Capitol Limited departs from Cleveland at 2:59 a.m. traveling westbound, arriving in Chicago at 8:45 a.m.; and 1:54 a.m. going eastbound, arriving in Washington at 1:05 p.m.

The Capitol Limited uses double-decker trains; the Lake Shore Limited uses single-level trains (because of bridge restrictions in Massachusetts).

From Chicago, Washington, Boston or New York, you can connect to most of the Amtrak network. See Amtrak.com

**Buying a seat:** Fares vary, depending on date of travel and when you buy your ticket. I paid \$118 round-trip for a reserved coach seat to and from Chicago. I bought it about two weeks before my trip. A reserved ticket means you are guaranteed a seat; you don't actually get your seat assignment until you're boarding the train.

SEE IF YOU GO, K2



Passengers board Amtrak's double-decker limited train in the middle of the night in Cleveland.



Electrical outlets and a view, en route to Chicago from Cleveland on Amtrak's Capitol Limited. Photos by Susan Glaser, The Plain Dealer

## Train: Taking Amtrak from Cleveland

### FROM K1

who also doesn't like to fly. "I can get anywhere I want to go by train."

There was an Amish family headed home to Nebraska, after visiting family in Wayne County. And a woman from Chicago, traveling with a small dog, who had just visited her sick mom in Cleveland.

This was the first time I've taken Amtrak since I was in college, decades ago, turned off by the inconvenient departure times.

But when I was invited to Chicago last month for a United Airlines event, I decided to give the train a try. (Yes, I see the irony in traveling by train to an airline event.)

Chicago, 350 miles west of Cleveland, is just close enough to cause real debate on air versus ground travel. Depending on where you live and where you're going in Chicago, you might not save much time by flying.

The train travels to Union Station, in the heart of downtown Chicago. If you fly, you've got at least a half-hour commute — and sometimes much longer — to downtown.

Driving a car can also be a hassle — the delays on the highways heading into town are legendary. Plus, the hotel I stayed at in downtown Chicago charges \$72 for overnight parking.

My train ticket was a reasonable \$118 round-trip.

In 2018, 48,964 travelers used the train from Cleveland, up 32% from 10 years earlier. At the same time, nearly 10 million used Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.

### WHY THE TRAINS ARE SO LATE

There are two lines that come through Cleveland: The Lake Shore Limited, which travels from Boston and New York (joining together in Albany) and Chicago, with stops in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and other points east. And the Capitol Limited, which travels between Chicago and Washington, D.C., with stops in Pittsburgh and Cumberland, Maryland, and other points east.

Both routes stop in Elyria, Sandusky, Toledo and South Bend, Indiana, as they travel west.

Many travelers from Cleveland connect in Chicago to trains traveling farther west and south, and in Washington and New York, to trains traveling south and north.

The two lines that travel through Cleveland are among the most tardy that Amtrak operates. According to the company, the Capitol Limited is on time 36% of the time; the Lake Shore is on time 41%.

A train is considered on time if it arrives at each station within 15 minutes of its schedule.

The reason for the tardiness: Both of these routes travel extensively on tracks owned by Norfolk Southern Railway, with a large network of tracks throughout Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana. Amtrak annually gives grades to freight railways based on on-time arrivals. In its most recent report card, Norfolk Southern received an F.

The 1971 law that created Amtrak gave the passenger railroad priority over freight traffic — even on tracks owned by the freight companies. But that law has been hard to enforce, said Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari. And some freight companies simply refuse to honor the law.

Amtrak has been locked in a legal battle with freight companies for years over a 2008 law that gave Amtrak and the Federal Railroad Administration the power to set standards for on-time performance. After a recent court victory, Amtrak is in the process of developing those standards.

Magliari said Amtrak is aware of how important on-time trains are. "The single biggest determinant of customer satisfaction is our reliability," he said. "We don't have full control over that. It's a huge issue for us."

Ken Prendergast, the executive director of All Aboard Ohio, a Cleveland-based nonprofit that advocates for more train service across the state, said the poor condition of many stations in Ohio is also a factor in lousy on-time rates.

Cleveland's station, for example, can only accommodate one train at a time, which often leads to back-ups on the tracks. Prendergast estimates it would cost \$15 million to improve the tracks, signaling and add a larger station platform. The improvements are separate from another, bigger proposal to reconfigure the station, built in 1977 and owned by the city, into an intermodal terminal, for train and bus use, an idea that was floated several years ago but hasn't gained steam.

Improved stations might also lead to more frequent traffic, said Prendergast, including a daytime route through the city.

Any new train service, however, will require support from the state.

In late 2010, shortly after he was elected, former Gov. John Kasich famously rejected \$400 million in federal funding earmarked for the development of new passenger rail service that would connect Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati.

Columbus is currently the largest city in the Western Hemisphere with no passenger rail service, according to Prendergast, and Ohio is the largest state in the country with no state-supported passenger trains. Michigan, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois all supplement long-distance Amtrak service with state-supported routes.



Chicago's Union Station, built in 1925; numerous Amtrak lines end or start their journey here.



Cleveland's Amtrak station, with the white roof on the left, was built in 1977. It's just south of the Shoreway, behind FirstEnergy Stadium. The station can be tricky to find. The address is 200 Cleveland Memorial Shoreway. Thomas Ondrey, The Plain Dealer



"If you want to know why we don't have good train service in Ohio, look to Columbus," said Prendergast. "Don't look to Amtrak."

He's cautiously optimistic, because Gov. Mike DeWine is at least willing to have a conversation about rail service, and has supported Amtrak in the past as a member of Congress.

In the meantime, Cleveland rail fans will have to be content with boarding trains in the dark of night.

Actually, it's not as bad as it sounds. In fact, I hope to join them again soon.

## If you go

### FROM K1

Both the Capitol Limited and Lake Shore Limited have sleeper cars, with roomettes and larger bedrooms, with private or semi-private bathrooms including showers. In my view, the sleeper car isn't necessary for the shorter trips from Cleveland to Chicago or east. The coach chairs are super-comfy, and the cars are quiet and dark during the night. I might consider a sleeper car if I was traveling farther.

These trains are also equipped with a café car, selling beverages and prepackaged food, including bagels, sandwiches, beer and wine. I brought my own food and purchased coffee on the train. Meals are included for travelers in the sleeper cars. Amtrak recently eliminated its formal dining service on several routes, including the Capitol and Lake Shore, in an effort to save money and appeal to younger travelers. Instead of eating together at communal tables, travelers order meals ahead of time that are delivered to their rooms.

Amtrak is in the process of remodeling all of its Lake Shore cars with new carpeting and faux leather upholstery. Capitol Limited cars will be renovated starting next year. Travelers in Cleveland can check two bags for free, and carry on two bags (up to 50 pounds each). You'll find electrical outlets at every seat, but no wifi on the trains.

**Finding the station:** Cleveland's Amtrak station, located behind FirstEnergy Stadium, is tricky to find. From the East Side, I drove downtown, turned north on W. 3rd Street and east on the Shoreway entrance ramp, then right into the Amtrak parking area (just west of E. 9th Street). The address is 200 Cleveland Memorial Shoreway.

The station is open midnight-7:30 a.m. daily (later on Fridays). You can leave your car, for free, in the fenced-in parking lot, which is locked when the station is closed.

Before heading to the station, you can check to see if your train is on time at Amtrak.com (click "Train Status"). The website also offers a "Track Your Train" feature.