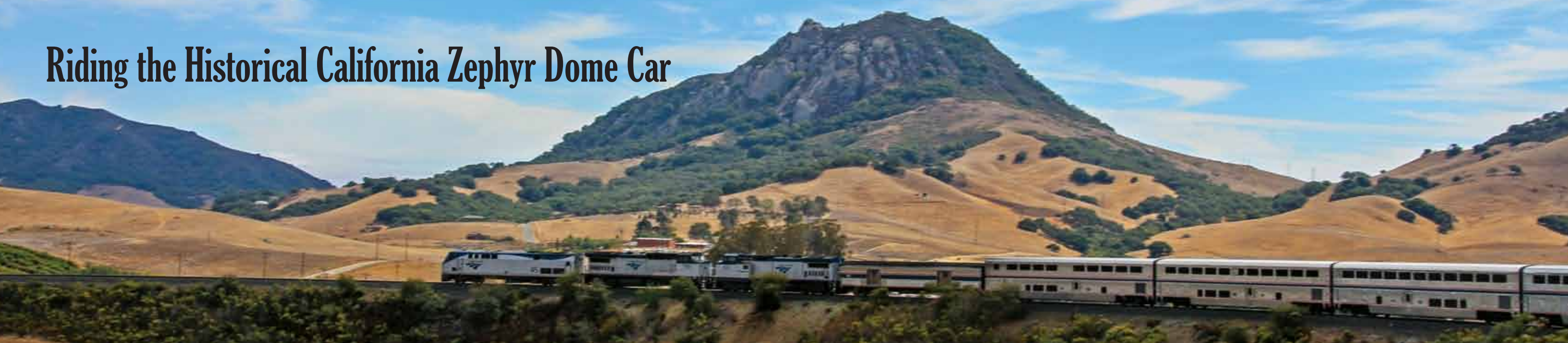


Riding the Historical California Zephyr Dome Car



Everyone who has been reading our articles for the past couple of years is familiar with our usual road trips and hikes but now we're going to take you on a different kind of trip. This time, we're going on a nostalgic journey along the California coastline, from Oakland to Los Angeles, onboard an old, historic domed railcar.

As rail travel in the tourist industry becomes more popular, train enthusiasts are making more of an effort to restore old, historic train coaches. One famous train that traveled from San Francisco to Chicago was the California Zephyr. It featured several streamlined "vista dome" cars. These glass-topped cars were reserved for first class travelers who would enjoy stunning views of the beautiful mountains of the Sierra Nevada's and the Rockies as the train snaked its way through these and countless other scenic areas along the route.

Originally built in the 1940's, these old cars were the top of the line for their day. As you sat at your table on the cushioned bench seats, you are higher than the rooftops of the other railcars and can enjoy 360 degree views while being served your choice of cocktail and gourmet meals.

The original Zephyr stopped running in 1971 and the domed cars were replaced by the cars you see running on Amtrak today. Only the name California Zephyr lives on with Amtrak trains. The actual routes and

the classic streamlined cars are no longer in service. But, thanks to those train enthusiasts and historians, some of those old cars are back riding the rails today.

These enthusiasts charter out their beautifully restored coaches to tour groups and for special excursions. Some trips can last a week or more and go across the country and some are just a day long and go for short rides from L.A. to San Diego. There are various charter companies that book trips on these railcars or the owners sell trips themselves. Often, trips will include meals, drinks, lodging (sleeping on the train in some cases), and side trips to the places where they stop.

These old coaches are stored in different locations, such as Los Angeles and Oakland so, when they are needed at a certain location to start their chartered excursion, they have to be repositioned from their storage place to the starting place of their excursion and then back again when the trip is over.

Just like a cruise ship that gets repositioned each year from colder to warmer tourist destinations, these coaches go on trips just to be moved. So instead of going down the rails empty, the owners book them out as "positioning moves". These one or two day trips are a great introduction to enjoying nostalgic rail travel and, for the first-class experience you get, are a great travel value.



The trip we are going to take you on was one of these one-day repositioning trips from Oakland to Los Angeles. It hitched onto the back of a regularly scheduled Amtrak train that arrived in Oakland at 9 am and rolled into Union Station in downtown Los Angeles at 8:30 that evening. Along the way, we enjoyed wonderful views of California's famous scenery, including many miles of coastline only viewable by train.

We started our trip by first getting to Oakland. We actually flew up the day before and enjoyed a day in San Francisco before starting the rail portion of our trip. We could have taken a regular Amtrak train up the day before but the flight actually cost less and the train trip would have taken all day. We stayed overnight in downtown Oakland at a hotel that was within walking distance of the Jack London Square Amtrak station.

The next day, the Amtrak train that runs from Seattle to Los Angeles arrived. Shortly after, a switcher locomotive delivered the Zephyr dome car and hitched it to the end of the train. After hearing those familiar words, "All Aboard", we stepped in and began our journey. After depositing our luggage in one of the private rooms, we were invited to go upstairs into the dome.

Soon, we were underway. After leaving Oakland, the tracks went along the Bay and we saw areas you normally don't see by car. You don't realize just how good the view is from the dome car until you're actually sitting up there. The staff brought up a light breakfast and before we knew it, we were in San Jose.

Our route took us through the garlic farms of Gilroy, Elkhorn Slough near Monterey, up Salinas Valley, through the wineries of Paso Robles, down the famed Cuesta Grade near San Luis Obispo, along Pismo

Beach, past all the rocket launch pads of Vandenberg Air Force Base, by Point Conception with its miles of undeveloped coastline, through Santa Barbara and Ventura, through the San Fernando Valley and finally arrived in Union Station. And all this went by while we sat comfortably atop the beautifully restored vista dome car enjoying cocktails, conversation and gourmet meals – just like the passengers of the past! It was awesome! And one of the best parts of the journey was seeing areas of our beautiful state that you just can't get to by car - especially the coastline.

Although the normal fare for this same journey in an Amtrak coach is around \$60 per person, our cost was \$200 per person. This included two gourmet meals and a light breakfast, an open bar for the entire trip (now that's dangerous... and fun), outstanding service from the crew, full run of the vintage Silver Solarium railcar (which meant no Amtrak riders could walk in), and guaranteed seating up in the vista dome. It was first-class all the way and worth every penny! We would do it again in a heartbeat!

See a 15 minute video of our rail journey to get a feel of what it's like to step back in time on one of these classic railcars, as well as the scenery along the way. You'll also see how good the food was. On our blog post (webpage), we also include more information on the different railcar excursions that are out there.

Watch our video on YouTube or read our webpage at: <http://www.backroadswest.com/trips/?p=1804> or "surf" all our trips at BackRoadsWest.com. You can also search for the exact title of this article on any YouTube-enabled device.

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