

All Aboard!

Travel by Train with Three Generations of Family

BY PAT TERRY & CLIFF TERRY

Our four-year-old grandson, "J.P." (Jason Patrick), LOVES trains. In fact, two of his favorite words are, "All aboard!" But the thing is, he'd never been on board.

We'd taken him to watch standard gauge trains chug amidst lush foliage in the park district conservatory, bought him an engineer's cap and taught him to operate Pat's Depression-era Ives train around the Christmas tree.

But J.P. really wanted to ride on a train.

We talked about taking J.P. by train to Milwaukee, 90 miles north, where we could eat lunch and visit the zoo.

Or even Indianapolis, about five hours southeast. But at dinner one night, after a glass of wine, Pat came up with a more ambitious plan: taking J.P. on an overnight train to Arizona to visit his great-aunt Martha. Not that we're all that grand-parenting brave. Our younger son, J.P.'s father, Scott, went along too.

Scott was nervous about sending his only child off with the grandparents for a 32-hour train ride and a week away from home. After all, Scott and his wife, Jane, hadn't even let J.P. spend the night

at our house. But Scott gave our invitation a tentative "yes" — if he came along, too, and if we paid his way.

We agreed, realizing that we had no idea what to do with a pre-school child for a 32-hour trip. He couldn't run around on the train, and what would we do with him at night? If he slept in his own bunk, could he fall out? Would one of us need to sleep with him?

So we bought train tickets for four, booked two Superliner Roomettes (two comfy chairs convert to a bed, a top bunk pulls down, and toilet facilities are nearby with showers on the lower level).

Jane, J.P.'s mother — envisioning Arizona desert critters such as tarantulas, scorpions and snakes — opted to stay home. A freelance graphic designer, she also faced a heavy workload at the time.

Scott and Jane prepared J.P. for the adventure by talking about Arizona, the desert and the mountains, and telling him stories about the family he'd be visiting. Jane also read "The Little Engine That Could" and Thomas the Train books, while we shared a colorful pop-up book from Arizona's Sonora Desert



PHOTO BY PAT TERRY

The Sightseer Lounge, with its huge windows beginning at the floor and wrapping around the ceiling, offers panoramic views of the passing scenery but it's also a great spot for people-watching: families, retirees, young couples, visitors from other countries just looking to see America close up. And it's also a place to charge your electronics.

Museum featuring (what else?) spiders, scorpions and snakes.

Our three-generation adventure started at Chicago's Union Station. We'd bought tickets online and the baggage check-in line moved quickly, so we headed for the station's "first class" (anyone in a sleeping compartment) lounge.

J.P. had a great time in the lounge — at age four, most everything is great — wandering around to check out the other kids. But his big adventure really began when the conductor hollered "All Aboard," which we asked him to repeat

LOUDER. As we walked along the concrete platform between double-decker trains, J.P. looked up with such wonder and awe, we realized how cheap four tickets really were to bring such joy to a little boy's face.

Excitement continued as we climbed the small stepstool and found our upper-level roomettes. Once we settled in, and J.P. climbed to the upper berth with

a huge grin, a staff member promptly identified himself to everyone in the car as "Crazy Tom," adding, "I'm not an 'attendant.' I'm your PORTER, as in the old James Cagney movies." And: "If you can't have fun with this crew, you should fly instead." He then stopped in each roomette to explain train stuff.

We booked dinner for 6:30 and headed to the Sightseer Lounge to check

out the scenery before dark. Floor-to-ceiling windows wrap around the ceiling for terrific views, although there wasn't much to see as we chugged through Chicago's gritty industrial areas and older suburbs. But for a little kid on his first train ride, it was plenty.

Eating and sleeping aboard a train is a ball, kind of like a rolling pajama party or your college dorm. People (usually)



PHOTO BY PAT TERRY

ABOVE: At dinner the first night, as we crossed the Mississippi River, we told J.P. it was the longest river in our America, our country, hoping the idea would be something a preschooler might understand. He actually stopped eating his pizza and appeared lost in thought as the train chugged from Illinois into Iowa.

TOP LEFT: One of the other three-generation families on board spent a lot of time playing cards in the Sightseer Lounge, including (l. to r.) grandmother Adagio Micaletti, grandsons, Ian, 9 (who's hiding), and Tony, 10, plus Adagio's daughter, Nancy, and her husband, John. We'd first seen them in the waiting room at Chicago's Union Station, and then begun chatting — as so many passengers do — once we got underway.

LEFT: The Sightseer Café, with tables, snacks, beverages and expansive views of the passing scenery, provides a fun place for three generations to munch, sip and challenge everyone's memory with a made-up card game. Grandson J.P. takes great delight in beating his dad, Scott; grandfather, Cliff; and grandmother, Pat (the photographer). We figure it's because he made up the game himself, and has played it before!



become chatty, and the dining car fosters that mood. Booths seat four, so the dining car host checks out the number in your party and seats you where space is available. Except in rare cases, this is lots of fun; meeting new people, finding out why they're on a train, where they're from, where they're going.

The first night we had a booth to ourselves. But the next morning, breakfast was "Russian roulette," as the younger Terrys got up much earlier and joined a lively retired couple, former professors of textile design and engineering, who were taking the train from coast to coast to see the country.

The senior Terrys drew a chatty father named Phil and his shy, 15-year-old son as tablemates. Phil, a Honeywell engineer who designs aircraft engines, was a passionate train buff and suggested we visit the Maricopa Live Steamers, a private club that offers free rides on miniature steam-driven trains.

For Phil's son, a high schooler studying the sciences, it was his first real train ride. Asked how he liked it, the boy said quietly: "It's nice, but... it takes a while."

That night, although J.P. really wanted to sleep in the top bunk, his courage failed (he was afraid of rolling off) and he climbed down to sleep with his father.

The second day, J.P. got his first look at the desert, at cacti, longhorn cattle, horses and abandoned towns. Later that day, his eyes reflected great wonder as we passed the rugged buttes of New Mexico, painted rosy and rust-colored as the sun went down. It was a special, shared moment for us all — especially the senior Terrys, but even our much-traveled son, Scott.

After La Junta, Colorado, we climbed to higher elevations, prompting one youngster about 10, to blurt out, "Oh, Mom, Mom... Look, look!" as the train cut through a narrow, jagged gap in the mountains. Soon, the snow-capped

peaks of the Rocky Mountains appeared in the distance, prompting a soft, "Wow," from our grandson.

Other families in the lounge car played games or cards, sipping juice and soda, frequently glancing out the window to check out the scenery. Crazy Tom treated us to a short travelogue as the train ran alongside the old Santa Fe Trail and the site of the battle of Glorieta Pass (aka "Gettysburg of the West") where Union troops defeated a desperate Rebel effort to expand the Confederacy westward.

Meanwhile, a three-generation L.A.-bound family we'd met at Union Station was sitting at a table in the lounge, chatting, playing cards and enjoying the view. Grandmother Adagio Micaletti told us that her daughter, Nancy, and son-in-law, John, had planned this trip with sons Tony, 10, and Ian, 9, to visit friends and stay at a Carlsbad resort.

"I asked John if I could come along



because Nancy would say ‘yes’ to anything,” Adagio said with a laugh. “And he said, ‘yes.’ He even booked my ticket — and paid for it.”

Turns out, Adagio lives a few blocks from us, near Chicago’s Lincoln Park Zoo, so we met later to find out how she enjoyed the trip.

“The best part? Being with family,” Adagio said, “though we kept different schedules. I was still in my pajamas with my first cup of coffee, looking out the window, while the others were on their way to breakfast.”

Adagio had a roomette near ours, while Nancy, John and the children

shared a larger Superliner Bedroom, which boasts two windows, sleeps four and has ensuite facilities.

The worst part?

“The very small bathrooms in each of the economy sleeper cars,” she said. “They were like airline bathrooms. And they ran out of some food items on the second day.”

So, how did our guys like the rail adventure?

Scott was initially hesitant about such a long trip, but says, “The time actually flew. It was great, and J.P. obviously had a blast looking out the window and going up and down the

train cars. He loved when the train was moving. He would kind of stumble a little bit and say, ‘I’m all wobbly.’ Unlike air travel, the train lets you get up and move around.”

The negatives?

“They ran out of some things in the dining car — one of the desserts and one of the wines!”

Thinking back, Scott says he’d definitely ride the rails again, but maybe try a different route.

The best part for us, the senior Terrys?

Sharing our grandson’s reactions to everything: That moment when J.P. stepped onto the boarding platform in Chicago, a tiny figure holding his father’s hand as he walked between two huge trains, looking up at them in awe. That

“If you can’t have fun with this crew, you should fly instead.”

first night at dinner, as twilight fell and J.P. stared out the window, entranced, while we crossed the Mississippi. The chance to tell him — in a four-year-old’s language — that the Mississippi is the biggest river in America, our country, and watch his face as he absorbed the information. And the chance for a spontaneous hug as he popped in from his adjacent roomette.

And maybe most of all, the long journey offered us the rare opportunity to reconnect more deeply with our younger son, removed as he was from his hectic job and role as husband and very involved father. ■

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IRB # 457-1999, IRB Approved 05/27/2013