

All Aboard!

Canada's Transcontinental Train

By Gregory B. GALLAGHER



The elegant interior of Montreal's Gare Centrale/Central Train Station welcomes and bids adieu to passengers as they return and embark on an historic tradition of transcontinental train travel. Many hands write the poetry of these rails, and many voices speak the histories of this nation. Gregory Gallagher finds these voices on his epic continental journey west and home again

The poetry of a transcontinental train adventure begins for my lady Linda and me upon arrival at Montreal's Central Station. As if on cue, a capped employee opens our taxi door, then heads quickly for the trunk to wrestle with the luggage, while shouting directions to other cabbies vying for access to unload their patrons. The billowing steam of the sub-zero temperature creates a perfect backdrop to the zany idea of a mammoth train escapade in January.

The larger-than-life fervor continues to evolve as we enter the Grand Hall, where thousands of early morning commuters and long-haul travelers weave in and out of each other's paths. Linda and I are happy to be leaving the coldest weather Québec has seen in thirty years, never imagining the cold would get worse as we headed West!

Although VIA Rail's Corridor Service between Québec City and Windsor is the busiest route in their national coverage, it is still surprising to see so many folks on a winter Monday train to Toronto, our first stop on the three-day trek to Vancouver. We choose to bed down at the Fairmont Royal York Hotel, because it is conveniently located directly across from Union Station, featuring bellman service from inside the train to our hotel room and then directly back to our sleeper compartment the next morning. That decision provided us with an inside look at one of the "Grand Dame" hotels and a wonderful taste of gourmet cuisine at the Epic dining room.

The next morning, we board the Silver & Blue Canadian and are pleased that we are using the rule of thumb, "Less is more." We chose the type of suitcases that

fit into those tiny metal forms at most airports, ultimately measured for the overhead compartments. This philosophy proves to be a huge boon onboard, since larger suitcases belong to a separate baggage car, making access extremely inconvenient.

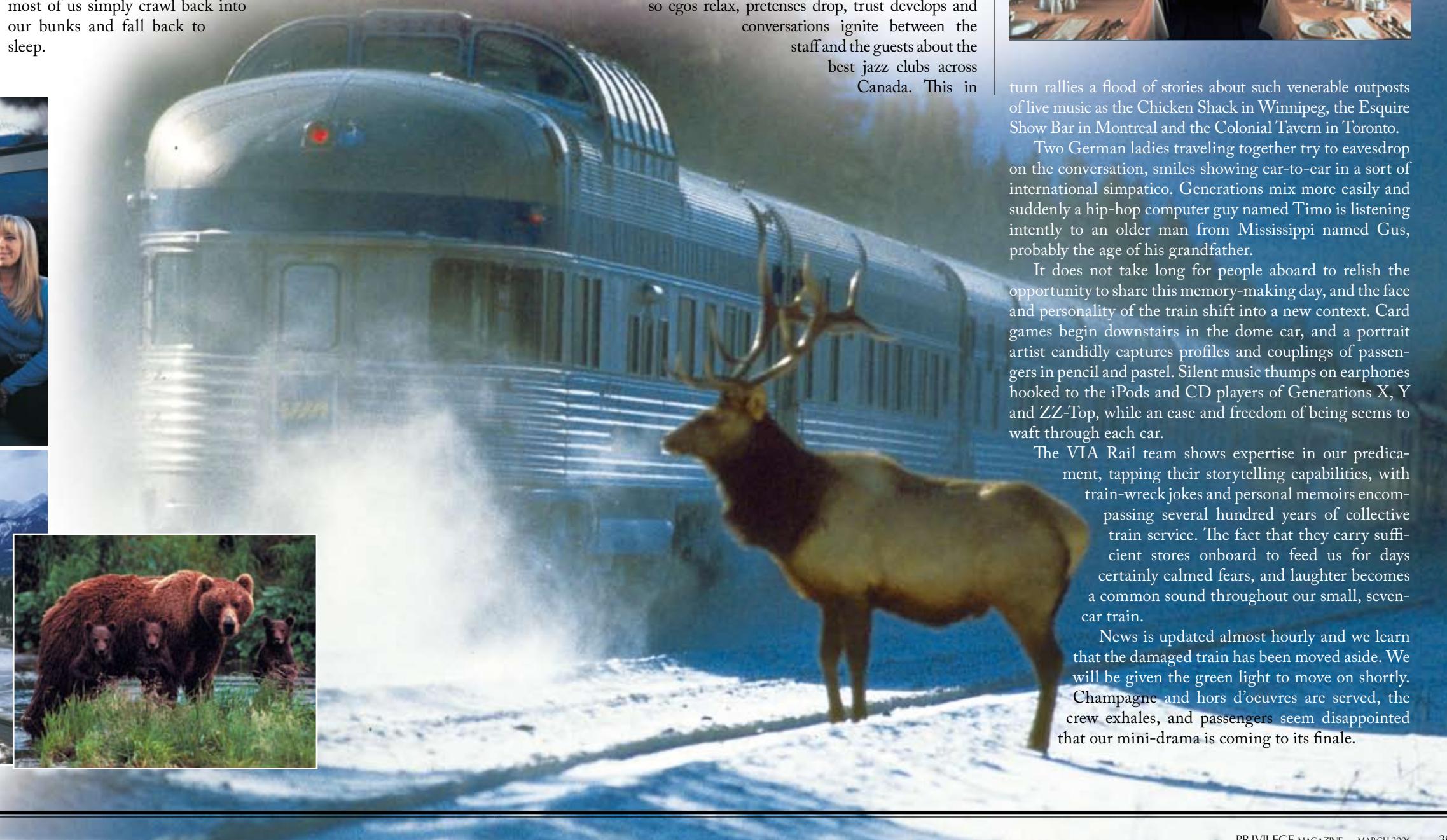
Since this caliber of train is not the Orient Express, dressing up in a swanky outfit for each meal is not de rigueur. Some gentlemen do wear blazers at dinner and some ladies do flash more than costume jewelry, but they are the exceptions these days. Sad to say, blue jeans and running shoes have become a kind of style epidemic. The upside to this demise of individual flare is that packing becomes much less bulky. Train travelers should take only clothes they absolutely need, and all garments must do double and triple duty.

Traveling due north out of frigid Hogtown, we spend most of the first day luxuriating in the fare served in the first-class dining car. From Pacific salmon, lake trout and Arctic char

to filet mignon, bison, curried lamb and prime rib, the chef's culinary repertoire would eventually encompass a surprisingly dynamic range of main dishes, as well as inventive soups and desserts to make any upscale eatery proud.

Trouble on the Track

We eventually reach the northern hinterlands between Armstrong and Sioux Lookout and then, as passengers sleep, all hell breaks loose. The train comes to a stop and, as people peek out into the wild surroundings, no one is quite sure what is happening. Too sleepy to bother, most of us simply crawl back into our bunks and fall back to sleep.



It is minus 58 degrees Celsius as we enter the breakfast car to discover there has been a freight train derailment on the tracks ahead. Brilliant sunshine streams through the bank of large windows and floods the dining car, as the engineer and the kitchen staff attempt to work without heat, covered with blankets. The bathrooms freeze solid in most of the cars and murmurs of concern begin amongst the bewildered passengers. The veteran staff members seem unfazed by the dangerous turn, managing to serve a hot, delicious breakfast to the 48 first-class passengers who begin bonding under the adventurous circumstances.

Protocol and the laws of the rail in these situations are very clear regarding passengers remaining aboard the train, so egos relax, pretenses drop, trust develops and conversations ignite between the staff and the guests about the best jazz clubs across Canada. This in



turn rallies a flood of stories about such venerable outposts of live music as the Chicken Shack in Winnipeg, the Esquire Show Bar in Montreal and the Colonial Tavern in Toronto.

Two German ladies traveling together try to eavesdrop on the conversation, smiles showing ear-to-ear in a sort of international simpatico. Generations mix more easily and suddenly a hip-hop computer guy named Timo is listening intently to an older man from Mississippi named Gus, probably the age of his grandfather.

It does not take long for people aboard to relish the opportunity to share this memory-making day, and the face and personality of the train shift into a new context. Card games begin downstairs in the dome car, and a portrait artist candidly captures profiles and couplings of passengers in pencil and pastel. Silent music thumps on earphones hooked to the iPods and CD players of Generations X, Y and ZZ-Top, while an ease and freedom of being seems to waft through each car.

The VIA Rail team shows expertise in our predicament, tapping their storytelling capabilities, with train-wreck jokes and personal memoirs encompassing several hundred years of collective train service. The fact that they carry sufficient stores onboard to feed us for days certainly calmed fears, and laughter becomes a common sound throughout our small, seven-car train.

News is updated almost hourly and we learn that the damaged train has been moved aside. We will be given the green light to move on shortly. Champagne and hors d'oeuvres are served, the crew exhales, and passengers seem disappointed that our mini-drama is coming to its finale.

Moving On

The train is now approximately six hours behind schedule as we pull into Winnipeg in the middle of the night. A new crew groggily replaces the exhausted Toronto team, while most travelers snooze or peek out their doors to see who is boarding. Cars are added, fresh potable water taken on, new supplies stacked, engineers trade places and we are off again — bound for the wide-open spaces of Saskatchewan, the horse country of Alberta and the mountainous eloquence of the Rockies.

One of the most unusual experiences of such a voyage is the daily lottery of who sits with whom at mealtimes. Invariably, you find yourself seated face-to-face with people you might never choose to sit with for one reason or another. The usual impeccable biases come into play: too old, too young, too grouchy-looking, too haughty, too rich, too poor—all of these judgment calls are made based solely upon appearance. The train setting removes the luxury of such discriminatory calls, and everyone is the richer for it. We find a constant set of surprises unfolding about the lives, families, and histories of our travel-mates.

To experience the rhythms of one's own land through the enthralled perception of first-timers is to be reminded of Canada's remarkable wealth of cultures. As we listen to the narrative of Australian teenagers and their parents, who have never seen snow, we bask not only in the camaraderie, but also in their wide-eyed wonder at Canada's beauty.

We also get to know a man from Texas who has taken this transcontinental trip 31 times and never tires of it because each train has a different crowd, a new set of variables. He knows the mile-markers as well as the staff and spouts a steady stream of memories from his bank of journeys. We share moments with him in the front of the observation car late in the evening, with the lights of the train playing tricks on the snow ahead of us. He is able to tell us what we will see around certain corners, at the end of long stretches of track. It boggles our minds to consider how well he knows the lay of our land.

Heading Home

The return East is quite different for us because we are able to book what is called a triple-sleeper. This is the Queen of England's accommodation when she travels across Canada, and is difficult

to reserve, since there are only one or two per train. The sleeper is significantly larger than the standard double room, with twice the floor space, wider windows, and no bunk beds! It is also the most comfortable room on the train for larger people or the physically challenged.

Now the stopping and starting in what looks like the middle of nowhere is the only reminder of the passengers who are picked up and dropped off in remote areas of this vast land. We are in awe that this kind of service is still provided. Perhaps the train watchman's little hut, with its golden glow from an oil lamp, makes us feel a little safer on these lonely tracks. We relax and luxuriate, happy to be a part of these longstanding traditions.

Pulling into Central Station in Montreal, we disembark with a mixture of relief and regret. We achieve our lifelong yearning to see our country aboard this mythical transcontinental train, and we come away from it with a richer impression of our fellow Canadians than we could ever have anticipated. Many hands write the poetry of these rails, and we proceed across the Grand Hall immediately to book a trip to Gaspé and Eastern Canada. The dream continues...all aboard! □

*Gregory B. Gallagher is the author of *Eyewitness Top Ten Travel Guide: Montreal and Quebec City*, published by the Penguin International company Dorling-Kindersley in London, England. He is also writing two new travel guides about Montreal and Quebec City to be launched worldwide on March 1, 2006.*

