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Do the locomotion from King Street Station

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May 11, 2006

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If you have been engrossed in the run-up to this year's American Idol beat-off, two transportation milestones may have escaped your notice. This month marks the 35th birthday of our proud yet humble national passenger rail service, Amtrak. And 100 years ago this week, Seattle's King Street Station opened for business. With President Bush making his periodic burlings about further reducing the Amtrak line's already-shameful funding levels - not to mention the airline industry's serious consideration of stand-up "seating," to pack us in ever more densely - it's time to do your part to stop the insanity.

Supporting our trains with your travel dollars is not just a good deed, but a reward in itself. This is the scenic Pacific Northwest, not the Pittsburgh - Toledo - South Bend corridor. Leave work a few minutes early on a Friday and catch the 5:30 p.m. Cascades to Vancouver. You'll arrive by nine, just in time for a late supper (or some early nightlife). Or head south to Portland Saturday morning for a day trip to the house that Nike built.

The Coast Starlight will take you through alternately arresting and serene natural beauty down to San Francisco and (if you must) Los Angeles. If you prefer the road less traveled, jump the newly refurbished Empire Builder and head east. Depart in the evening and wake up in Glacier National Park, or settle in for the two-day ride to Chicago. These long-distance trains boast observation cars with floor-to-ceiling windows that allow for unrestricted views. You can get good meals and wine and batteries. The seats are spacious and comfortable enough to preclude the need to spring for the cost of a sleeper. And people mostly know how to behave.

While you wait for your ride out of town - or if you're killing time before the Mariners game - explore King Street Station, midway through its restoration. The station is currently a patchwork of old and new, with banks of unromantic black vinyl chairs alongside sleek e-ticket machines. But hints of the glory that once reigned are evident, in the mosaic trim of green, white, and gold tiles on the southwest walls and columns. Don't miss the posted article from the August 27, 1967 edition of the Seattle Times, lauding that era's remodel without irony as it details how "marble walls have been overlaid with formica" and "modern refractive-light fixtures...replaced the antique chandeliers."

The most grievous aesthetic assault of the previous "upgrade" was the installation of a false ceiling, 10 feet lower than the 45-foot original and without an iota of the original ceiling's appeal. A uniform expanse of stained, Triscuit-like panels that makes the lid of your sixth-grade classroom look like the Sistine Chapel, this dubious improvement will soon be made right. The station's extreme makeover will include the outside as well, right down to the repair of the once-grand clock tower.

You know the arguments in favor of traveling by train. The train is cheaper than flying; you can actually see America as more than patches and squiggles from 37,000 feet up; and you can meet the most interesting people - people who find as much pleasure in the journey as they find in the destination.

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