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## A window on Canada from Train No. 1

VIA Rail's cross-country service on The Canadian showcases the magnificence of our land

**MARY K. NOLAN**

The Hamilton Spectator

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To celebrate the 25th anniversary of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a slight amendment is in order.

The document in Pierre Trudeau's Constitution Act of 1982 that guarantees certain democratic, legal, mobility and equality rights should be modified to include the right to travel across this country's pure, spectacular breadth by train.

At government expense, of course.

Every Canadian should have the opportunity to ride The Canadian, Via Rail's Toronto-Vancouver route through the forests of Northern Ontario, the serenity of the Prairies, the majesty of the mountains and out to the sea.

It is an eye-opening, awe-inspiring journey that illustrates, as nothing else possibly can, the magnitude and magnificence of a land so often taken for granted, even disparaged, by its own people.

As for new Canadians, forget about making them swear allegiance to the Queen. Put them on the train instead. Guaranteed, the trip will inspire more devotion and patriotism to their adopted homeland than pledging undying fealty to a foreign monarch.

Although Via's network extends from coast to coast, each route offering its own unique beauty, The Canadian is Train No. 1. It says so right there on the ticket -- Via 001 -- just to the left of the part that shows an arrival date three full days after departure. And that's from Toronto, not Atlantic to Pacific. It takes nearly 30 hours just to get out of Ontario.

"Take lots of books," warn the well-intentioned. "Northern Ontario is nothing but trees. And the prairies, well, it's a long way to the mountains."

That's how the uninitiated think, says Catherine Kaloutsky, the railway's senior public affairs officer. When her own husband, Dan, was preparing for his first trip on The Canadian from Winnipeg to Toronto, he got busy packing up his bookbag. He'd be on the train for two days, he reasoned, and wanted something to stave off the inevitable boredom.

"You're not going to need them," Kaloutsky told him. If it is unwise to argue with a woman, it is doubly so when that woman has made the trip more times than she can count in 30 years with Via. He did not open the books.

"The allure of being on the train and the frame of mind it puts you in, when you're away from all distractions and the only thing to see is what's outside the window ... people discount the power of that," she explains. "It's like a drug. It hypnotizes you."

The tranquilizing effect begins almost as soon as the train pulls out of Union Station. There is no fanfare as it lurches slightly and, almost imperceptibly, starts to move, but the excitement is tangible. Whether in a Comfort class seat or the



Stephen J. Brown, Via Rail

The Canadian chugs majestically through the Fraser Valley. There are three departures of The Canadian weekly from both Toronto and Vancouver.

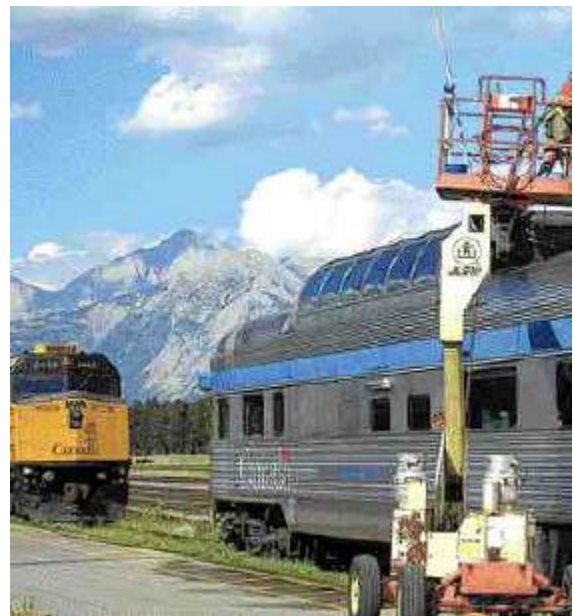


Photo Above and on the Right by Mary K. Nolan, the Hamilton Spectator

The Canadian gets its dome windows washed in Jasper in preparation for the trip through the Rocky Mountains.

luxurious Silver & Blue class, passengers share a sense of adventure, of setting out to explore the wild frontiers as Simon Fraser and David Thompson did, after whom two of the West's great rivers are named. This is not so much transportation to a destination as the destination itself.

Passengers squeeze past each other in the narrow passageways to check out the dining car, activity car, the bar, the dome cars, the shower rooms, the Park car, the compartments with the wee sinks and the Pullman beds, made up invitingly with squishy pillows and fluffy duvets.

This train is 636 metres long with three engines and 30 cars, most of which are stainless steel, stock built in the 1950s and restored to their original elegance. The distinctively shaped "bullet lounge" is in the Park car, at the very end of the train, where newspapers, fresh fruit, snacks and beverages are available 24 hours a day.

The dining car, where meals are served in two sittings at tables of four, is set with linens and flowers. Lunch might be a salmon quiche, and dinner, a grilled Portobello mushroom or prime rib of beef with Greek salad and chocolate torte cake. It is all excellent.

Passengers are seated as they arrive, which means that couples or singles sit with strangers at every meal. It's awkward at first, especially when tablemates don't speak the same language. But before many miles are out, there are no strangers, just new acquaintances to be made.

There's Heidi and Manfred from Bonn, taking the train to Vancouver to board an Alaskan cruise ship. Christian, a river engineer from Switzerland, is meeting his girlfriend in Calgary and then going on to Vancouver. A Canadian Armed Forces navy man is moving with his wife and two children to British Columbia from Ontario.

The Chaudrys from Delhi have been in Toronto visiting their grandchildren, and are heading for Vancouver, San Francisco and Los Angeles before returning to Toronto by Amtrak. Richard from Sudbury "used to be one of those kayak-canoe guys who got on for a fish." (It's a little more complicated than that, but outdoor adventurers can arrange to have the train stop in the middle of nowhere to pick them up, toss their canoe in the baggage car, and drop them off down the line.)

It doesn't take long to identify the train weenies -- they're the passengers, usually men, equipped with radios tuned to the railroad frequencies and loud voices that ensure everybody else knows how much they know. Simultaneously entertaining and obnoxious, these guys park themselves in the middle of the observation cars and hold forth about trains, but they do seem to know their stuff.

Passengers busy themselves with books or knitting, cards, cocktails or conversation. Many succumb to the relaxing rhythm and gentle swaying, and nod off where they sit.

Some hop off the train to buy wild blueberries in the junction town of Capreol or stretch their legs in Sioux Lookout, the Hub of the North.

In Winnipeg, there's time to visit The Forks Market, tour The Winnipeg Railway Museum or admire the Beaux-Arts architecture of the 1911 station, famous for its domed rotunda.

At Portage la Prairie, the train passes the world's largest Coke can, an old water tower next to the Canadian Tire.

West of Edmonton is Lake Wabamun, once a busy recreation area, where a freight train derailment two years ago dumped 1.3 million litres of bunker fuel and toxins into the lake and closed the track for 18 hours.

"We were the first train through," said Via attendant Martin Gagnon. "I'll never forget the image ... all the black water and oil still leaking out of the cars, the birds trying to fly ..."

A cluster of desperate smokers forms on the platform at every stop, but time is short. This is a working train, and there are timetables to follow, even when The Canadian has to yield the right of way to a freight train.

The scenery is the thing on The Canadian. It's as if the pages of every glossy coffee-table book about Canada are flipping by the window, just one into

Far from boring, the forests are tall and mysterious, alive with unseen eyes looking out from the depths at the silver tube rocketing by. The lakes are lit the rippling wake of a lonely loon or the long legs of a disinterested moose. The prairies, humbling in their vastness, are brilliant with fields of blazing yellow bales of golden hay. At night, the sky is dripping with stars, like diamonds being poured from some celestial ladle.

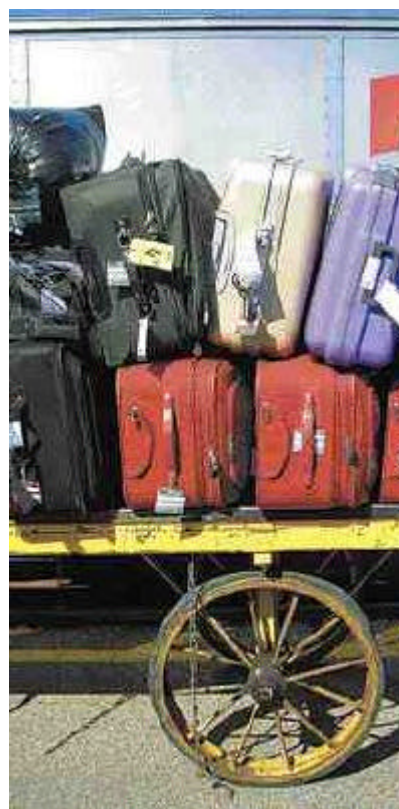
And then, the mountains, jagged shards of sedimentary rock jutting competitively into the sky.

They are heart-stopping, breathtaking, every synonym for "awesome" that Roget's contains. To a Hamiltonian, whose mountain is just a drive up the hills, the peaks are a little claustrophobic, frightening even. They demand to be marvelled at, dare the observer not to be stupefied by their power. Some are strata of colours, others cloaked in capes of white snow or bisected with streaming cascades.



James Peters, Via Rail

Riding The Canadian is all about the scenery.



James Peters, Via Rail

A baggage cart is laden with disembarking passengers' luggage.

"You start to appreciate the profound beauty that is in this country," says Kaloutsky, the daughter of a railroader. "Canadians become very patriotic -- it's ours. The tourists simply can't find words for it."

Winter on the train, she says, is equally romantic and magical.

"Going across the prairies, there's nothing on those fields but snow, and it goes on forever," she says. "And when you get off the train, it's crisp and cold, you smell the pine, and there's no Air Wick that can create that sense."

Kaloutsky and her husband are going on holidays next month -- on The Canadian.

"I've seen it 100 times before," she says, "but it still captivates me, it still fascinates me. I can still sit there and look out the window for eight hours."

Mary K. Nolan travelled on The Canadian as a guest of Via Rail.

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IF YOU GO

The Canadian departs Toronto every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Reservations can be made through a travel agent, at [viarail.com](http://viarail.com), by phone at 1-888-VIA-RAIL or at any Via station.

Approximate off-season fares from mid-October through May range from \$563 for a reclining Comfort class seat to \$1,469 per person double for a Silver bedroom and all meals. The range is approximately \$750 to \$1,958 in peak season.

Take a fleece throw, travel pillow, slippers, a journal for notes and a copy of Canadian Rail Travel Guide by Daryl T. Adair (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, \$23.9

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