ForeWord Reviews

Great American Rail Journeys (Broadcast Tie-Ins)
John Grant
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Grant is probably one of those delightfully annoying people who says, tongue firmly in cheek, that theirs is a tough job — but, hey, someone has to do it. The former Public Broadcasting Service executive now owns Driftwood Productions, which developed an eight-part series about scenic rail journeys in North America for PBS. Now comes the print companion to the television series, a brightly written book chock-full of stunning photographs guaranteed to infect even the stodgiest of homebodies with an incurable case of wanderlust.

To gather material for this project, poor ol' Grant and his crew naturally had to experience the trips themselves. They heroically endured excursions through the Canadian Rockies; the Pacific Coast from Los Angeles to Seattle; the Copper Canyon of Mexico; the U.S. Rockies via Denver, Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks and Salt Lake City; Alaska from Anchorage to Fairbanks and from Skagway to the Yukon Territory; the Southern U.S. from New Orleans to Washington, D.C.; and upstate New York through the Hudson River Valley and the Andirondack Mountains to Montreal. These journeys offer some of the most beautiful scenery on Earth, viewed from the comfort of rail cars that, in some cases, boldly go where no sport utility vehicle has gone before.

There's the Alaska Railroad's Denali Star, whose twelve-hour run takes in spectacular views of Mount McKinley and bush country so isolated that the train is "the only lifeline to civilization for the people who live here." Also the Sierra Madre Express to North America's largest network of canyons, which traverses Mexican country so rugged that it took nearly a century to complete and required carving eighty-seven tunnels through the mountains. Amtrak's Coast Starlight provides access to Pacific vistas otherwise off-limits to ordinary folks, thanks to sprawling Vandenberg Air Force Base and wealthy landowners who prefer keeping the great unwashed at a distance.

Like any good travel guide, this book does more than simply describe the sights, giving cultural and historical sketches and practical tips for travelers. Its most valuable contribution, however, may well be its celebration of rail travel, surely America's most underappreciated mode of transportation. "There's just something magic about taking the train," says engineer John Howarth of Canada's Via Rail. "If you want to get somewhere quick, take the bus, but if

you want to have a good time while you're getting there, take the train."

John Flesher