

Though it seems old-fashioned, we should all choo-choo-choose to ride the railways



PAUL OWEN

It's been 62 years since the creation of Thomas the Tank Engine, and the longevity of the curious blue locomotive proves one thing: kids love trains.

Of course, they're not the only ones. Europe, Japan, and even the northeastern United States all rely heavily on rail transportation for daily commuters and travelling tourists alike. Which makes it all the more depressing that a vast part of our country that was confederated largely due to the construction of the railroad has so little use for it now.

After all, there's nothing not to like about trains. They make cool noises, have built-in beds and food service, and some even go really fast. The guy driving it has not one but two cool titles—the conductor and the engineer—and they even have a rear-end known as the caboose.

Sure, the Canadian railroads are still full of long chains of cars hauling grain, oil, and assorted other commodities, but it's getting rarer to see a passenger train chugging down the tracks.

Pricing is a big factor in this, as a train ride on VIA Rail is disproportionately expensive in comparison to the cost in other places around the world. It's also disproportionate compared to other methods: a round trip to Jasper from Edmonton costs \$258.30 for one person, for example.

As well, dwindling ridership has resulted in less accommodating train schedules, which makes riding the rails a much more difficult—and sometimes impossible—endeavour. The Edmonton-to-Calgary bullet train might have more support if people currently had the option of making the trip by rail, but VIA doesn't even offer stops in Calgary at the moment, which means you either have to fly or drive out there to get your fix of rodeo clowns and cowboy hats.

While trains can be hijacked, they're still restricted to the tracks that they run on. The worst that could happen would be slamming into another train, making it a relatively low-impact act of terrorism, especially in comparison to what has been done with planes.

More importantly, air travel has provided the opportunity for quicker travel at a lower price across the country—no one wants to take a week to get to Toronto, after all.

But that shouldn't remove the option of being able to take a train from Edmonton to Saskatoon or Regina. Even though they're slower, railways offer many options that airplanes simply can't. Whereas a plane gives you the choice between the small "coach" seating and the slightly larger executive-class chairs and a scenic

cloudscape view, trains allow you to observe constantly changing scenery, cabins designed specifically for you to sleep in, a semblance of privacy, the ability to move around (which reduces feelings of claustrophobia), the use of your cell phone, and even wireless internet access.

Moreover, though there are many concerns over airport security, the train is almost immune to those fears. While passenger trains can be hijacked, they're still restricted to the tracks that they run on. The worst that could happen would be slamming into another train, making it a relatively low-impact act of terrorism, especially in comparison to what has been done with planes.

Our society has simply stopped riding trains, and in doing so we've been depriving ourselves of another option when travelling around our country. And while it's not entirely our fault, as VIA could make it more affordable and accommodating like the European lines do, it's important that we don't forget what the railways have done for this country—like keeping the West from being annexed by the States.

It would be illogical to ignore the improvements that are being made to both vehicles and highways that make driving an appealing option over short and mid-length travel. In the same vein, the emergence of airlines such as WestJet that offer low-cost flights makes flying a viable option for many, especially when it's currently less expensive than train travel. But at the same time, railroads have proven successful in so many other places in the world, which makes it hard to believe that they couldn't work in western Canada as well.

Maybe it's time we all listened to our inner child—because kids love trains, even if no one else does.

THE BURLAP SACK

The extra-large victim of this Sack beating is the Tory Building. As a left-handed person, the facilities there piss me off to no end. Where most proper lecture theatres have one lefty desk at the end of each row, the theaters on the main floor in Tory have none.

These postcard-size desk tables are even more useless to write notes on when you have to make a quarter turn to put pen to paper. By the end of most lectures, I usually find my notebook on my left knee, which is a royal pain in the ass for me and the other ten per cent of the population who have our brains wired differently.

What hardly makes sense is that this is going on in the Tory building, a place that ought to be the area on campus for arts students where unique ways of thinking are to be encouraged, not stifled.

Perhaps the Tory Building hasn't been updated since the 1950s, when teachers would physically force young lefties to learn how to write with their wrong hands. Or maybe it was built in the middle ages when the left hand was associated with the devil—the term "sinister," in fact, was derived from *mano sinistra*, the Italian term for the left hand.

Regardless of when the Tory Building was spawned from the depths of Hell, that doesn't mean that retrofitting the desks should be a problem. If wheelchair ramps can be built for those with disabilities, reasonable accommodations can be made without difficulty to remedy my minor inconvenience.

So into the sack with you, and I hope you enjoy the taste of my left-handed sledgehammer.

ELLIOT GOODINE

The Burlap Sack is a semi-regular feature where a person or group who needs to be put in a sack and beaten is ridiculed in print. No sack beatings are actually administered.

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