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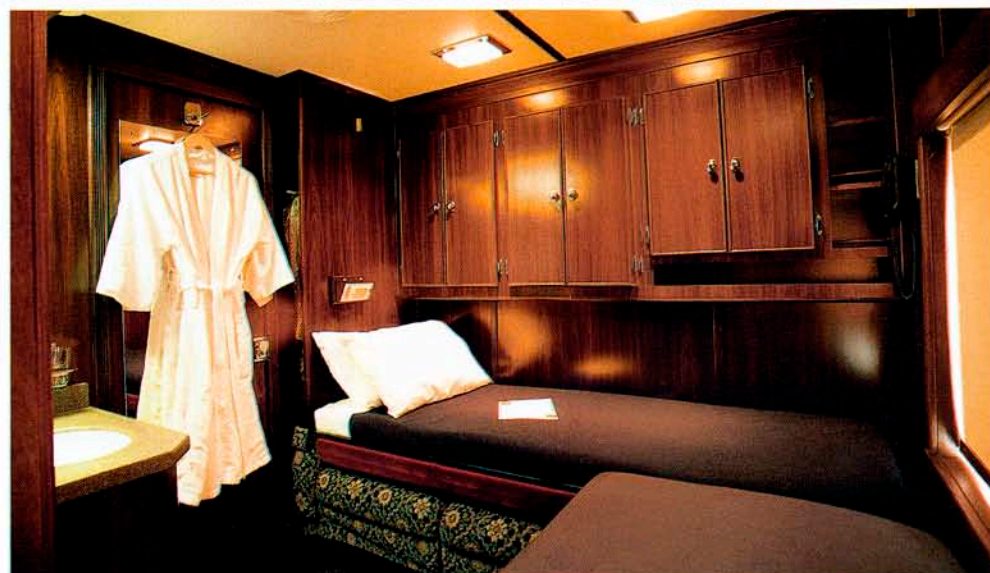
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PHOTOGRAPH BY KIP DAWKINS



Clockwise from above, the rear observation car, an interior cabin and ready for boarding.



The Rail Thing

A Southern journey on these vintage train cars offers history, nouvelle cuisine and even a nostalgic stop at Richmond's Broad Street Station. ANN COCHRAN rides the American Orient Express through Virginia and the deep South.

"Do you want me to polish your chrome now?" asked Paul the porter. I was becoming accustomed to relying on Paul to wake me up, deliver my first cup of coffee, make my bed and clean my room. Paul made sure I never ran out of bottled water and never missed breakfast, whether or not I asked for a wake up call and whether or not serving times had been rescheduled.

Even amidst a full array of creature comforts, including a slightly shared porter, it can be good to travel alone to experience the separation from loved ones, electronic devices and schedules that never quit. I ask myself, from time to time, who I am without the people

and To Do lists that keep me running—sometimes on empty. Embarking solo on a recent American Orient Express 'rail cruise,' I could feel myself slow down and take fuller breaths as soon as I started to unpack.

As the train pulled out of New Orleans at midnight, I stretched out on my bed facing the window. Without a TV to chatter in the background, I was entertained by lights of small towns and an occasional passing train.

For me, this nostalgic experience was all about the train, but the itinerary was equally appealing. Side trips included Vicksburg, Savannah, Charleston, Charlottesville and

Richmond. The final destination was Union Station in Washington, D.C., beautifully restored to its 1907 glory.

The train was more luxurious than I imagined. The blankets felt like cashmere. The upholstery, from grey leather to muted rose and sage paisley, looked freshly installed. Modernizing rail cars built between 1948 and 1958 cost a million dollars each. Much of the budget must have been spent on details. Wild bird designs are inlaid in the dining cars' mahogany paneling. Overhead in the Seattle Club Car, murals depict scattered clouds and the vegetation of the Northwest.

Impeccable maintenance shows in

the gleaming wood and glowing brass. A lady from Montana said, "I think every time we leave to go touring, the staff scrubs and polishes every inch of this train."

During our first tour, through the battlefields of Vicksburg, our guide never took a breath. She seemed to have an internal tape going, with endless gory and inspiring war stories. Despite her nonstop banter,

flexibility than expected. Anyone who travels often can come up with a plan on short notice, but it makes more sense to prepare a short list of options just in case.

A short taxi ride took me and the gardening editor of *Traditional Home* to the riverside area of the city. First stop: an Internet café for an e-mail fix. After browsing in a few boutiques, we window-shopped for

one hour," she said. "Just don't cross over the track." Right.

The following morning, after a lobster omelet, we had tour of Savannah and a visit to the Owens-Thomas House Museum. Not worth the time unless early plumbing achievements turn you on: They had indoor plumbing before the White House. We popped into the gorgeous

tropical greenhouse, maze and herb garden. The home has antique furnishings and historical photographs, but the talk was lackluster and I was glad it wasn't long before I could set off on a photo safari.

When we got to Richmond, I found myself balking at the idea of being away from the train all day, and elected to stay behind. The train stops at the old Broad Street Station, now the Science Museum of Virginia.

I took a long walk up and down Monument Avenue and visited the Science Museum that was steps away from the train. A few other travelers stayed behind; we had gotten to know each other and it was easy to find company if you sought it.

One of the things you find in your room in addition to the next day's schedule is a passenger list. It only includes name, city and state. Our group came from 19 states plus the District of Columbia and two countries: Scotland and Finland.

In a crowd like this, you overhear interesting lines. One Florida woman told her Scrabble opponent, "My husband insists on traveling first class. You only go through life once, and that's the way to go."

The best mix-and-mingle opportunity took place every night in the Seattle Club Car, where tall, handsome Michael manned the bar while pianist Bonnie Hackett entertained an audience that grew as the trip progressed. Most musical selections drew from railroad and Dixie themes: "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Carolina in the Morning," "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and, the most appropriate of all, "Sentimental Journey."

On our last evening, I was thinking how much fun this scene would be at Christmas time. I could imagine Bonnie belting out "Jingle Bells" and ending with a reverent "Silent Night."

I requested any Christmas song. Bonnie was game and my fellow passengers were a bit tipsy, so we ended the night with "White Christmas"—in April.

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which was actually interesting, I fell asleep on the bus. Between the restfulness of the train and the bus, this was turning into a good opportunity to catch up on sleep.

For those who loved locomotion, Vicksburg to Savannah was the favorite leg of our trip: 24 hours on the rails. During daytime hours, even long stretches of nothing but trees and mossy swamps made for pleasantly hypnotic scenery. Occasional distractions included cows, white dogwoods and bold purple wisteria vines that proliferated among mile-high branches.

There were plenty of different places to sit and watch the world go by. The New York Observation Car, dedicated in 1948 by Dwight Eisenhower, has curved burgundy sofas with fringed pillows, a rounded end, and large windows. The most expansive views are from the top of the two-story Copper Canyon Dome Car, where lectures were held.

University of Texas professor Ann Dupont, a textiles and apparel expert, educated us about Southern women in plantation days, the making of *Gone with the Wind*, and pirates. Sharing her research from women's diaries, she dispelled stereotypes about the Southern belle plantation mistress. Most women worked harder than the men, sewing garments for all the slaves, managing health care, taking inventories of everything from knives to thread, and keeping the books.

Dr. Dupont is privy to the David O. Selznick papers. Devotees of the film might not like to hear how many of its legendary stars were dragged into participating. GWTW was not the highlight of most of their careers. And Selznick never made another great movie.

After a day and night of rocking and rolling, we arrived in Savannah late afternoon. There I learned that even on a very organized tour, it pays to do your homework. Back at home, I'd convinced myself that it would be frustrating to be armed with a list of each town's sights and shops if I could not get to them. I ended up with more free time and

dinner. After reading some menus, we decided we'd be fools to spend money when we could go back 'home,' where we were guaranteed a great meal, with free wine. Thankfully, this thought occurred to both of us at the same time, and we flagged a taxi.

The dining car staff laughed at our late dash to a table after changing for dinner, but I think they were complimented that we returned. In a world gone casual, it was refreshing to dine in a dressed-up atmosphere.

The cuisine was lighter than anticipated. Portions are sensible, and half-entrees are available for those who want to savor every course but cannot polish off an entire steak or trio of lamb chops with couscous and grilled asparagus. The variety was impressive. Lobster, duck and pheasant were on the menu, which always included soup; orange ginger was a favorite. Every kind of fruit was available at breakfast or for dessert. Desserts were tiny. It was understood that you could ask for more of anything, but I never observed it.

Since I indulged in every dessert, I had to fit in some exercise. There was room to spread a bath towel on the floor of my small cabin for crunches and push-ups, and water bottles make decent weights.

After a day of bus touring, our guide suggested walking: "You have

Cathedral of St. John the Baptist and heard its history along with the history of the city. A progressive lunch followed, with icy mint juleps on the coroner's lovely wraparound porch, and dessert at a home owned by the granddaughter of the famous Mrs. Wilkes.

If something doesn't interest you, ask to opt out. Having seen one fort in full in Mississippi, I skipped Fort Pulaski in Savannah. Tour organizers aim to please; if they can accommodate you, they will. This was a perfect afternoon to play hooky from the schedule. If it had rained, I would have gone to the Telfair art museum, but we were blessed with mild breezes and a temperature in the mid-70s.

A group of us walked from square to square under the live oaks with Spanish moss garlands. We slipped in and out of antique shops, boutiques and bookstores. From the morning's trolley car tour, I had spotted the Savannah College of Art and Design shop and made note of its location.

There was less time in Charleston, but it was another gorgeous day and we made the most of it, beginning with an entertaining horse and buggy tour with a young, funny guide. Free time consisted, for me, of a long walk and a few church visits. In the afternoon, we visited Magnolia Plantation, 500 acres settled in 1676. It is a wildlife sanctuary filled with azaleas, camellias, a Bible Garden,

What's in a Name? >>> The name American Orient Express perplexes a lot of people. The company explains the lack of affiliation in all their materials, and in person. According to AOE, when the present owners took over the business, the name American Orient Express was already in place. In fact, there were several different companies that promoted trains with that root besides Venice Simplon Orient Express. The previous owners chose an easy way to brand themselves as the same first class experience. As an example of the non-connection working in their favor, two Finnish couples on board discovered AOE when they were searching the Internet for a train vacation and after typing in Orient Express, happened upon the American counterpart. "We'd seen most of Europe, so we looked at the American Orient Express tours and decided on this one." Info at AmericanOrientExpress.com.

Tipping Tip >>> Recommended tipping is \$15 per person per day, regardless of cabin cost or size. It was a small add-on for the pleasure of interacting with cheerful, attentive servers and porters who seemed to enjoy caring for their charges. Small, gracious acts have impact. For me, it was all about the coffee. A waiter remembered I liked heated soy milk instead of cream. My porter was aware that I only had to walk to the next car to fetch my own cup in the morning, but for a caffeine fiend it would have meant dressing and coming back to undress for my shower. From that first morning when Paul knocked and asked if I would like coffee, he had a grateful passenger who looked forward to showing it.