NEW TRAINS NOW ARRIVING – *ROGER WILLIAMS, CHAIRMAN OF IRCG, LOOKS AT HOW AMERICA IS INVESTING IN A NEW ERA OF SUSTAINABLE LONG DISTANCE RAIL TRAVEL*

International rail hospitality is constantly evolving and has always adapted to changes in the market.

Now there is a new challenge, being driven by what some are calling "Travel Revenge" – people determined to play catch up on their lost holidays and experiences.

Large volumes of leisure customers with a new philosophy of "Sustainable Freedom" are seeking to upgrade their environmentally friendly rail journeys.

For International rail caterers who are used to focusing on business travellers, it offers potential for growth, as leisure travel is booming but with a clear consumer focus set on value for money and minimising environmental impact.

In the USA's railway market, this trend is translating into a new generation of trains, with manufacturing designs driving improvements in the customer's journey experience and bringing forward new efficiencies in speed, comfort, accessibility and sustainability.

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

National operator Amtrak is purchasing new long distance and overnight trains for their iconic named services that operate coast to coast and link major regions – trains such as the California Zephyr, Southwest Chief, Coast Starlight and Empire Builder.

10 manufacturers have reportedly submitted proposals to replace these 800 plus rail cars, some of which are now over 40 years old, with the first ones entering service in 1979.

Amtrak Board Chair Tony Coscia was quoted as saying "We are looking for new trains that improve safety, reliability, accessibility and efficiency while offering the features our customers believe are most important to completely modernize train travel for the 21st century."

As part of this effort, Amtrak is researching design elements and customer amenities to "evolve overnight and cross-country train travel in the coming decades", a project with federal funding enacted by Congress and the Biden Administration in 2021.

Coscia added, "We believe in the future of our Long-Distance service, and we look forward to enhancing the customer experience across the Amtrak network, and further supporting U.S. manufacturing." That's good news for sustainability of the supply chain, with 95% of domestic components being made in America, involving 23 states and over 70 suppliers.

NORTHEAST ARRIVALS

The Acela trains referred to by Coscia operate over the Northeast Corridor (NEC). This important business route, joining Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Washington DC and

covering over 450 miles in around 6.5 hours journey time end to end, is the closest comparable US operation to an intercity service in Europe.

The NEC is an economic engine, estimated to carry a workforce contributing $50 billion annually to America's GDP. Nearly one-third of the region's jobs are located within five miles of an NEC station and the region is home to nearly a quarter of the nation's top universities and a fifth of Fortune 500 company headquarters.

Built by Alstom, the new Acela trains are already on test, with service introduction planned for later this year. Each will carry up to 378 passengers compared to 304 of the current legacy Acela train fleet.

Besides being 24% bigger, Amtrak says these new trains are faster, so the only thing you get less of is time onboard.

SMOOTH RIDER

The new design includes shared wheel sets between cars so the ride is stiffer and smoother for passengers. A single level walk between adjacent cars and extra grab bars also makes it easier to walk through.

The seats are more spacious, with winged headrest to aid rest and relaxation. Each has its own outlet, USB port and reading light and tables are now individualised so instead of having to negotiate with your neighbour about when to flip that table up, everybody has their own.

Add in larger, more spacious restrooms with contactless features and automatic door access for improved customer hygiene and safety, plus a lounge area for relaxing, and these trains are taking customer comfort to a whole new level, regardless of whether you're in coach, business, or first class.

Additional features include real-time information on train location, train speed, and conductor announcements; contactless storage option for luggage; Café Car enhancements including convenient self-service options and accessibility features for people with disabilities.

GREEN GETS GREENER

Passengers can also travel in the comfort of knowing their environmentally friendly ride just got greener.

"Already, rail today is the greenest way to travel," Laura Mason, executive vice president of capital delivery for Amtrak, told CBS Philadelphia. "83% reduction in greenhouse gasses compared to driving, 73% less compared to flying when you're talking about the northeast corridor. These train sets, as a fleet basis, are 20% more energy efficient. And on a per passenger basis, it's 40% more efficient. So the greenest way to travel is getting greener."

Further components, including seating made out of recycled leather, a robust recycling program and new sustainable food and beverage offering onboard, all support this improved environmental approach.

Such positive environmental leadership coming from the US is great to see, and Amtrak's new Acela fleet, via these many enhancements in comfort, technology and innovation will be America's most environmentally sustainable fleet of trains to date, helping to set the minimum standard for other longer distance train designs to follow.

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