

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

America's Trains hopes to bring luxury to US railroads

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America's Trains bi-level Sunflower rail car. Image credit: America's Trains

By SARAH RAMIREZ

New guidelines from passenger railroad service Amtrak are paving the way for the launch of America's Trains, a luxury vacation train service in the United States.

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While private luxury train services have a well established presence on railroads in Europe and Canada, there has been a void in the U.S. market since Amtrak took over passenger rail operations in the 1970s. With little existing competition, America's Trains hopes to reach adventurous affluents who are intrigued by seeing the U.S. from a new perspective.

"[Luxury rail travel] is special and memorable," said Barry Jones, CEO at [America's Trains](#), Granbury, TX. "In addition to the general experience of traveling by rail with scenery and to places not otherwise readily accessible, layovers at various en-route destinations provide a wide selection and just about most adventurous things to do, you name it, with pre-arranged adventure tours."

All aboard

In the coming years, America's Trains plans to launch about 40 luxurious rebuilt passenger cars with more than 160 bedrooms as part of its Journeys by Rail offerings.

These all-inclusive vacations will run five to eight nights, covering seasonal, gourmet meals, complimentary beverages, onboard experiences and excursions during prolonged layovers at en-route destinations.

Journeys by Rail will be available as individual vacations or timeshares.

The first itinerary to begin operation is "Southern Comfort," which will travel between New Orleans and Fort Worth, TX with layovers in Houston, TX and San Antonio, TX. Guests will travel on Amtrak-certified Sunflower rail cars, which include four deluxe bedrooms with full bathrooms, lounges and a dining room across two levels.

Fares begin at \$6,660 for a standard double bedroom.

America's Trains will introduce additional routes across the U.S. and Canada, with stops in cities such as San

Francisco, New York and Montreal pending approval from Amtrak.

For some time, Amtrak had been reviewing regulations for privately-owned railroad cars traveling as part of its trains. To meet the updated requirements, America's Train revamped its itineraries and services, including layover services, scheduling and route determination.

"The extended wait for Amtrak's revised policies allowed us to further enhance America's only luxury rail vacations," Mr. Jones said.

Amtrak currently offers its own vacation packages, which include sightseeing tours and off-board accommodations at select layovers.

For instance, a 25-day package features stops at 12 national parks, five nights onboard Amtrak and 19 nights of accommodations at hotels including Seattle's Fairmont Olympic Hotel and the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago. Fares for this Amtrak vacation begin at \$7,659.

However, Amtrak does not offer the exclusivity that is one of the hallmarks of luxury travel. America's Travel will cap passengers at 40 on a five car train set.

Journeys by Rail will make individual reservations available by late 2019.

Luxury rail

Luxury train travel is a less competitive space than other hospitality specialties, but it is seeing growth and investments.

This April, conglomerate LVMH Mot Hennessy Louis Vuitton expanded its hospitality portfolio by closing on its acquisition of hotel group Belmond.

Founded more than 40 years ago, Belmond encompasses 46 travel experiences, including hotels, trains and river cruises. Belmond's luxury tourist trains include the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express and Belmond British Pullman.

As luxury becomes more about experiences than ownership of physical goods, LVMH's move will help it capture more of the growing high-end travel business. LVMH purchased Belmond in cash for \$25 per Class A share in a transaction with an equity value of \$2.6 billion and an enterprise value of \$3.2 billion ([see story](#)).

Elsewhere in the hospitality sector, cruise line Cunard is partnering with rail operator Rocky Mountaineer for its resumed service to Alaska, allowing guests to extend their journey with a train excursion.

Rocky Mountaineer operates a fleet of domed trains, affording passengers views of the mountainous terrain and wildlife along its routes. Along with the visual experience, the train line features onboard services such as fine cuisine ([see story](#)).