XTP Train – Sydney to Melbourne

By Nico Earhart

When my alarm chirped to life at 5:45 I wasn't looking forward to what I had ahead of me that day. In fact, this was probably the one travel day of my journey that I had been looking forward to the least. Of all the extended plane rides and various forms of conveyances I would be having to tolerate, this was the one that I had dreaded the most since booking my tickets months ago. I had no problem with the mode of transportation; I would be traveling on the XPT train from Sydney to Melbourne and had been looking forward to the first of my three big train trips for some time. Nor was it because I had to get up drastically early to make my train's 7:30 departure time, which I'm not a huge fan of either. The problem was to be with trying to get myself through Sydney's Central Station with all my luggage and forty pounds of golf clubs in tow. My imagination had created a scene akin to trying to slog through New York City's Pennsylvania Station, dragging two roller bags and another hefty carryall on my back, zigzagging through riparian channels of briskly-walking humans. Basically, the stuff that travel nightmares are made of. I woke up especially early and allowed myself a safety gap of almost two hours, assuming the station would be a madhouse and Sydney's morning rush hour traffic would be a logjam. But getting to the station in under ten minutes' drive, an hour-and-a-half before my train was due to leave, I found it was nothing like what I had assumed it would be. In reality, it was the complete opposite of what my imagination had constructed.

Sydney Central, which was first opened for service in 1885, seems to have aged like a fine wine. Red, weathered bricks and washed stone, the latticework detail of a European cathedral, give the station a tasteful, antiquated look of both functionality and style. One hundred and eighty degrees opposite of Penn. Station, which mixes unsightliness, total insanity and confusion with a hint of malfunction. Despite this being the primary terminus of the country's largest city, passing through it was predominantly smooth sailing. Through the entrance, to the ticket window where I was able to check one of my bags and then to a quiet corner where I sat on my golf bag and drank a few cappuccinos. The people who I spoke with were informative and the ticket takers extremely helpful. When the train pulled up to its berth, I shoveled my belongings through the open doors of the first-class B car, wedging my clubs into a compartment that fit them snugly and waited for the journey to begin.

Eventually the whistle sounded and the engine began to pick up momentum as we slid out of the station heading south. This would be an 11-hour ride from Sydney, through the southern reaches of the Blue Mountains, down into Albury and the state of Victoria, running to the west of the Australian Alps then down into Melbourne's Southern Cross Station. You might ask why I opted for a half day's ride by rail instead of an hour-and-a-half flight for the trip. For one reason, I needed something interesting to write about and a description of the flight would be painfully uneventful, but also, it had been some years since I was last on a long-distance rail trip and I figured it would be infinitely more interesting than resorting to a jetliner. With plane rides, it seems that the destination is the only thing that matters; Just waiting for the dreaded thing to be over with. Counting down the hours till you arrive in a new city. But, on a train that you know you'll be on all day, you can just relax and let the landscape slip past you. I knew I would reach my intended destination at 7 o'clock that evening and

anything else I saw or that happened to me along the way was just added bonus of traveling on the ground rather than in the air. If anything, time seemed to fly on a train whereas on a plane it almost moves backwards.

As we started to move away from the city I could see the glorious effects of the rain they had had in the area over the last month, that I had been fortunate enough to miss. Thick, jade and emerald-green layers of vegetation, waist high grasslands, stands of healthy trees paneling the sides of the tracks as we edged along. Further down the line the gum trees, parks, soccer fields and golf courses began to give way to cattle pastures and a spanning, tawny veldt. Passing through wind-whipped little tumbleweed towns like Goulburn and Bundanoon with their quaint and quiet Main Streets full of bars, banks, boutiques and the ubiquitous Soldier's Clubs. Vast, cattle-cropped paddocks and copses of sad, skinny trees were the only things to be seen for the first few hours out of the station, but it still beat the view from a plane. I had been assigned an aisle seat at the start of the journey, but when my neighbor sat down next to me with a pungent perfume that smelled like an alcoholic grapefruit and immediately gave me a headache, I opted for a window seat a few rows away. A blessing in disguise this woman's malodorous fragrance. From my window seat's vantage, I could see desiccated fields strewn with immense boulders imitating sounding humpbacks. It looked sweltering and muggy too. In Australia, once you move away from the fertile coastline, the heat climbs exponentially (only 35% of the country is considered true desert, but 70% of the country receives less than 20 inches of rain per annum and is considered arid). The cabin's AC futilely blasted away but outside the train, in towns like Moss Vale, Cootamundra and Henson it looked steamy and dry, sun-scorched.

Another reason I consider trains as a superior form of transportation to airplanes is because of the cleanliness, comparatively, of the things. Not that trains are exceptionally clean. Some of them are, I know, and some of the more draconian trains I've read about like the Trans-Siberian sound filthy, overcrowded and nightmarish. But Australian trains are certainly clean in comparison to airplanes. Sometimes I feel like I need to be sprayed down with hand sanitizer and Lysol, my clothing placed in an incinerator upon disembarking an aircraft, having soaked in that foul airplane air for a few hours. Air on a plane becomes stagnant and foul as it gets recycled around the cabin again and again, until finally, you're revived with some fresh air upon your arrival, only somewhat tinged with the rank smell of jet fuel on the tarmac. Because the train stops occasionally, opening its doors at each station, airing out the cabin a couple times an hour, the buildup of human related tangs gets some slight dissipation throughout the journey. A slight breeze might even whip through the car if you're lucky. One could even stand near the doors at some of the stations if you are really in need of a deep, fresh breath. This would be executed with limited success on an airplane.

When we finally crossed into the State of Victoria, we were in the high-heated desert of inland Australia, passing through Wagga Wagga and The Rock, on our way back down towards Port Phillip Bay and the city of Melbourne. The same way that civilization began to fade to an unpeopled, Tuscanesque countryside as we made our way out of Sydney's hinterland, nearing the city, the trappings of humanity begin to reappear from the savannah's emptiness. It might seem like a waste of time to spend eleven hours on a train, but if you fly, even on a short flight like this would have been, it will still occupy your whole day, unless you're on a bright-and-

early or a red eye. I find myself so exhausted after the flight experience that it's unlikely that I'm going to land and then go out and visit some museums and then the zoo anyway. I'm tired, dirty, smell like jet fuel and want a shower and some substantial couch time. The only sights you've seen on a plane are on a huge, geologic scale. Take the train for the close-up. Take the train to see swaths of the country you're visiting and the little towns and hamlets you'd never otherwise take the time to pass through, even if it is only that, passing through with the rising sound of the train's whistle. And once you're done with your train trip, you can always go back and look at Google Earth and see what you've missed from the sky.