

Patt Morrison: Is California about to lose its most beautiful train ride?

Story by Patt Morrison • Jul 7



The "Daylight," which carried passengers on 13-hour trip between Los Angeles and San Francisco, was sometimes called the "most beautiful train in America." This vintage postcard from Patt Morrison's collection shows a train on a coastline stretch of track.
© Provided by LA Times

The tale of California's railroads is a tale of beauties and beasts.

The beasts are the muscle machines, the workaday haulers chuffing to and fro with the takings of forests and mines, fields and factories.

The beauties are the glamor routes, the passenger trains that, whatever shabbiness may have befallen their interiors, more than make up for it with the grandeur of what lies outside their windows.

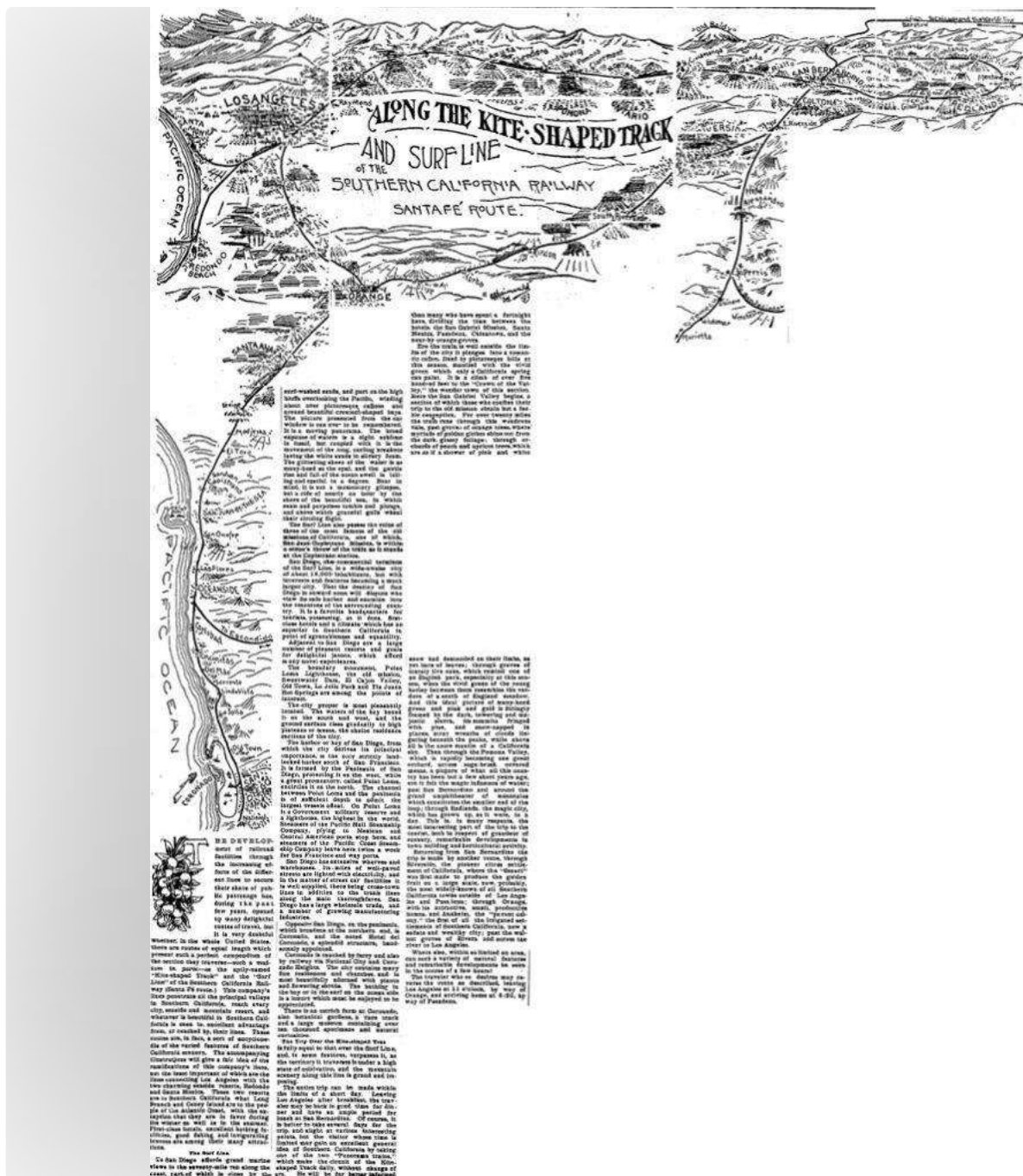
In 1882, not quite 15 years after the [Golden Spike married the nation's eastern and western rails](#), the enticing views of the California coast begat the "Surf Line," starting with the National City-to-Oceanside route in San Diego County — one of the earliest of the lines that would be laid not just for getting passengers from points A to B, but from "aaah!" to "beautiful!"

President Lincoln, a-slog in the Civil War in the summer of 1862, was still farsighted enough to sign the Pacific Railway Act for building the transcontinental railway.

He did not live to ride aboard it. But he would have liked to; California was to him an El Dorado of prodigious promise and beauty, and he often spoke to the Sacramento Union correspondent Noah Brooks about moving here, "to afford better opportunities for his two boys." At the White House, hours before he was assassinated, he bade farewell to House Speaker Schulyer Colfax, who was heading to California for his own journey. Lincoln told him upon their parting, "How I would rejoice to make that trip!"

Once Americans had supplanted plodding wagon trains with swift rail travel, the drama and the grandeur of the California coast were

aboard "panorama trains."



A map published in The Times in 1893 shows the various train routes around Southern California. ((Los Angeles Times archive) © (Los Angeles Times archive)

But now — here's that phrase that signals a change in fortunes — but now, what man hath joined by steel I-beams, [climate change may put asunder](#). Along the gorgeous coastal rail ride through Orange and San Diego counties, the "Lossan" corridor train tracks are taking a pounding. ("Lossan" is brief for Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo.) The [bluffs are melting away](#) like sand castles. The [beach is receding](#) like the [Windsors' hereditary hairline](#).

It's an enormously popular route for commuters and leisure riders alike, as well as an indispensable corridor for moving freight. Anyone who's been aboard knows there's nothing as satisfyingly smug as flying along this rail route next to the frothy Pacific on a Sunday evening, and seeing miles of cars backed up on the 5 Freeway, trying to return home.

And still, humiliatingly, for almost 10 months now, the [train service has been suspended off and on](#). At times the most scenic parts of the train route [have been served by buses](#) — buses! Some civic and transportation voices are saying perhaps the moment is here to

If it happens, it will have been a long time coming. The coast-flirting train lines have been beset by uncooperative nature almost from their inaugural runs. In the epochal storms of February 1914, the Lark — a swanky overnight train between Los Angeles and San Francisco — had to stop running for a time because of washouts. The Lark began in 1910 and made its last trip in 1968, by which time the commuter airline PSA had laid on a full schedule of commuter flights between Southern California and the Bay Area.

In March of 1906, a washout above Oceanside stranded about 150 northbound passengers. First a rescue ship tried to get them aboard in strenuous seas, but “the work of transferring the people to the [boat] was fraught with so great peril that after 18 had been dragged, wet and frightened, through the surf to the boat, the plan was abandoned.” The one hotel in town was taken over by the women passengers, and the men slept on the train, eating cream puffs and fudge for breakfast and dinner.

The peril has not always come from nature. Thirty years ago — and maybe even before and since — the boys of Carlsbad made a sport of defying death and the wrath of railroad law. They crouched on the wooden trestle’s inner rail and jumped away at the right moment as the train bore down on them. When the railroad put up fences to stop them, the boys tore them down and even dumped the debris on the tracks.

This country didn’t invent trains, but regards them as wholly American, from the plundering railroad robber barons of the Gilded Age to the notion that steel and steam can master a continent, no matter who or what had to give way. The great age of rail lasted until the greater age of the automobile, and the airplane, but even as we abandoned the train for our own wheels, we romanced it in our imaginations.

In 1978, Los Angeles County Supervisor Baxter Ward got his quixotic way: He persuaded the county and Amtrak to put eight 1940s railroad cars into regular service as the “El Camino,” along the San Diego-Orange County-L.A. run. It was called “El Camino” because, with some liberties, the path supposedly followed the *camino*, the route, of the [mission-building Franciscan priest Junipero Serra](#).

Everyone professed to love the cars, and ridership took a happy 75,000-passenger bump. But it wasn’t enough to keep the old stock up and rolling, and six months later Amtrak put the cars into storage and put the modern “San Diegan” train cars back on the route.

Our excellent Times librarian Scott Wilson pointed out to me that the stories of coastal trains can be divided between the northbound from L.A. and the southbound from L.A.

Like many California trains, the San Diego-area Surf Line grew into its full length only by bits and fits, finally connecting San Diego to L.A. around 1888.



A train steams down an attractive track on this vintage postcard from Patt Morrison’s collection.
© Provided by LA Times

Fifty whole years later, the diesel-powered San Diegan, blurbled as the “first streamline train service” between the two cities, made its

passengers on the north-to-south trip were 150 L.A.-area schoolkids.

In 1971, Amtrak took over the San Diegan, and around 2000 replaced it with the Pacific Surfliner, a train that — with asterisk exceptions for interruptions such as landslides — makes its way through Ventura and Santa Barbara into San Luis Obispo County, 350 or so miles in total, above and below L.A.

Railroads were nothing if not ambitious. Tracks and routes came together piecemeal — railroad buffs know these by heart, every bend and curve of track, every name change and route alteration. By 1922, the triumphant Daylight Limited service between Los Angeles and San Francisco offered travelers a short-order diner, open throughout its 13-hour trip.

The more streamlined version, the Coast Daylight, hit the tracks in 1937 and called itself, with reason, the "most beautiful train in the West," and even "in America." (In 1999, the "Daylight" got its own 33-cent stamp as part of a postal series of legendary American trains.)

Here comes the new Daylight!

ON EXHIBITION
 Exposition Park - Exposition Boulevard
 between Figueroa and Vermont
TUESDAY, March 9 - 9 A.M. to 10 P.M.
WEDNESDAY, March 10 - 9 A.M. to 7 P.M.
YOU ARE INVITED!

Southern Pacific's new streamlined train to San Francisco
The most beautiful train in the West

Ladies and gentlemen: Meet the new Daylight!
 Meet Southern Pacific's new streamlined train that will speed from Los Angeles to San Francisco every day beginning March 21. Swift, smooth-riding, perfectly molded into a sleek crimson, orange and black unit, the new Daylight will average nearly fifty miles an hour—making the whole trip by daylight.

Up front is the largest streamlined locomotive in the world—107 feet long, including tender. Behind are twelve custom-built steel passenger cars with wide double-paned windows of plate and safety glass. From tip to tip, the whole train sits low on the rails, is built for speed and comfort. It looks like—and is—a beautiful job.

But that's just the outside. Now step inside. You've never seen anything like this before! Harmonious interior colors with contrasting upholstery, color schemes that vary from car to car. Windows low and wide. Restrooms large and comfortably furnished. Radio reception in every car but the Dining. Complete air-conditioning.

Eight luxurious chair cars: reclining seats cushioned with soft sponge rubber, covered with thick mohair, designed to face the windows if desired. Ash trays that recess into the walls. Individual overhead lights.

A cheerful, flower-decked Dining Car. All linens and tableware custom-made, bearing the Daylight crest. A delightful Tavern car with soft leather booths, indirect lights, Venetian blinds and a sparkling bar set off with tall mirrors. A Coffee shop that serves inexpensive short orders.

Two thick-capped Parlor Cars, the last one ending in a trim windowed curve.

What a train! A train to match the scenic splendor of the route it travels—over the Coast Range and for more than one hundred miles along the blue Pacific. Southern Pacific is proud to present the new million-dollar Daylight. See it on exhibition. Try it on your next trip to San Francisco.

First Trip March 21
 Starting March 21, the Daylight begins daily service in both directions on the following schedule:

Northbound

Lv. LOS ANGELES 8:15 a. m.
 Ar. SAN FRANCISCO (Third St.) 6:00 p. m.

Southbound

Lv. SAN FRANCISCO (Third St.) 8:15 a. m.
 Ar. LOS ANGELES 6:00 p. m.

NO EXTRA FARE!

Our lowest fares to San Francisco are good on the new streamlined Daylight:

\$9.17 \$14

One Way Roundtrip

These fares are good in the luxurious chair cars on the Daylight. Chair car passengers enjoy full use of the Dining, Tavern and Coffee Shop. Seats in the parlor cars are restricted to first class tickets, plus a seat charge of \$1.50.

ALL SEATS ON THE DAYLIGHT ARE NUMBERED AND ARE RESERVED IN ADVANCE.

FASTER NIGHT SCHEDULES starting March 21

LARK
 Leaving Los Angeles a half hour later than at present, the luxurious all-Pullman Lark will operate on the following schedule, thirty minutes faster:

Lv. LOS ANGELES 9:00 p. m.
 Ar. SAN FRANCISCO 8:00 a. m.

Same schedule Southbound
 The Oakland Lark will arrive Oakland (First & Broadway) at 9:07 a. m.

SUNSET LIMITED
 Leaving Los Angeles an hour and fifteen minutes later than at present, the Sunset Limited will run on the following schedule, one hour and fifteen minutes faster:

Lv. LOS ANGELES 9:00 p. m.
 Ar. SAN FRANCISCO 8:10 a. m.

Southbound, leave San Francisco 8:00 p. m., arrive Los Angeles 7:10 a. m.
 Bedrooms, lounge cars, Pullman tourist sleeper, chair car.

The new COASTER

With new soft floor equipment, the Coaster will operate on a new and faster schedule:

Lv. LOS ANGELES 8:05 p. m.
 Ar. SAN FRANCISCO 7:50 a. m.

Southbound, leave San Francisco 6:15 p. m., arrive Los Angeles 6:00 a. m.

The new Coaster will carry bedrooms, lounge car, stand-up Pullmans, tourist sleeping car, chair car, also a Pullman San Francisco to Santa Barbara.

SOFT reclining seats on the Daylight are all cushioned with sponge rubber. Each has an individual ash tray and overhead light. There is porter service in all chair cars and parlor cars.

THE TAVERN'S semi-circular leather booths, mirrored bar, soft colored lights and Venetian blinds make it a cozy, intimate place to gather with friends while the Daylight speeds along.

THE PARLOR CARS have wide windows, rich carpets and big, soft seats cushioned with sponge rubber. The parlor-observation car ends the train in a smooth curve lined with windows.

IN THE COFFEE SHOP, you enjoy delicious, inexpensive "short orders" prepared in a special kitchen and served at a breakfast counter. Comfort chairs are upholstered in soft, red leather.

ALL SILVER AND LINEN on the Daylight were especially designed for the train and bear the winged Daylight emblem. In the Dining, Southern Pacific's delicious "Meat Select" are served.

SIX COACHES on the Daylight are "articulated" in units of two, as illustrated here. Articulation and new "light-lock" coupling eliminate shock, so that the Daylight starts and stops smoothly.

GOING EAST? . . . Here's How to See Twice as Much

Go East on one of our Four Scenic Routes and return on another, a privilege that goes with every S. P. roundtrip ticket. For example, on Chicago, take our direct, fast Golden State Route via El Paso and Kansas City. Return by our Overland Route, over the trail of the 49'ers to San Francisco, stopping to inspect the giant bridges, then down the Coast on the new Daylight or one of six other fine trains. Or go either way on our Sunset Route, via New Orleans and the Old South, or Shasta Route, through the Pacific Northwest. All our transcontinental trains completely air-conditioned. No extra fare.

Southern Pacific

Phone NO. 6391 • TICKET OFFICE 310 W. 7th St. • 1147 S. Broadway • Main Floor Pacific Pacific 3442 • 413 S. 102 St. • 2121000 • 104 S. Central • 10 S. Broadway, 4000 Broadway • Phone 210, 1041 • 10 Beverly Hills, Corner Drive at Santa Monica Blvd. • Phone Chevrolet 1246 • In Berkeley Park, 5300 Pacific Boulevard, Phone 11500 • 1118.

A display ad that ran in The Times in March 1937 shows a \$14 round-trip fare between Los Angeles and San Francisco — "the most beautiful train in the West." ((Los Angeles Times archive))
 © (Los Angeles Times archive)

Finally, in 1971, Amtrak took it over and it became the Coast Starlight.

Its [day-and-a-half-long journey between L.A. and Seattle](#) couldn't hope to compete with the swiftness of plane schedules or the versatility of a car; the nickname "Coast Starlate" caught on for good reason. So in the 1990s, the Coast Starlight, for too brief a time, offered first-class culinary luxury unmatched even on the Orient Express, and a Vegas array of live music and comedians.

The food — local and regional delicacies, wine tastings to match — earned a rave review from a food magazine for such offerings as halibut in a pesto crust. On one trip in the early 2000s, The Times heard that the Dalai Lama had recently taken the Coast Starlight, with bodyguards and his own chef.

But again, in spite of the Coast Starlight's popularity and loyal ridership, it had to pool its box office with the entire system, so its success could not save it, and the lavish deluxe trips and the train "experience" went back to the utilitarian.

One coastal train trip the railroads could never offer was a route along one of the most gorgeous pieces of earthly real estate, Big Sur.

The flighty Highway 1 through Big Sur has been vulnerable to the elements since it opened in 1937, and storm damage shut down its trickiest section in January (that bit is [unlikely to open until the end of summer](#)). The manager of Deetjen's Big Sur Inn [told SFGate](#) that "we're America's most beautiful cul-de-sac right now,"

When a narrow asphalt thread of highway can barely cling to the Big Sur cliffs, a railroad — even a narrow-gauge railroad — would have been logistically impossible and environmentally catastrophic. The best the train can do is to deliver you to a car rental company in San Luis Obispo or Salinas, wish you luck, and await you in the Bay Area to connect up for the rest of the ride north.

Now, back to the frayed Southern California coast, and the fortunes of its surf-skirting trains.

If we must abandon the trains' coastal beauty trips for sturdier railbeds inland, the least that the disputed new technology of AI can do for us is to give train riders traveling through scrub and subdivisions a real-time virtual reality cruise along the old surf-and-shoreline route.

This story originally appeared in [Los Angeles Times](#).



More for You

If You Have Any Of These 40 Items, Then You Can Retire.

American Shoppers Should Think Twice Before Buying From These 2 Stores

