

EVERYWHERE BUT NOWHERE

To quote from the movie *The Polar Express*, “One thing about trains, it doesn’t matter where they are going, what really matters is deciding to get on”. That’s exactly what I am about to do.

From my very childhood I was, still am and will continue to be fascinated by TRAINS. I guess it runs in my genes. My dad too, is fond of trains, During my early childhood in the late 70s, he used to take me in local trains on weekends. The first sentence I had spoken, as per my grandmother was “And the train went into the tunnel”, in Marathi of course. That referred to the train going through Parsik tunnel. When I was in school, I cannot recall how many times I have ran from my studies to watch Rajdhani go past. We were staying at Dahisar (West) then, about a kilometer (as the crow flies) from the station. The only thing visible from the balcony was the station board at the southern end of the platform. Just that glimpse of the train going past was a treat. Needless to say, I have got a few raps on the knuckles for that, especially when I did it during exams. When we used to visit Dadar at my maternal grandparents for vacations, the morning walk for me and my cousin was a trip to Dadar station, Pf 5. Watching shunting of Gujarat Mail and then Rajdhani go by, frantically waving out to it everyday. Evenings were spent studying various zonal Time Tables. My grandfather had 7 of the 9 zonal ones that were printed.

As I grew up, the passion grew with me. I am in aviation field. And as such do get a set of concessional air tickets for leisure travel. Those were usually bought for my family. I used to start a couple of days early, travel by train and meet them at the other end. Same for return. My mother always told me, that if I had read my study books with the same enthusiasm as I read the Timetables of various railways, I could have cracked IIT JEE with ease. Today I am an NRI for the past six years, but whenever I am in Mumbai, I make a point to travel at least once by trains.

It was about four years ago, that I read an article about the most picturesque train journeys of India. I wanted to experience them, sample the sights with my own eyes. I had seen a video on YouTube, which was posted by a person who had traveled NDLS-HWH by 12302 in AC First Class. It was fascinating. That’s when the idea of seeing all the top ten scenic routes of Indian Railways by AC First Class was conceived. A few years ago, I was trying various combinations to get from JAT to BCT as Swaraj was not operating on that day. I happened to come across IRI at that time. I must admit, without the help of this forum, it would have been a monumental task. Trying to work out the combinations purely on printed timetable is too much. The ease by which I could plan this trip was only due to you guys, who have started and are running this wonderful site.

Being an NRI for more than 5 years, allowed me to buy an IndRail Pass. That worked out the cost factor for the trip greatly in my favor. I also have a few spare days of leave accumulated over the past years. The original plan was to make a 15 day trip. However, accommodating all the journeys was not possible, So I was looking at 21 day option. That was done, but the greed to travel some other routes and trains took over me and I decided to make it a month long affair.

I was first ridiculed by the Railway Reservation staff at CCG, where I went to purchase the IndRail pass. All trains do not have AC First. Why do you want to spend money on AC First? All trains do not have FTQ. What’s your final destination? So, you are not getting down anywhere? A month in trains, sure sounds like a crazy idea. Anyway, got the pass and did all the bookings. I could not stay for a whole month to make bookings on the first day of APR. Thanks to my dad as well, who used to make trips to CCG, on the days the bookings used to open, I do have all the required bookings.

So finally with the blessings of the almighty and my parents, with the love and affections of friends, the guidance of IRI and it's members and most importantly the consent of my beloved wife, I shall embark on this month long Dream Train Journey. A very long journey of over 30,000 kms, criss-crossing the country by trains, sampling many them and watching the unparalleled variety of scenery outside, that probably only my India can offer.

Day 1

Well, I just need to get into Goa. Without losing a day of the trip Pass, I will board 10111 Konkan Kanya at Panvel traveling to Madgaon Jn. That's where I will be able to catch 12779 Goa Express. It will pass through the coastal plains, then climbing through the Brazanga ghats. I know Dudh Sagar will not be at its full glory, but rainy season trip is out of question, as of now. Once at Londha, change to AC First in 17305 HUBALI-NIZAMUDDIN Link Express. Sleep early.

Day 2

Get up at about time the train is entering Daund Jn. It will reverse and pass through the Single line track, through Ahemadnagr, past Kopergaon onto Manmad Jn. No reversal. Now on the main CR Line. At Bhusaval Jn see the Loco change. Bye-Bye to the WDM twins, welcome WAP4/7. Travel up to Itarsi Junction, through Khandwa Junction. Head off to the retiring room, A quick shower and a small nap. A light dinner and it's time for the overnight journey by 12168 BSB-LTT S/F to Bhusaval Jn.

Day 3

Have to get up early, alighting at 04:45. To the waiting room, tie off the luggage, Tea time, with some light B/F. Time for 12656 Navjeevan S/F Express. Bhusaval to Surat, via Nandurbar. Again, a single line, and good country side views. Alight at Surat. Catch the 12936 ST-BDTS Inter City S/F. Travel up to Vapi. Alight and await for 12010 ADI-BCT Shatabdi. Board Ex CC. Dinner time. The first of IR Meals that I will be having for the coming month. Reach BCT. Head off to the waiting Hall. Time to catch the 12267 BCT-ADI Duranto. One of the two fully Non-Stop (even technical) Duranto in India.

Day 4

Would love to be up early and watch my train overtake Gujarat Mail at about 05:30 around MHD. Arrival at ADI. Straight to retiring room. Tea B/F and freshen up. A quick nap possible. But a quick one. Will be catching Yoga Express. Travel through Gujarat, via Abu Road at foot hills of the Aravali mountains. A small nap possible after Sun set. Alight at Phulera Jn, Scheduled time of arrival 22:00. Head off to my third home, the waiting room. The second home is the Railways AC First Class, where I will be spending a lot of time.

Day 5

01:00 departure of Malini Express. Need to be up by 06:00. Passing through the vast expanse of the Thar Desert reach Jaisalmer, Half day sightseeing. Evening same Malini headed to Jaipur, ticket up to DLI, booking up to JP only. Pack up a solid dinner and loads of water tonight. No PC in the train and no expectations of getting anything en-route.

Day 6

05:00 Alight at Jaipur. Change train and catch JP-DEE AC Double Decker. The fastest train on the JP-DEE route, beating even Swarna Jayanti Rajdhani and AII-NDLS Shatabdi. This is all a day journey. Good sightseeing. Alight at GGN or DEE and catch Malini again. Travel to DLI, passing through the world's largest "Route Interlocking System" making a West to East passing. Reach DLI and head to NDLS. Preferred Cycle Rickshaw, drop off at Pharaganj Side. Leave the luggage at Clock Room and catch the 12:20 Palwal-GZB EMU. Route NDLS-DLI-GZB. Pass again through the Interlock South to East. View DLI GZB route. Return to NDLS by Gomati Express, reaching NDLS at 15:00. At 16:25 begins the famous "Cat and Mouse" game between 12952 NDLS-BCT Rajdhani and 13314 NDLS-SDAH Rajdhani. Watch it from board the King, the daily winner of this race. Oh yes "The King of IR". The fastest train, calculated End to End, of course, not counting the recently introduced NDLS-AGC Shatabdi. Book in FTQ, up-to ST.

Day 7

Alight at ST, and board August Kranti Rajdhani. Reason, at BVI comes on PF6 and goes via the Kandivali yard up-to ADH. This is where I alight and take a local train back to Kandivali. Big shower. Back to BVI, Take ADI-BCT DD to BCT. Return to BVI by Karnavati, in it's LHB avatar. Home cooked Lunch..... Change the contents of the bag. Fresh clothes loaded. And ready to continue on the

action packed journey. Evening catch the Legendary Flying Rane. BVI to PLG. Meet up with my cousin. A dinner at the restaurant. Catch Saurashtra Mail. Boarding at PLG already done. Sleep tight.

Day 8

Wake up and the sun rises as the train is about to enter VG. Day journey up to DWK. Have reached the Western most point of the IR network, now that Bhuj-Naailya line is discontinued. Dwarka temple and the evening bus to Bhuj.

Day 9

Reach Bhuj at 05:00 am. Take Ahimsa Express. Day journey from BHUJ to about just past BRC.

Day 10

Reach PUNE at 04:45. Take PUNE-SC Shatabdi leaving at 05:50. Short connection, but arrival will be on schedule. Too much slack time in the TT of Ahimsa. PUNE to SC full day journey, at least from DD for sure. Reach SC at 14:20. Travel to HYB. To the Retiring Room. Shower and sleep. Catch the night HYB-CSTM at 20:40.

Day 11

Arrive PUNE at 09:05. See the missing PUNE-DD section. Wait for 12263 PUNE-NZM AC Duranto. Departure 11:10. Travel through the Original Western Ghats. PUNE-LONAVALA-KARJAT-KALYAN. Then move to WR, via DOMBIVALI-DIVA-VSASI ROAD. Rolling along the Western Coast off Mumbai, moving North. Pass into Gujarat. Evening at Vadodara. Dinner and sleep.

What fantastic last 4 days have been. Traveled in broad day-light the following sections

- a) Viramgam Junction to Dwarka
- b) Bhuj to Vadodara through VG-ADI-BRC.
- c) Pune to Secunderabad
- d) Pune to Kalyan Jn – Diva Jn to Vasai – Vasai Road to Vadodara Jn

Day 12

Arrive at NZM, and to the airport. Fly to Jammu. Prearranged cab to take me to SVDK. This is the present Northern most point of the Railway network. The railway in the valley is still not connected to the network, so cannot be accounted for. 14034 Jammu Mail to JAT. Travel day light in the picturesque Kashmir valley up-to JAT. Alight and wait. Catch 12426 Jammu Rajdhani. Tuck in at the earliest.

Day 13

Arrive NDLS at 05:00. One of the highlights of the trip is next on the agenda. 12002 New Delhi-Bhopal Shatabdi, Traveling at the top speed of 160 kmph, reach Agra Cantt. In about two hours. Continue the journey through, UP in to MP. Reach Bhopal at 14:00, traveling a distance of 703 Km in 8 hours, at an average speed of 87 km/hr. Then Amarkantak S/F Express to ET Jn. At ET Jn. Wait for LTT-KQY AC Express arriving at 19:15. Sure to crash off early today. Up since 04:45 at least.

Day 14

Arrive PNBE at 11:50. Straight off to Room. Shower and then a little of walk around the city. Travel to RJPB for 12309 RJPB-NDLS Rajdhani. Dinner on board.

Day 15

Arrive NDLS at 07:40. Then 12236 NDLS-DBRG Rajdhani. The slowest of all the Rajdhani on the IR network. NDLS-Moradabad-Bareilly-Lucknow in day time.

Day 16

Up when the train would be just past Samstipur Junction. Chugging slowly along the lush green foot hills of Himalayas, Night shall fall before reaching Guwahati.

Day 17

Arrive at 05:30, a short drive to DBRT. DBRT-LEDO passenger. Reach LEDO at 10:50. I am now at the Eastern most point of IR network. Cab to Dibrugarh Airport. Flight to Kolkatta. Hurry to

Sealdah, Catch the 12313 SDAH-NDLS Rajdhani. Travel on the old Iron bridge over the Hoogly. Booking is up to Dhanbad, Reaching DHN at 20:20. Wait for 11447 Shaktipunj Express.

Day 18

Arrive HWH at 04:15. To the Retiring Room. A shower. Freshen up. Time for 12262 HWH-CSTM AC Duranto. Day light journey up to BSP. Stay up if possible, till NGP.

Day 19

Long and hectic day today. Should rise and shine before Manmad Jn. which should be about 06:00 in the morning. Past Igatpuri, down the Kasara Ghat straight to CSTM, skipping Kalyan Jn and Dadar. Hurry back to Kandivali. Fresh set of clothes packed. Home lunch again. Back to Dadar. 12125 Pragati Express. Travel to Karjat via Thane-Panvel-Karjat route. Reaching KJT at 18:10. Alight and wait for Deccan Queen. Boarding at 18:35 alighting LNL at 19:20. Forget the CC booking. Park up in the Dining Car. The only remaining Dining Car in Indian Railways. Need to experience it, before the commercial considerations have it removed. Wait for DR-MS Super-fast. Boarding LNL at 22:40. I think I shall be out even before Pune.

Day 20

Should be up before the train is at Gulbarba. Past Wadi Junction, Passing from Maharastra, into Karnataka and then into Andhra Pradesh. Night fall just past Arrkonam Jn as the train enters Tamil Nadu. Reach Chennai Egmore at 19:45. Change to 16101 Boat Mail (Rameshwaram Express}.

Day 21

Travel over the Pamban Bridge reaching Rameshwaram at 11:45. Leave luggage at the Clock Room & now time to visit the resting place of Dr. A. P. J. Abdulkalam. One of the greatest Indians of our times. Back to RMM for 16780 RMM-TPTY Meenakshi Express. Alight at TPJ. Board 12633 Chennai Egmore Kanyakumari Super-fast Express.

Day 22

Arrival at CAPE 06:50. Now at the Southern Most point of the IR network. Dump luggage in the Clock Room and a visit to the Vivekanand Kendra, where my Maternal Grandfather used to teach, purely as a social service. Back by 10:00. Catch 16525 Island Express. Travel over the coastal Kerla, past Thiruvananthapuram, Cochin up to Thrissur. Alight here. Good restaurants around the station. Gobble up on some good Kerla dishes. Waiting room. 12431 Thiruvananthapuram Nizamuddin Rajdhani. The longest running Rajdhani of IR. Leaving at 23:50. Could have alighted at TVC to board Rajdhani, but with 19:15 departure will miss the scenic coastal Kerla. Also, need to see Aluva (AWY), the place where we revived the news of our first bundle of joy. Possible only by traveling up to TCR.

Day 23

Wake up as the train rolls into Manglore Jn. Manglore to Panvel. Full Konkan Railway in daylight. Past Panvel as the sun sets. No qualms as I have already experienced PNVL-DIVA-BSR section. BSR in the late evening. Dinner and Good night.

Day 24

At midnight wake up at BRC to watch loco change from WDP/WDG to WAP 5/7. Wake up before Kota. Kota to NZM non stop run. Reach NZM and a prepaid cab should take me to NDLS for 12424 NDLS-DBRT Rajdhani. Booking in FTQ up to CNB. Enjoy the high speed line in day light. Alight at CNB, and have dinner, Wait for 12314 NDLS-HWH Rajdhani. The booking is from NDLS-HWW, boarding at CNB. In case I misconnect 12424, I can still hop on 12314 at NDLS. The first Rajdhani of IR. Not the fastest train today, but amongst the top 5.

Day 25

Reach HWH on PF 09, and a quick transfer to PF 21, for HWH-YPR Duranto. Day journey past Bhubneshwar, and should be cruising past the Chikha lake as the Sun sets.

Day 26

Sunrise somewhere past Tenali Junction. All the way past Ongle to Renugnta Jn. Then onwards to Yesvantpur. Travel to SBC. Board the 12658 Chennai Mail.

Day 27

Reach Chennai early morning. Return on the same route, in the daylight. Travel up to Mysore by 12007 Shatabdi. Alight at Mysore and return to SBC by Gol Gumbuz Express. Alight, straight to the Retiring Room for a shower. Wait for 22691 SBC-NZM Krantivira Sangolli Rayanna (Bangalore) Rajdhani.

Day 28

Full day journey from somewhere about Vikradabad Jn to Ghoradongri. See the famous "Diamond Crossing" at Nagpur. Shall see ET, but will be night by then.

Day 29

Arrive NZM at 05:55. Reach NDLS and catch 12031 Amritsar Swarna Shatabdi, Alight at UMB, and catch 12011 NDLS-KLK Shatabdi to reach CDG. Return 12046 CDG-NDLS Shatabdi. Once, the only Shatabdi, which was a Duranto basically. But even now is one of the rare trains, where EXCC is in W/L everyday, even with a huge availability in CC. Arrive at NDLS.

And now for the last scheduled leg of the loooong trip. 12952 NEW DELHI MUMBAI RAJDHANI. Once again I get to ride the King.

Day 30

Wake up very early, preferably at BRC. Enjoy the upgraded 130 speed on my home stretch. As the sun rises will be going past Valsad, Vapi, Boisar, Plaghar, Dahisar and Dadar. So many memories of seeing this train in my childhood. I will surely look out to see some kids frantically waving out as it thunders past. Will not alight at BVI today. All the way, on this leg. Will ride the King to it's home at BCT. Want to enjoy this ride to the maximum. This is the train that evoked my passion. This is what me and my cousin used to see fly past Dadar everyday morning in summers. The music of the twin WMDs and it's unbeatable and absolutely singular rhythm on the tracks of 3-6-3-2 (not any more now) is what really stoked the fire for train travel. This leg of the month long trip is the cherry on the cake, the sweet of the meal, whose taste will linger on for a long long time, even when the meal is over.

Buy a ticket and back home. The INDRAIL PASS shall have no more entries. Start to Finish by 12952 will be the epitome of this trip. Nor will I use it for any other journey. Not even the local train.

Constraints while planning the trip :-

1. Firstly, the season. Winters, Fog plays a havoc with the TT in the northern region. With so many Rajdhani journeys involved, that's impossible.
2. Rainy season, well Konkan railway is upside down. Plus can't really enjoy outside views. It tends to get all mucky on the stations.
3. That leaves summer only.
4. My shifts and leave. Being in Shifts, my leaves are not necessarily same. Have to really plan in advance. The day of the week the leave starts is a huge constraint to be dealt with. Normally JSM trip would be at the last, but cannot overstay.
5. Non Daily operation of trains. Especially, Pune Duranto, DBRG Rajdhani, HWH CSTM Duranto, HW-YPR Duranto and TVC Rajdhani. Co-ordination of travel between these trains gives a very limited days, on which travel can commence. Friday PUNE-NZM Duranto is the most efficient option I could make, given my constraints of days which the trip can start and end.
6. AC First/Executive Chair Car only, except RMM-TPJ, only Boat Mail has AC First. Might misconnect MS-CAPE S/F at TPJ. The other journeys not in AC First have the following reasons :-
 - (a) VSG-LD by Goa S/F Express and CSTM-KJT by Pragati Express via PNVL, due to absolutely no AC First, for any train on this route.

(b) Secondly, KJT-LNL by Deccan Queen. But that is to enjoy Dining Car, so really does not matter.

(c) ST-VAPI by Surat Bandra Terminus Inter City Superfast and BVI-PLG by Flying Rane. These are two journeys are for me to sample the two trains which I never had the opportunity to travel by, despite innumerable trips to Boisar, my native place.

7. Day Journeys during the all of the planned scenic routes.

HIGH LIGHTS OF THE TRIP:-

Traveled the most scenic routes on the Broad Gauge during day time

- (a) VSG-LD
- (b) BSL-ST
- (c) JU-JSM
- (d) WESTERN GHATS
- (e) BSR-BRC
- (f) SVDK-JAT
- (g) NJP-GHY
- (h) NTSK-LEDO
- (i) CAPE-TCR via ERN
- (j) Konkan Railways
- (k) Pamban Bridge at Rameshwaram

Source of Information, The Guardian.

I will have traveled to all the four tips of the railway network. They are (a) Dwarka (Western), (b) SVDK (Northern), (c) Ledo (Eastern), (d) Kanyakumari (Southern). All these in broad day-light.

I will have traveled by the following Rajdhani Express

1. August Kranti Rajdhani 12954
2. Jammu Rajdhani 12426
3. Patna Rajdhani 12309
4. Dibrugarh Town Rajdhani 12236
5. Sealdah New Delhi Rajdhani 12313
6. Thiruvananthapuram Rajdhani 12431
7. Dibrugarh Rajdhani 12524
8. Howrah Rajdhani 12302
9. Bangalore Rajdhani 22691
10. Mumbai Rajdhani 12952, The KING, twice...

I will have traveled the following Duranto

1. Mumbai -Ahemdabad AC Duranto.
2. Pune-Nizamuddin AC Duranto.
3. Howrah-Mumbai CSTM AC Duranto.

4. Howrah-Yesvantpuer Duranto.

I will have traveled in the following Shatabdi

1. ADI – BCT Shatabdi
2. PUNE-SC Shatabdi
3. NDLS-BPL Shatabdi
4. MAS-MYS Shatabdi
5. NDLS-ASR Swarna Shatabdi
6. NDLS-KLK Shatabdi
7. CDG-NDLS Shatabdi

I will have sampled the following DDs

1. JP-DEE DD
2. ADI-BCT DD

I will have traveled the following routes in day-light

1. CSTM-MAS/SC-HYB
 - (a) Kalyan to CSTM during HWH-CSTM
 - (b) Kalyan to Pune during PUNE-NZM Duranto.
 - (c) Pune to Wadi Jn during PUNE-SC
 - (d) Wadi Jn to Arakkonam during DR-MS
 - (e) Arakkonam to MAS during MAS-MYS
2. CSTM-NDLS
 - (a) Manmad Jn to CSTM during HWH-CSTM
 - (b) Manmad Jn to Itarsi Jn during LD-ET
 - (c) Itarsi Jn to Bhopal during BPL-ET
 - (d) Bhopal to NDLS during NDLS-BPL.
3. BCT-BRC
4. KOTA-NDLS.