

Travel Outlook

One train still winds its way across Canada



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The past is a hard place to leave, but leave it we must.

Most of us love train travel as we think it used to be, although, in reality, it seldom lived up to our rosy, nostalgic conceptions.

With the start of the new year - a time for breaking with the past - we have reached a railway junction: On one track, train service is being coldly cut back, despite cries of anguish from those who see the past slipping away. On the other, a new era of high-cost, glossy long-distance railway travel is burgeoning, to the applause of those romantics who may, perhaps, have watched too many vintage movies.

Jan. 15, Via Rail's famous cross-Canada train, the Canadian, stopped its three weekly trips in each direction. What is left is the three-a-week Western Transcontinental between Toronto and Vancouver.

Last week, however, tickets went on sale for the privately operated Royal Canadian, running between Toronto and Vancouver once a week in each direction, beginning July 1. The level of amenities will be much higher than on the Canadian, as will fares.

VIA FUNDING

The elimination of the Canadian is part of a broader reduction in railway service all across Canada, made necessary by the federal government's cutbacks in funding to publicly owned Via Rail.

Those cutbacks, instituted last year, set off yet another round of Mulroney-bashing and breast-beating about the lost glories of the railways that have tied this country together throughout our post-Confederation history.

But is it the government's fault entirely, if so few people have been using Via Rail as opposed to the relatively large number of people who never use it but demand that it be available anyway? Operating and maintaining a railway, staffed

by strong unions (who have sometimes appeared to put their own short-term financial interests ahead of economic survival), does put a severe strain on the public purse.

Without getting into specious arguments about the exact amount of money that Via has been losing on each passenger it transports, it is clear that some strong corrective measures had become necessary.

The relatively small group using railways frequently may not have helped its own cause (which, one assumes, is continued use of trains by enough people). On a typical cross-country coach, many experienced travellers inevitably stake a claim to a group of four seats per person, by spreading out their belongings - thus making it as difficult as possible for later-boarding passengers to find seats for themselves.

ORIENT EXPRESS

The emerging trend in rail travel is to ensure that each passenger has a specific place, and that the place be more luxurious and inviting than on any competitive mode of travel.

The man who risked a fortune to launch a modern-day, high-style rail service was a U.S. industrialist and rail buff named James Sherwood, president of London-based Sea Containers Ltd.

When the old Orient Express (linking several major European cities) was discontinued in 1977, Sherwood bought two of its "carriages" at auction, later acquiring 35 others. Five years later, once they had all been refurbished, he launched a new company, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express (VSOE), and was in the railway business.

By means of exceptionally astute promotion, Sherwood's new train service caught on as a kind of adventure that every traveller

aspired to (as one would dream of flying on the supersonic Concorde) despite the elevated fares.

It is the Canadian wholesaler of the VSOE, Blyth and Co. of Toronto, that will be operating the premium-priced Royal Canadian service between Toronto and Vancouver commencing on Canada Day. The eight-car, double-decker train will have capacity for up to 188 passengers; top accommodation on the train will be a few "staterooms" on the upper level, each with a dome and three panoramic windows.

AMTRAK LUXURY

In the U.S., a somewhat similar venture was undertaken two months ago by Amtrak, that country's equivalent of Via Rail.

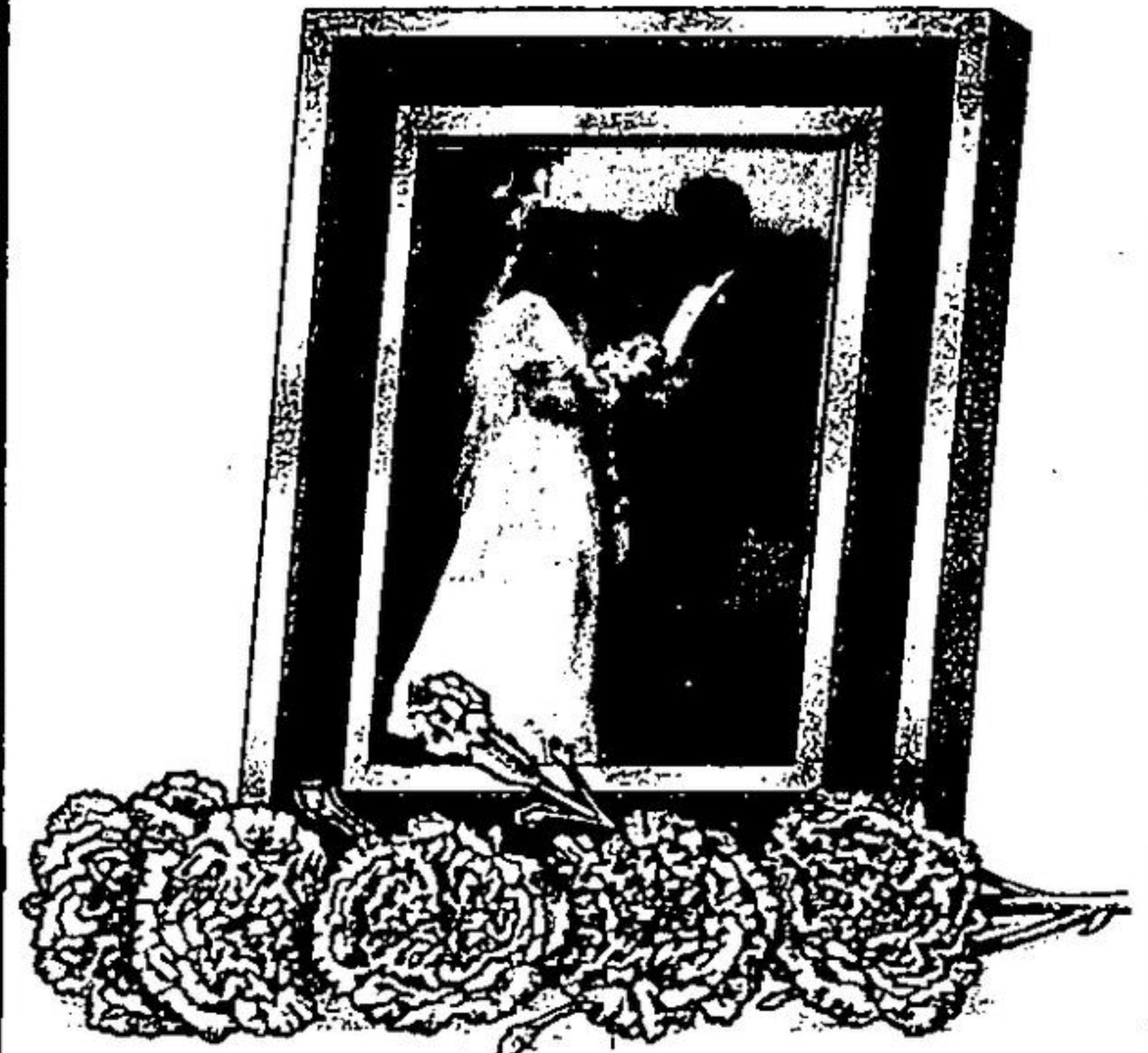
The American-European Express operates between Washington and Chicago via Pittsburgh, and consists of four extensively rebuilt rail cars coupled to the rear of the regularly scheduled Capitol Limited.

At just under 1,500 km, however, the journey is considerably shorter than that of the VSOE or the Royal Canadian. The American-European Express leaves from Washington or Chicago in the early evening, daily except Tuesday, and completes its trip late the next morning or early afternoon.

This venture in de luxe overnight train travel was initiated by a Florida businessman, William F. Spann. He has made the dining car the highlight, by providing a sophisticated, seven-course menu at dinner, a late night buffet and a full breakfast.

The all-inclusive fares start at \$1,042 U.S. for a compartment with upper and lower berths, toilet and vanity. That's more than double the cost of Amtrak's top-priced berth in regular service, but the American-European Express offers discounts for weekend travel, for round trips and for group travel.

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