

Phileas Phil, Around The World

Day 43 Venice Beach and Amtrak

In which Phil tries to shake of the romance of yesterday to see the potential of today!

From the movie:

"Have there been any women in his life?" - Princess Aouda asking of Phileas Fogg

"I assume he had a mother, but I am not certain." - Passepartout

Today, I resume my journey, and quest to beat Phileas at his own game. Once again a long train journey awaits to carry me to the Windy City. I've looked forward to reaching Chicago, a city I barely know, determined to change that situation.

Trains and more trains, I wonder, yet again, why such a trouble-free mode of transport has passed me by. My planned journey starting today would be three-days trundling across the New World in the kind of luxury that the Russians and Trans-Siberian Railway management could learn a lot from.

But first, the morning held a nice surprise in the form of Delphia. And again I would be presented with one of those opportunities in life, and during this journey in particular, that would make me question whether I should be boarding a train or not!

I checked-out of the hostel leaving my luggage to collect later before heading off to Union Station. Venice Beach is exactly as you see in the movies. At any moment you could expect to see a poodle skate boarding down the promenade, or a geriatric lifting weights at one of the outdoor gyms. The sun was shining and the place buzzing. I headed out across the beach, along one of the jetties stretching into the sea, probably the one that

would later feature in *La La Land*. I'm no Ryan Gosling, but the day would soon prove that there was still some charm in the old dog.

Walking along the Venice Broadwalk I drifted back a few years to a previous visit, and again reflected on the change that has afflicted a place. There is still the buzz, but there is more threat in the air. Less spirit. The winter months attract many homeless from all over the States. I stopped and spoke to one, Greg, originally from Denver. Greg looked like he was in his 60's, but was only 45. He was *vacationing* to avoid the winter months. He had lost his job, and like so many in this land of opportunity, was a *nomad*; moving from place to place. Sometimes catching some cash-paid work, mostly not. California offered him very little, other than the chance to not freeze to death on a winter's night. The place was full of Gregs, as had been San Diego. Nomads sleeping rough or living in their cars. One in eight Americans lives in a trailer! For Greg and his fellow sun-seekers a trailer would appear like a palace.

But America is nothing if it isn't extreme, for every Greg there is an *affluent* living in a swanky, water-side, designer home. Although the scales were clearly tipping numerically towards the Gregs, some of the homes looked amazing. Boxes on poles floating in the clear blue skies; mirrored walls giving the illusion of a second ocean. They were all there, along with the medicinal cannabis stores, and vegan cafes. The rich were having a ball and loving the skinny lattes, the poor enjoying living another day happy to sup some suds, both soaking up the Californian sun.

Los Angeles had it all, miles of sandy sunny beaches. The City of Angels, California, U.S.A. The World. Sprawling and brazenly showing flexing its muscles to the rest of humanity. Oranges, money and Hollywood. The place had it all in swathes - it had every right to boast and boast big. I mean, California

has an economy larger than Germany's! All the young men had gone west, and now the homeless too!

With time on my hands, I wandered along, passing the Muscle Beach gym I wasn't sure if I was in awe, frightened or found the sights too hilarious for words. There was more testosterone on display than you would find in the whole of New York city. I wandered along the beach pathway in the direction of Santa Monica pier. Enter Delphia. I saw this lovely black woman walking towards me along the path. She was Michelle Obama's younger sister, but with even better looks. Looks to die for. It was a movie scene, right there in the place of so many, I was making my own. As we approached, I smiled, she smiled, I walked on and looked back as she looked back. We walked towards each other. Yes, it sounds like a script, it should be a script, but it wasn't. It was real, and I was suddenly lead in a Hollywood *rom-com*.

She was an actress heading to an audition later that afternoon. I was an English adventurer, travelling the world, attempting to beat the record of a famous fictional character. More Hollywood script - really you couldn't write this stuff. And boy was she beautiful, she made Maja from Poland look like the ugly sister.

We decided to stroll to the pier, chatting as we did so. It felt like the most natural thing in the world. Walking along with her at my side, telling our stories. I grew about a foot taller just being in her presence. What a smile, look, character. She was the complete package. Where was her leading actor? Amazingly she didn't have one. Enter me, the Englishman, with a train to catch in 3 hours for a long-haul across America to minus four degrees and snow. Was this history repeating itself? Was I really going to take that train?

We took photographs under the *Santa Monica 66 End of the Trail* sign. Forrest Gump and Cinderella. Tom had been there

before turning around and heading back east. Tom, and many others had stood where I stood, and now it was my time, Phileas Phil. And like Tom I was planning to turn around and head east. East to Chicago and the Atlantic and home.

But Cinderella was staying here in Sunnyville, California so why would I even consider skipping town? I took a photo of Cinders with the famous ferris wheel behind her. My next photo in sequence is of Los Angeles Union Station which can only mean one thing!

I look at those photos, in sequence, from time to time and wonder at the gap; the three hours between the two shots, ferris wheel and train station.

Again, I was standing on a station platform eyeing an enormous snake of a train stretching as far as I could see. It could have been the train from *Silver Streak*, the comedy murder movie set on a train on this route. I wondered what lay ahead, would I find Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor on board? The *Southwest Chief* was taking me from Los Angeles to Chicago and she was leaving in 15 minutes. It would take three days to reach our destination, and there would be a lot of time for reflection on what had been another extraordinary day. We pulled away on schedule at 6:15 p.m. precisely and I bade a sad farewell to Los Angeles, San Diego and Mexico. It would be fair to say my days had been full and my life full of fun and the unexpected since I had disembarked the *Hanjin Athens*. Those peaceful days circling the ships deck, staring into the vast emptiness of the Pacific had been followed by a roller-coaster of activity. I waved goodbye to Hollywood and my time as a real-life film star.

What lay ahead was a journey through eight American states on an Amtrak train which would chug along 24 hours a day, stopping 31 times along the way, at stations from Albuquerque to Dodge City.

The *Southwest Chief* was no *Orient Express* and thankfully not a *Vostok*, but it was big, welcome to America, and comfortable, just like American motor cars. It had an observation lounge and a wonderful dining carriage. Without time restrictions it was a great way to cross and see some of this enormous country in luxury. Sure, the freedom of the road was missing, but so were the hours of cruise control and highway diners.

I had booked a sleeping compartment and fully inclusive dining service. Taking everything into account I would argue it was the best value for money on my entire journey. At U.S. \$400 it was worth every cent. My compartment was small but pleasant. The car attendants would make up my bed whilst I dined in the evening and clear it way over breakfast.

Again, I would be without wifi, which after the Pacific crossing would be a doddle, and I had anyway not missed the interruption of daily electronic communication. But the *Chief* did not offer isolation, in fact far from it. It was clearly a popular route, with a mixture of those scared of flying, travellers, business people and families. There would be an ebb and flow as we reached stations along the way. The most consistent group, who were going *all the way*, were from the Amish community. Flying was out of the question for them, so they took the train to Chicago then transferred down to Pennsylvania. I would get to meet a few along the way, and it made for interesting times.

Over my first dinner four Amish were at the next table. I had never encountered these people before so upon seeing them was immediately transported back to *Witness*, where Harrison Ford is hiding out amongst their community. I had gone from the homeless in Venice Beach, to an actress on Santa Monica pier to Kelly McGillis. This was for sure a very diverse country, and I was realising it, hour by hour. There were days on this journey

that flew by, especially those at sea, with their monotony. But days like today seemed to fill a week. I was living days to the full and after, I would look back and think that 65 days had felt like 165. I was seeing and doing so much. Meeting so many different and fascinating people. Traveling sure throws up some interesting characters.

I dined with an elderly couple. Quite distracted, my thoughts drifted back to Santa Monica Pier, but the subject of yet another mass shooting came up, and I was dragged back to the present by this topic. They were a homely couple, Fred and Sue, so I was surprised, when I asked how they felt about the availability of guns in their homeland, that they were big supporters, and saw nothing wrong with the sale of semi and automatic rifles. Kids were being gunned down at school and pop and grandma were all in favour of being surrounded by lethal weapons. One line of argument being that such armaments were needed for self-preservation. A gun begets a gun. I realised I was not going to get much joy on this topic and figured only the Amish could make any sense on this one.

We stopped shortly after leaving Los Angeles, and surprise surprise I was back in Fullerton, the station where the taxi driver had dropped me to take a train to San Diego. At the time I figured he had made a mistake and didn't want to go into the city. Arriving at Fullerton the first time I thought I was in the middle of nowhere, and that it saw one train a day if it was lucky. But clearly, I was wrong, because here we were, first stop out of 31. No one got on or off, but what the hell, clearly the folks at Amtrak knew something about Fullerton that no one else did.

We pushed on, but night was rushing towards us, and I didn't hang around in the dining car for too long.

I was bushed. It had been a long day, and I was relieved to settle down in my bunk and fall into a peaceful sleep to the

gentle rocking of the train, with the thoughts of a beautiful black Cinderella being my last of the day.