

The Auto Train: Getting There - Walt Disney Style

by Michael Miller, PassPorter Guest Contributor

Walt Disney loved trains.

From the scale model railroad he built at his house, to the trains that are integral to the Disney parks, trains were central to Walt's philosophy of fun for the whole family. For those traveling between Walt Disney World and the Northeastern United States, Amtrak offers a unique experience that Walt himself would have loved, the Auto Train.

What is the AutoTrain?

At over $\frac{34}{100}$ mile in length, AMTRAK's Auto Train is the longest passenger train in the world; carrying up to 330 vehicles and 650 passengers every day of the year. Running parallel to I-95 and covering roughly 900 miles, the train offers a unique travel experience between Lorton, Virginia (just south of Washington DC) and Sanford, Florida -- an easy hour's drive to Walt Disney World.

□ The same rules apply to traveling via the Auto Train as planning your trip to Walt Disney World--planning ahead is the key to securing the best deals and accommodations. AMTRAK has a wonderful [website](#) to walk you through all of the logistics of the Auto Train.

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□ Reservations -- Timing is critical

□ Timeliness is a necessity if you want the cheapest fares. AMTRAK allows you to book your trip up to 11 months prior to your travel date. The earlier you reserve the better. AMTRAK uses a stepped pricing model, offering a limited number of passenger and vehicle reservations at the lowest rate. Once those are sold, the price steps up to the next level, and so on. We've witnessed the price go up by hundreds of dollars in a single day.

There are two components to your Auto Train fare. The first is the vehicle charge, which varies depending upon vehicle type -- regular, oversized (which includes minivans), and motorcycle. The second component is the individual fare, which has many factors including accommodation class, military and AAA discounts, etc. While at first glance the total price may seem steep, when you compare it against the combined cost of airfare and a rental car, or with the stress of driving and paying for a hotel, meals and mileage, it can be quite cost-competitive.

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□ Accommodations

□ There are a variety of accommodation classes to choose from:

bedrooms, roomettes, family, and coach. Bedrooms accommodate 2 people, are more spacious and contain a private bathroom/shower. Roomettes also sleep 2 people, but are much smaller than the bedrooms and have shared bathrooms and showers at the end of the rail car. During the day, the rooms have chairs and/or a couch, but once you request "turn-down" service, the porter will convert the seating into beds or "berths." The lower berths are wider than the upper berths, which can feel a bit claustrophobic to adults.

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□ There are a limited number of family rooms that can accommodate 2 adults and 2 children, but keep in mind that the children's berths in these rooms are just over $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet long! If your children are older or taller, you also have the option of purchasing two connecting bedrooms; which is more costly, but very comfortable. For the special needs traveler, there are wheelchair-accessible bedrooms.

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□ For cost-conscious travelers, coach cars offer reserved seating that can be comfortably reclined for overnight sleeping. Each seat offers overhead storage, a reading light and electrical outlet. Shared bathrooms are also available on each coach car. The biggest downside is the lack of privacy from your fellow travelers in the coach car.

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□ The AMTRAK website offers interactive, visual representations of accommodation options and prices.

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□ Boarding the Auto Train

□ Upon checking in at the train station, you and your vehicle will part ways. While your car gets loaded on the train (if you have kids, they will love watching this process), you head in to check in and select one of three seating times for dinner. Be sure to bring everything you need for your overnight stay on the train; unless you possess Indiana Jones-type abilities, you cannot access your vehicle during the trip!

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□ In order to ensure that the train leaves on time, cars need to arrive by 3:00 pm; motorcycles and oversized vehicles must arrive by 2:00 pm. Since the train leaves at 4:00 pm, this means that waiting is part of the process. And while there are televisions and free Wi-Fi in the lobby, and a small playground outside the terminal, you're smart to bring things with you to pass the time. Just like Disney, AMTRAK knows it has a captive audience and offers a small shop in the terminal lobby with souvenirs, reading materials, and snacks.

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□ Passengers are allowed to board the train around 3:30 pm. Boarding is relatively quick and porters will happily assist passengers with getting their luggage onto the train.

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☐ Did someone say "Free Dining?"

Once you have stowed your belonging at your room or seat, head to the Lounge car for complimentary veggies, cheese, crackers, snack mix, and water. Virginia wines and soft drinks are available for purchase. The Lounge car offers great views of the local scenery as the train makes its way to your destination. Seating is limited, but most people overlook the large table on the lower level, next to an enclosed smoking area. We've used the table on many trips and rarely smelled smoke.

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☐ Later that evening, the crew will call guests to the Dining car at their appointed dining time. Linen table clothes, dimmed lighting, and surprisingly good food will greet you. There are usually chicken, steak, fish, and vegetarian entrees, plus a few kids' options. While we found all of the food to be surprisingly good, our favorite part was the brownie sundae for dessert.

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☐ The next morning, you can return to the Dining car to enjoy a continental breakfast, or request a "to go box" to be taken back to your room or for the road. The best part is both meals are included in your ticket price. Remember to take along cash to tip your servers. We've traditionally tipped \$10-20 at dinner and \$3-5 at breakfast.

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☐ Debarking Bingo -- Please, Please call my number!!

☐ Upon arriving at your destination, passengers disembark and begin the potentially time-consuming process of waiting for their vehicles. Vehicle unloading is random, based on how the car carriers are decoupled. Passengers eagerly stand by the railing, waiting for their car to unload. As cars are driven off the train, the crew announces the number assigned to each car -- often to the shouts of "bingo!" from the lucky owner. And with that, you are on your way.

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☐ Service with a Smile

☐ From the porters who personally assist you, to the dining staff, Auto Train employees are attentive and hard working. Servicing a moving train full of people with varied needs requires hard work and a good disposition, which we've experienced again and again on our trips. And for those staying in Bedrooms or Roomettes, the porters are deserving of a \$10-\$20 tip for servicing your room--it's a surprisingly physical task. The train offers a variety of additional amenities, such as self-service coffee and tea stations, an evening movie, and basic toiletries and towels to make your trip as pleasant and relaxing as possible!

About The Author: Michael & Tara Miller are Disney Vacation Club members and have enjoyed numerous trips to Walt Disney World and on the Disney Cruise Line ships. They are looking forward to experiencing Star Wars

Weekend at Walt Disney World in June 2012 and their first voyage on the Disney Dream over Christmas of 2012.

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