

Go East, Old Man

(The Consolation Prize 2023)

Last Christmas I planned to take the train out to New York City, where the big event would be seeing the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall. Unfortunately climate change doesn't just mean "global warming". In December 2022 it meant one of the worst snow storms we'd had in years. Amtrak cancelled the trains I'd bene booked on, and the only option was a refund credit that had to be spent within a year. Since my main vacation in 2023 was overseas (a long-awaited trip to New Zealand), to get value out of the credit I'd have to take a fairly major train trip in the country as well. That trip would happen in late July and early August and would take me back to the East Coast.



Lower Manhattan skyline from Bush Terminal Park in Brooklyn

Thursday, July 27

Algona, Iowa to Maquoketa, Iowa

I left home right at 6:15 this morning. Just a couple minutes after leaving I made my first stop, dropping off some deposit bottles and cans at a charity donation site. Among the many changes our legislators made in recent years that I disagree with, it's become all but impossible for individuals to return beverage containers and get their deposit back. Letting charities benefit from them is the next best thing, so that's what I do.

As I made my way southward the radio reported that there was some rain west of Algona. I didn't encounter any real rain, but between a construction site south of St. Joe and Humboldt it did sprinkle on and off—just enough that I had to start the wipers a couple of times. My next stop was at Hardees in Humboldt, where I picked up a bacon, egg, and cheese biscuit. While I usually enjoy Hardees breakfasts, this one seemed like it had been sitting under the light for quite a while; it was cold and hard.

I continued south to Ft. Dodge and then headed east on U.S. 20. This is a very dull road. The most interesting thing I saw was a dead hog that was laying along the shoulder like roadkill. I have no idea how it was killed or why it was lying on the roadside, but it definitely caught me by surprise.

I continued east to Waterloo and then headed (where there's a bit more construction) and then headed south on I-380. My next stop at a Casey's in Urbana, where I filled with gas and used the restroom. I hadn't bought gas since the beginning of the month, and the price had really shot up just recently. Even with a few Hy-Vee points, I still paid \$3.35 a gallon.\

It had been a bit foggy much of the morning, but the mist finally burned off by the time I got to Cedar Rapids. The temperature soared to where it was over 90 for the rest of my drive. I continued down to Iowa City, where they seem to have re-done the 80/380 interchange yet again. Then I headed east over to the Quad Cities.



I took the western beltway (I-280) south to business 61, which I followed into downtown Davenport. My brother John had recently written about seeing our nephew Tim and his family post on Facebook about an exhibit about cartoonist Charles Schultz that they'd gone to at the Figge Museum in Davenport, so I decided to make that my destination this morning. Right at 11am I got to a parking lot between the museum and the river. I settled in there, crossed the street, and climbed an enormous flight of stairs to the museum's main entrance.

In addition to the special exhibit, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the museum had free admission during the month of July (apparently subsidized by a major donation). I spent about an hour exploring their eclectic collection. They have a broad range of work, though not a lot by any given artist. For no reason I can figure out there's a large collection of Haitian art, as well as the prairie artists (Grant Wood, Frank Lloyd Wright, etc.) that I'd expect in a Midwestern museum. What I probably enjoyed most, though, was a collection of works by art students from high schools around eastern Iowa and northwest Illinois. They displayed some amazing talent.

I had lunch today at Little Caesar's pizza. Mostly I'd chosen this to add to my collection of Pepsi memorabilia. Little Caesar's has a summer promotion featuring pineapple-flavored Pepsi (which they suggest as an accompaniment to Hawaiian pizza). I got a small Detroit-style pizza (a specialty of the Michigan-based company), and I picked up a can of the pineapple Pepsi and also a bottle of Diet Pepsi. The pizza was good, but half of the small size was more than enough for my lunch. I drank the Diet Pepsi and saved the unopened can of pineapple Pepsi as a souvenir.



It seems that whenever I travel there's something that I forget to pack. I'd realized while driving this morning that I'd forgotten the needles that I use for the insulin injections I take each night. I probably have a year's supply at home, but those were useless since I didn't pack them. So I stopped at a nearby Walgreen's and picked up a small box of needles for the trip.

After lunch I headed north on highway 61. I'd arranged to spend the night at my brother John's in Maquoketa, and I got there around 1:30. John and Janet and I spent the afternoon and evening just chatting, broken only by a wonderful dinner of steak skewers and potatoes. John and Janet had recently bought a bunch of sparkling wine (Spanish cava and Italian prosecco), and we drained multiple bottles while conversing. We were up until after midnight having a wonderful visit.

Friday, July 28

Maquoketa, Iowa to Bettendorf, Iowa

We continued our visit today. John and Janet treated me to brunch at a nice diner in Maquoketa called City Limits. While their staff seemed to leave a bit to be desired, the food was excellent and the portions were enormous.

Back at their house I spent quite a while showing off my pictures from New Zealand. I took far too many pictures on that trip, and I worry that people may be bored by them. John and Janet seemed to like seeing the pictures, though, and New Zealand definitely is a beautiful country.

We spent much of the afternoon visiting some more. I hadn't seen John and Janet since last Thanksgiving, and it was great to get caught up a bit.

Around four I headed back southward. When I got into my car I realized just how hot it had gotten sitting in the sun. I'd left that can of pineapple Pepsi in the cupholder. The heat had caused the can to explode spraying pop all over the dash area. I made a brief stop at the Maquoketa Dollar Tree, where I picked up some cleaning wipes. I went through about a dozen of them cleaning up where the pop had sprayed, and I also used a bunch of napkins to dry out the bottom of the cupholder. While I've seen pop cans explode after being frozen before, I'd never seen one blown apart by heat. I decided to keep the damaged can, because it will still be an interesting part of the Pepsi collection.

Aside from cleaning up the mess, the drive southward was uneventful. Before long I got to Bettendorf, where I checked into the Clarion Pointe Hotel. This hotel, like all the places I have reserved for this trip, is a "freebie" point redemption. Tonight's stay is at one of the lowest point values, just 8,000 Choice Privileges points. That's probably because the property used to be an Econolodge. Margaret and I stayed here a couple of times at the start of past trips. While Econolodge is a cheap chain, this was one of their better properties. Choice Hotels considers Clarion a more upscale brand, and the hotel seems to fit its new name. Everything in my room is quite nice, with a single exception—which is that the desk chair has a missing wheel. I'll try to inform the desk about that at check-out, and hopefully they'll get it fixed before another guest is here.

After settling into the room I microwaved the Little Caesar's pizza I had leftover from yesterday for my dinner. While I was working on this travelogue, the local tornado sirens started blaring. It apparently wasn't a tornado warning, but rather a severe thunderstorm warning, and at least in Bettendorf it hadn't even started raining yet. Hopefully rain will be all we get out of this—knock on wood.

Saturday, July 29

Bettendorf, Iowa to South Bend, Indiana

I was up before six this morning, though I did get a pretty decent night's sleep. It did rain quite heavily between about 9:30 and 11:00, but it didn't appear that there was any reason for the tornado sirens to have sounded. The hotel, my car, and pretty much everything else in the Quad Cities seemed to be all right.

As I was packing up my car a group of high school boys in orange shirts was also taking stuff out to the parking lot. I did a double-take because one of them looked almost exactly like Gavin Swift, a track and cross-country athlete who just graduated from Garrigan. It wasn't Gavin, but the lanky blond guy with wire-rim glasses could easily have been his double.

I gave the breakfast room a quick once over and decided there was nothing that looked inviting. There were plenty of high-carb items, but the only protein they had was yogurt. I figured I'd do better picking something up along the way, so I just headed out to my car and set off at 6:45.

I didn't go long before stopping. A Kwik Star convenience store near the hotel had gas for \$3.24⁹, which was cheaper than anything I'd seen so far on the trip. I didn't need gas, but I figured I might as well fill up. After that brief stop I set off for real, heading down Interstate 74. There's a lovely new bridge over the Mississippi on I-74, and they've also rebuilt the highway through Moline. I remember that route being horrible years ago when my brother Steve lived in the Quad Cities. Today it was an easy drive on a mostly six-lane highway. There's still an awkward cloverleaf to merge onto I-280, but fortunately the traffic was light and I was able to get through without any problem.

I stopped for breakfast at the Hardees in Geneseo. I was pleased to be able to get an item that's nostalgic to me—a ham, egg, and cheese biscuit. That was always my "good luck" breakfast when I'd go to speech contests back in high school, but most Hardees don't have it on their menu anymore. This one was as tasty as I remembered, and together with coffee it was just what I wanted this morning.

I made a quick stop to use the restroom at a rest area just west of Princeton. Then I took Exit 56 off of I-80 and made my way down to the Princeton Amtrak station. I got there just shortly after they opened for the day, and I only had about a twenty-minute wait until my train would arrive. Everyone went outside at 8:25, but just a couple minutes later they announced we should cross to the north platform (the one normally used for westbound trains). The train showed up on that platform, and we left one minute late at 8:31am.

There were twenty-one passengers who boarded at Princeton, three of whom (myself included) went to the business class car. I was the first in there, which allowed me to claim the one remaining singleton seat. It was not really an ideal seat, as it had what might be described as an obstructed view, since a storage closet took away the window that would otherwise be in front of my bulkhead seat. It was still comfortable, and I was glad not to be by myself.

The conductor spent a long time scanning the coach passengers' tickets. I decided to get a cup of coffee (a perk in the business car) while I was waiting, and of course it was while I was getting the coffee that he came to scan the business class tickets. He actually scanned the ticket on my phone while I was still in the café car, and by the time he had finished with the other two business class passengers who got on at Princeton we had reached the next stop, Mendota. When we left Mendota every single business class seat was full, and I gather there weren't many empties in coach either.

After I'd gotten my coffee a father and his son came to the café car. They asked the attendant if the coffee cake they had was any good. His response was, "I never eat them, but I sure sell them."

I filled much of the time on the morning trip by taking a history quiz that came up in the Google feed on my phone. They implied the questions were very hard and "less than 5% can get over 50%". I ended up answering all but one of fifty multiple choice questions correctly. The only one I missed was the exact date of the fall of Saigon. There are a lot of dates that are important in history, but that's one pretty much nobody talks about.

For some reason we slowed way down and eventually came to a complete stop just west of Aurora. Normally it's freight trains that slow down Amtrak. That didn't really make sense here, though, since this section was four tracks wide. We stopped there for about ten minutes, though. Fortunately there's a bit of time built into the schedule. We were only four minutes late leaving Naperville, and we arrived in Chicago right on time at 10:25am.

My watch and phone said it was 10:25, but that's not what any of the clocks at Union Station said. They were wrong when I came to Chicago to fly to New Zealand, and they were still wrong now. There were two clocks on the platform where I arrived. One of them said it was Friday at 1:37pm, and the other said it was Saturday at 9:01am. I'm writing this Saturday night while I'm waiting to depart. Looking out I can see a clock on the next platform. It says the time is 8:31am, even though now it's 9:19 at night. I have no clue why the clocks are so screwed up.

I checked into the Metropolitan Lounge, grabbed a couple snacks, and left my bags in their storage room. Then I headed out to explore the city. That was a little more difficult than it sometimes is. They're doing major construction on the blue line 'L' tracks in and west of downtown. Clinton station, the closest one to the Amtrak station, is closed completely closed, and they're running trains in two sections with a bus bridge between them. I walked seven blocks (just under a mile) east and south to the LaSalle station, which right now is the end of the line for O'Hare-bound trains. A train was leaving just as I entered the station. Another train was on the platform, but it waited until the next train arrived from O'Hare (about ten minutes) before setting out. The train seemed rather crowded to me, especially for a weekend. I was very glad I'd gotten on at the temporary terminal, because once we got to the next station (Jackson) it was standing room only.

I rode the train up to Logan Square, a once destitute but now hip and trendy neighborhood on the northwest side. I transferred there to a bus, which I rode up Milwaukee Avenue to a neighborhood in the “bungalow belt” called Jefferson Park. I had lunch there at a place I’d found online called Lucky Grill. Their symbol is an upside-down horseshow, which I’d always heard makes good luck spill out. They do seem to have some good luck, though, because they were doing quite a bit of business today.



Lucky Grill is a pretty classic diner. It was around noon when I got there, and the tables seemed to be evenly split between breakfast and lunch dishes. I had what they called a julienne salad, which most places would call a chef salad. It was an enormous salad, and it was extremely heavy on meat. It seemed like they’d julienned a full pound of ham and turkey. There were also two full eggs (halved, so four total pieces) and a bunch of cheese. In addition to the protein there were a few carrots and cucumber slices and of course a huge mound of lettuce. It was just about the largest salad I’ve ever had. The salad came with rosa marina soup. I’d never heard of that before, but it turned out to be a delicious tomato broth with orzo and basil. The combination made for an excellent lunch.

I left my Ventra card (the card used to pay for Chicagoland transit) on the table when I left the Lucky Grill. I’d just made it to the bus stop across the street when the waitress raced out and called at me to claim it. That was good, because the CTA day pass I had cost just \$5, but individual bus and train rides would add up fast at \$2.50 each.

Most of my day was a jaunt around the near north suburbs on transit. I’ve described bumming around in Chicago numerous times before, so I’ll just hit the highlights here. I first went to a White Castle, where I basically had my lunch dessert. White Castle was doing a temporary promo on “shake parfaits”, and I had a vanilla shake layered with caramel and butter cake crumbles. It definitely made up for the healthy salad I’d had, but it was very tasty.

Next I went to see a rather dubious attraction called the Leaning Tower of Niles. It’s exactly what it sounds like. An eccentric old man erected a half-sized replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and it now sits in a little park between a YMCA (which now owns the tower) and a Target. It took far longer to get there on suburban buses than it did to see the thing.

I then went over to the Evanston Civic Center, where I saw a little attraction I became aware of last spring when Garrigan did the latest in a series of plays with a holocaust theme. The heroine that play portrayed is one of several people honored in a memorial called the Avenue of the Righteous. It’s just a small circular walkway lined with trees. Each tree has a memorial boulder commemorating a Gentile who helped Jews during the holocaust. Evanston was chosen for this because the north suburbs have a large Jewish population, many of whom are holocaust survivors and their descendants. I’d have never known about the place had it not been mentioned in the play, but I am glad I went there.



Leaning Tower of Niles

Getting back south from Evanston was annoying. It always takes forever to get downtown on the red line, which has too many stops that are too close together. Making today worse were two special events. First there was a White Sox game, and a lot of sports fans were heading down to the south side for that. The train was also overwhelmed by thousands of twenty-somethings wearing red T-shirts that proclaimed “Chicago Mustache Crawl”. I googled this and found that it is an all-day organized bar crawl. The event runs from 10am to 8pm, with a breakfast buffet before the starting time and an afterparty going until midnight. Thirty-seven different bars were featuring \$3 draws for people wearing those T-shirts, and there were discounts on other drinks as well. I can’t imagine anyone could fit all the bars into their schedule, but a number of them had obviously had a lot to drink by afternoon. I’d definitely hate to be on one of the red line trains in the evening.

Since I still had quite a bit of time to kill, I decided to go to mass at Holy Name Cathedral. I’ve been here a couple of times before, once with Margaret and once with quiz bowl kids. My reaction this time was no different than it had been then. Holy Name is one of the ugliest churches in Chicago. The interior combines architecture from several eras, and they don’t really go together. That said, the service was enjoyable. The music was excellent, and the priest had a good message about making the most of our lives.

I took another jam-packed train to my dinner destination, the New City location of Nando’s. This is either the fifth or sixth location of the chain I’ve eaten at in Chicago, and I’ve been to about a dozen in various places around the world. Tonight I had skewers of chicken and vegetables, together with coleslaw.

I avoided the madness of the train by taking a bus back to Union Station. There were several Mustache Crawl people there as well, but at least a few seats were available. I made my way to the Metropolitan Lounge, collected my bags, and got started writing today’s summary of the travelogue. I’d been there only about half an hour when they called boarding for the Lake Shore Limited. I was aboard by 8:45, forty-five minutes before the actual departure time.

Before this trip I'd told my brothers I'd be taking the Capitol Limited out to Pittsburgh and then the Pennsylvanian from there, but I'd taken advantage of a last-minute deal to upgrade to a sleeper on the Lake Shore Limited. Not only would I have a lie-flat bed, but I wouldn't have to worry about changing trains in Pittsburgh. I believe this is the fifth time I've taken this train, so I won't bore you with the details. We left right on time, and we were still on time when we got to South Bend shortly before midnight Eastern Time.

Sunday, July 30

South Bend, Indiana to New York City

I slept fairly decently, in spite of some pretty rough tracks. While I was aware of the stop in Elkhart, I completely slept through the rest of Indiana and most of Ohio as well. Slowing down to arrive in Cleveland is what really woke me up. It surprised me that we actually got to Cleveland almost twenty minutes ahead of schedule. Amtrak never leaves before the scheduled time, so we had a very long stop just across from the Browns' stadium. That was a far cry from the first Lake Shore Limited trip I made with Margaret years ago, when we left Chicago late and were nearly seven hours behind by the time we got to Cleveland.

I think there are plumbing problems in this car. The attendant told me about the shower when I boarded, but it's blocked off this morning. I'm in one of the older cars that has an in-room toilet, but there's a yellow light above it that says "not in service". Fortunately there's a newer car behind mine. Those cars don't have in-room toilets, so there are public restrooms in them. I was able to go back there to do what I needed to do. (Almost immediately after writing that the attendant came by and confirmed that there were mechanical problems in this car.)

The upgrade to a roomette means meals are included, though that's certainly not a big feature on this train. While Amtrak has returned to its rather lavish cooked-to-order traditional dining on the big western trains, they've kept the "flexible dining" that went in with COVID east of the Mississippi. That basically means pre-packaged "airplane food". This morning I had pancakes with pork sausage and some yogurt on the side. The breakfast wasn't bad, but it was far from haute cuisine.

We're racing through the vineyards of far western New York as I write this. This is one of the few places where the name of the train (Lake Shore Limited) actually makes sense, since periodically there are nice views of Lake Erie beyond the grape fields. My roomette is on the left side of the train, so Lake Erie is about the only water view I'll have. The Erie Canal and the Hudson will be on the other side of the train. I don't think I've ever been on this side of the Lake Shore Limited before, and I'll be kind of interested to see what the view is to the north and east.

We passed a train of tanker cars just south of Buffalo. That reminded me of another reason I should probably be glad I'm taking this route rather than what I'd originally scheduled. The Capitol Limited runs over the infamous tracks in East Palestine, Ohio, where a derailment led to a toxic spill not long ago. Upstate New York is the same rust belt region as Ohio and Pennsylvania. It's a bit flatter here, though, so hopefully the tracks are easier to maintain.



**Abandoned Buffalo Central Station
(a major landmark on the Lake Shore Limited)**

quiz bowl tournament this fall and also updated a few pages on my church's website. All Amtrak's single-level trains now have wi-fi. It's not lightning fast (they advise passengers not to stream video, for instance), but it worked perfectly well for anything I wanted to do.

We arrived early in both Buffalo and Rochester, and we left both cities precisely on time. We slowed down and stopped west of Syracuse for about ten minutes, though. I suspect they're doing some sort of track work. I haven't seen workers, but it looks like there's fresh gravel under the tracks. As is far too often the case on Amtrak, though, no announcement of any sort was made. I thought this might affect the schedule, but we were only a couple minutes late at both Syracuse and Utica.

Since I'd eaten breakfast early, I also went to the diner for lunch right when they opened at noon. An advantage of the changes to food service they made with COVID is that the diner is less crowded than it used to be. I was by myself at breakfast, and there was only one other person sharing my table at lunch. The companion was a portly young man with a mohawk haircut. He lives in Columbus (which has no Amtrak service) and had boarded the train at Cleveland. He's obviously quite wealthy, since he owns both a house in Ohio and an apartment in Manhattan. Both he and I had enchiladas for lunch. They looked absolutely disgusting, but they tasted very good.

The views have actually been quite pretty today, even if I am on the "wrong" side of the train. I may not be looking out at the Erie Canal, but I have seen some nice lakes and rivers, and there's the tree-covered mountains that to my mind make upstate New York one of the prettiest places around. Given all the major cities in the Empire State, it's really kind of amazing just how rural much of New York is.

I spent much of the morning working at my computer. I wrote some questions for our

We reached Schenectady fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, which meant another long stop. At Schenectady a young couple boarded and was assigned the roomette across from mine. They must really value their privacy, because I certainly can't think of any other reason to book a sleeper for an in-state daytime trip that only lasts a few hours. The diner has stopped serving lunch, so they won't even get a free meal. Half a dozen trains a day run from Schenectady to New York. On any of the others they could book business class for about half of what a sleeper costs on the Lake Shore Limited. I guess they must have money to burn, but I think it must be about privacy. As soon as the attendant showed them their room they shut the curtain and locked the door. I suspect it will remain that way for the duration of the trip—which means, of course, I won't even be catching a glimpse of the Hudson valley.



Sitting in Room 10 of Car 4811

engines, one Boston sleeper, a café car, two Boston coaches, three New York coaches, a diner, three New York sleepers, and a baggage car that also has a couple rooms for crew rest. That makes fourteen cars going to Albany (long enough that both the engines and the baggage car extended beyond the platform), and we'll still have nine as we make our way south along the Hudson. The sleepers each have twelve roomettes, three large bedrooms, and a handicapped room, and the coaches each seat sixty passengers. You can tell this train moves a lot of people.

It's interesting that the one place in the route we got behind schedule was on the stretch from Albany to New York City. Amtrak owns those tracks, and there's no freight trains at all. That's probably why they have a pretty tight schedule on that leg. When anything goes wrong (like some track work today) there's no padding in the schedule to recover from it. We were about twenty minutes late at the penultimate stop (Croton—Harmon). We made up a bit of time, but we were still ten minutes down when we got to Penn Station.

I didn't even make my way into the new Moynihan Train Hall. Instead I followed signs for the subway and made a connection totally underground. Before I could enter the subway I had to pay for my fare. Theoretically New York has switched to a new payment method called OMNY, but two years after introducing that system you still can't buy OMNY cards in subway stations. That meant I had to buy one of the magnetic stripe Metrocards. Those are a pain to use, but there's basically no other good option. Even though I'll only be in New York for three days, it was cheaper to buy a 7-day pass. Those have cost \$33 since well before COVID, but apparently the cost is going up later this year.

I was grateful to have a small suitcase that could slide under the turnstile. I had to slide the new Metrocard a couple of times to get it to work, but eventually I was inside the station at 8th Avenue and 34th Street. My intent was to catch an A-train. However the C-train was running on the express tracks where A's usually run, and it came first. The train was crowded, but it emptied out as we headed southward. After just a couple of stops I was able to sit down. I rode to Jay Street—Metrotech in downtown Brooklyn and switched there to the R-train. Then I rode south to the 45th Street station. From there I just had to walk one block west to my hotel, the Quality Inn—Sunset Park.

While we seemed to crawl between Schenectady and Albany, we still reached New York's dumpy capital nine minutes early. There were more sleeper passengers who boarded in Albany. The Amtrak website says the sleeper fare from Albany to New York is \$197, while coach is \$59. I suppose that—like me—the people who boarded here could have upgraded at a discount rate, but it still seems odd to get a sleeper for a short daytime run. I did find out in overhearing the car attendant's welcome speech that passengers who board after the lunch service stops are served one of the same reheated meals as "dinner" (a meal not normally included when headed to New York). That would make up about \$10 of the extra cost.

Every train that goes through Albany has a long layover scheduled here. Trains headed to or from New York switch engines here, because the tracks along the Hudson are electrified, but those north and west of here aren't. The process is even more involved on the Lake Shore Limited because they also split the two halves of the train. The front part, including the engines that brought us from Chicago, continues on to Boston. They actually add a third engine to that section so it can make it through the steep grades in the Berkshires without any issues. Once they leave, they'll put an electric engine in front of the back section so we can continue down to New York. They have a little over an hour scheduled for those maneuvers, and since we arrived early we've basically got an hour and a half here. I went into the station, which is much improved from when Margaret and I were first here. There's really not much to do there, though, and after using a more modern restroom I just returned to the train.

I did watch the train separation maneuver, and I also hiked the length of a very long train. Leaving Chicago we had (from front to back) two



Halves of Lake Shore Limited separating at Albany



**View from Room 406
Quality Inn—Sunset Park**

It took surprisingly long to check in, particularly given that this was another point redemption. Eventually I got my keys, though, and I made my way up to Room 406. I'd specifically requested a room with two double beds. I think that was wise, because it's larger than most NYC hotel rooms. Except that there's no closet at all, the place has the same amenities you'd find at any low to midrange hotel. The walls and floors seem a bit worn, and my view is of an elevated expressway. The biggest quirk, though, is the TV. They don't have a standard cable or satellite connection. Instead you have to stream individual programs over the Roku service. I'm not at all familiar with Roku, and it doesn't seem particularly user-friendly. I have a feeling I probably won't be watching any TV while I'm here.

There's one other complaint I have about the hotel. They don't start serving breakfast until 7:30am. Since I'm trying to cram as much as I can into the time I'm here, I'll likely be skipping breakfast once or twice. I've run into the same problem at other New York hotels in the past. For a place they call "the city that never sleeps", they seem to sleep in awfully late in the Big Apple.

Monday, July 31 **New York City**

I was up at six and left the hotel at 6:45, well ahead of the breakfast service. I walked a few blocks north under the expressway and had breakfast at a Dunkin' Donuts location. I didn't have their namesake product, but I did have coffee and a breakfast sandwich. Then I made my way to the 36th Street subway station.

I rode up to Whitehall Street at the south tip of Manhattan. I spent the first part of my morning checking out a number of little parks in the area. While a couple of these were actual city parks, most were plazas that businesses were required to construct when they built skyscrapers. Not only must they provide green space, but they must also make sure it is freely available to the public. In many cases these plazas are nicer than city parks, because the developers meticulously maintain them as part of their property.



**LEFT: Rooftop garden at the Elevated Acre
RIGHT: View of Queens (Long Island City) skyline from Elevated Acre**

The one of these that's mentioned in a variety of guides to New York is a place called the Elevated Acre, a lovely park that is part of the 55 Water Street development. You reach it by going up a series of escalators from the street, and once there it's not only a pleasant park, but there are lovely views of several of the famous bridges and much of New York harbor.

I also saw the plaza at a building with the pretentious address One New York, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Plaza, a city park that occupies the site of the first police precinct in the city, the Old Government Plaza (which is now surrounded by a Hyatt Hotel), the plaza at 88 Pine Street, and the plaza at the entrance to the South Street Seaport commercial development.

While not a park, another fascinating point of interest is at 200 Water Street. The entire face of the building at that address is covered with enormous numbers that light up in different colors to make a digital clock showing the current hour, minute, and second.

When it was erected in 1971, it was the largest clock in the world. That's no longer true, and today the numbers probably annoy the residents of the apartments in that building. It's a landmark, though, so they're not going anywhere.



Digital clock building

After seeing the parks along Water Street I took the subway up to the Bowery stop and spent a bit of time in Sara Roosevelt Park. The park is named after FDR's mother. She was a wealthy debutante who advocated for the poor, and it's appropriate to have a park bearing her name in a neighborhood that's been down at the heels for generations. The area around Bowery station was once Little Italy, but today it's mostly home to recent Asian and Central American immigrants. Most of those people were at work, and the park was full of old white men just sitting around all day. The neighborhood is heavily graffitied, and the park has litter everywhere. It's definitely not one of New York's beauty spots.

In stark contrast to Sara Roosevelt Park was the next place I went to, Gramercy Park. This is a completely private green space owned and maintained by the homeowners association in the condos that surround it. All the entrances require a key that only the locals have, and the only people I could see when looking through the fence were gardeners. Most of the people on the sidewalk were nannies pushing around the spoiled brats of the filthy rich. While the neighborhood is lovely, I felt more than a bit out of place there.



Typical mosaic nameplate in NYC subway

pedestrian tunnel that provides access to four additional lines. Those lines (the ones colored orange on the subway map) are technically in a different station, but now they're part of the Times Square complex. The new tunnel means you can walk under 42nd Street from 8th Avenue to 5th Avenue, a distance that's almost exactly a mile.

Just west of Gramercy Park I walked past the birthplace of Theodore Roosevelt. He was born in a pleasant, if rather nondescript rowhouse. It's now a national historic site. I'd like to have seen it, but it has yet to reopen after COVID. It was interesting to walk by, though.

I made my way up to Grand Central Station. They just finished an enormous construction project there, though everything new is underground. The lovely terminal looks like it always has, but hundreds of feet below the subway they've built new tracks and concourses that connect to the Long Island Railroad. The new part is open, but it doesn't appear to be entirely finished. There are places all along the concourses where they obviously plan to have businesses, but none of them are there yet. Instead they have big posters showing what sort of business is supposed to occupy each space. It really was quite weird.

I took the subway shuttle over to Times Square and then went through another new piece of infrastructure. The Times Square underground complex already served twelve subway lines, and they just opened a new



Citigroup Center

I next went up to 54th Street, where the subway exit is to the plaza of the Citigroup Center. This skyscraper has a fascinating history. About a third of the building rests on pillars over the plaza, and part of it is cantilevered over a church that existed before the skyscraper was built. The building was completed in 1976, but in 1978 they discovered that the pillars that supported it would not be structurally sound in a high wind. (The architects had literally goofed up the math required for their design.) The building was reinforced while business continued to go on inside, with most of the workers having no clue what the construction was about. The reinforcement worked. Since then it has withstood several hurricanes without issue. Its issues are now studied by future engineers, though.

I took the train down to Rockefeller Center and had a nice stroll through the public plazas there. Then I made my way to my main destination this morning. I'd booked a tour of Radio City Music Hall. While I couldn't see the Rockettes do their show as I'd planned, at least I could see the theatre where they performed.

The Radio City tour was excellent. Ryan, the guide was an aspiring actor who gave an interesting perspective on everything we saw. He also did a good job of keeping things moving without making us feel rushed.

Radio City (which was named after RCA, then one of the primary tenants of Rockefeller Center) was built to be the largest movie theatre on earth. As its name implies, from the start it also hosted live music acts. The Rockettes (a group originally formed in St. Louis) were hired to perform between movies. The theatre seats more than 6,000 people, and because the balconies are cantilevered, there are no pillars obstructing any views. The enormous stage has a gilded curtain and is surrounded by panels that are lit to form a sunset

design, supposedly inspired by the scenery the original owner saw on a cruise. The seats are upholstered in orange and rust to match that sunset theme.



Radio City Music Hall

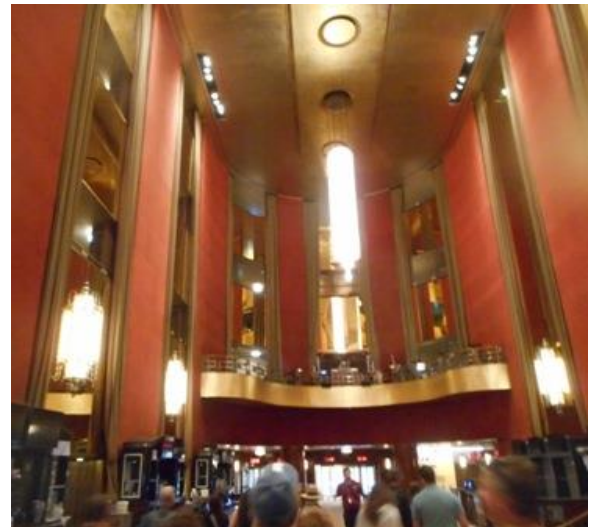
The stage floor has multiple elevators and turntables, all of which come into play during the Christmas show. Workers were doing maintenance on the stage elevators when we visited. There are vast amounts of wing and fly space—far more (according to our guide) than any of the Broadway theatres. The mechanical controls are

considered quite outdated by today's standards, but the technicians say they like the infinitely adjustable range that digital lights and sound don't allow.

Another big feature of Radio City is its organ. It is controlled by two consoles and has pipes covered with curtains all over the auditorium. The air control mechanism runs throughout several floors above, with stairs leading up and then down to get around the pipes.

The lobby at Radio City is an art deco masterpiece. It was built in the 1920s and is very much of its era. While a few modern touches (like credit card payment stations at the bars) have been added, it still has an old-time glamorous feel. There are some unfortunate features like an extremely busy carpet featuring abstract renderings of musical instruments and an aluminum sculpture of a nude goddess with a very masculine face. Overall it's extremely beautiful, though.

The tour includes meeting a Rockette. We went into a small room that had a side door with a star on it. The guide knocked on the door, and a fully made-up and costumed young woman stepped out. She had been part of a scholarship program that brings high school girls from all over the country to study dance in New York. That happened in 2020, so her first bid to be a Rockette was cut short by COVID. She was part of the group when things reopened in 2022, though, and she'll be a Rockette for this year's Christmas show as well. I could see a lot of the dance girls I teach in this woman, though it's unlikely any of them will ever dance at Radio City. The odds of becoming a Rockette are about the same as becoming a professional athlete, and the money is a lot worse.



Lobby at Radio City Music Hall

After the Radio City tour I took the subway to Columbus Circle and went to a place I'd been on an earlier trip, the TurnStyle underground market. This is a little shopping center located in an abandoned subway station. They have an interesting range of food from all over the world. When I was here before I had a Bolivian empanada. I was a bit less adventurous this time, having a snack from a place called the Dognuttery. They specialize in miniature doughnuts (the size of those awful Donettes, but made fresh on site) which are covered with various flavored sugars. I chose apple cider (the official New York state doughnut), cardamom, and salted caramel. There honestly wasn't much difference between the three flavors, but they were quite tasty.

I picked up a copy of the free paper *Metro* at TurnStyle. It intrigued me that free papers are still going in New York, while they've all but completely disappeared in other cities. The big news in *Metro* was that the hotels the city has contracted with to house the busloads of migrants that have been shipped up here by the Texas governor were now full. That meant the migrants on the latest bus ending up sleeping on the sidewalk. I'd think there would be churches or community groups that might offer to help out with that, but I don't know if any were contacted.

I took the subway up to 116th Street, which is right outside Barnard College, the women's college that is a sister to Columbia. Since I'd already had dessert, I had the main course of my lunch (a chicken souvlaki pita) from a food truck just outside the station. I ate it on a bench in another little park called the Broadway Mall. Broadway in upper Manhattan is a boulevard, and the mall is the tree-filled median between the two sides.

I took the subway north to 161st Street. I'd booked another tour, this one of the new Yankee Stadium. The "new" stadium is fifteen years old now. Ballparks all over the country have sprung up since it was open. Years ago I toured the old Yankee Stadium, and I figured it might be fun to see the new one.



World Championship trophy – Yankee Stadium



**"Selfie" taken at the Toyota Club
in the outfield seats at Yankee Stadium**

I've done a lot of ballpark tours over the years. Some of them have been very nice; others not so much. This was just about the worst of the tours I've done. While the guide was pleasant and clearly a die-hard Yankee fan, he really didn't show us much of anything. We walked along the concourse and then took an elevator up to the Yankees Museum, where they display World Series trophies, balls signed by famous players, and a few other bits of memorabilia. We then walked all the way to the outfield area and walked down numerous flights of stairs to get to Monument Park, the tribute to great players that was transferred from the old park. At the old stadium the monuments were surrounded by grass; now they have a concrete walkway leading past them, and the sense was that the line had better keep moving. We then walked back to the front of the stadium and went down to the "Legends Club" seats. These seats (right behind home plate) are almost always empty when you watch games on TV. They're sold to season ticket holders at a rate that equates to thousands of dollars per game. The rich people who buy them don't care about missing a few games. When they do attend, they're more often enjoying food at a restaurant underneath the section than in the seats themselves.

I just described everything we saw on the Yankee Stadium tour. At other ballparks I got to sit in the dugouts or walk on the field. At other stadiums I saw the locker rooms and the pressbox, and I learned technical details like how they get draft beer all over an enormous facility. I even saw the daycare center for players' kids at one ballpark, the training room at another, and learned how the scoreboard worked at a third. All of that was off limits here. I'd gone through airport-style security to enter the stadium, but they seemed to there was nothing I saw that seemed to warrant that. The tour was minimal and disappointing, easily the worst of the ballpark tours I've done. I've been a Yankee fan since childhood, but honestly this tour put a rather bad taste in my mouth.

I took the subway south to 138th Street. This is in the South Bronx, an area that a generation ago was considered the worst slum in America. While it's certainly not wealthy today, it's a very lively working class Hispanic neighborhood. Grand Concourse in the South Bronx looks and feels a lot like Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago.

I stopped at a supermarket just a couple blocks from the station. It's odd to see a full-size supermarket anywhere in New York, and it was particularly strange to see one called Western Beef whose logo was a cactus with a cowboy hat. While a bit cramped inside, the store was immaculate, easily the nicest place in a rather gritty neighborhood.

Just down the street from Western Beef was a Dollar Tree located on the ground floor of an apartment building. While the supermarket was nicely maintained, the same can't be said of Dollar Tree. It reminded me of visiting the K-Mart in Gallup, New Mexico on Christmas Eve. Everything had been picked over, merchandise had been abandoned in the wrong departments, and there was junk all over the floors. Visiting this store was an experience, though not a particularly pleasant one.

I hadn't really come to the South Bronx for shopping. I'd walked across a number of New York bridges in the past, and I wanted to cross another. So I walked south along 3rd Avenue, passing a Comfort Inn that I'd have stayed at if the trip I'd planned in December had actually happened. Just south of there 3rd Avenue becomes a bridge that first crosses over an interstate and then over the Harlem River. The Harlem River doesn't really have a source or mouth. Basically it's just what separates the Hudson and the East Rivers (both of which are really just inlets of the Atlantic Ocean at this point) at the north end of Manhattan. It is a major waterway, though, and it was kind of fun to cross it on foot.

I walked down to 125th Street. This is the heart of Harlem and used to be called the main street of black America. While there are still some black people in Harlem, it's definitely not a center of black culture today. The area is very multicultural. Spanish is the most spoken language on the street, but there are also people from south and east Asia and lots of wealthy white people. (Bill Clinton has an

apartment on 125th Street, for instance.) The stores and restaurants are mostly global chains, and it's one of the cleanest areas in New York.

It was rush hour now, so it surprised me that trains I took back to Brooklyn were not particularly crowded. I transferred twice, and I was able to get a seat on all three trains I took. While riding the subway back to Brooklyn I saw ads for an event called the "Immersive Cosmos" that was obviously done by the same company that did the Immersive Van Gogh exhibit I'd seen in San Francisco. It might have made a fun way to spend the evening. However, when I googled it, I found the exhibit was closed for maintenance this week. ... Oh, well!

I dumped my stuff at the hotel and then went out again. I walked around the Sunset Park neighborhood. The residential parts of the area are almost all rowhouses, though they're either brick or wood rather than the brownstones for which the city is famous. It's quite a diverse area. There are substantial numbers of Chinese, Korean, Mexican, Central American, and Caribbean immigrants. There are also a fair number of African—Americans. What you don't see much of in Sunset Park are people of European descent. It's a very prosperous neighborhood. Those rowhouses sell for around \$650,000, so obviously the residents aren't doing badly. Another sense of prosperity is that the tiny lawns in front of the rowhouses are well kept, and almost everyone owns a motorcycle.

The main drags of Sunset Park are 4th Avenue (where the subway runs) and 5th Avenue. These feature apartment buildings with businesses on the ground floor. There are some chains, but mostly ma 'n' pa shops and restaurants.

I walked past the actual park for which Sunset Park is named. It's located on a sort of plateau above the rest of the neighborhood, so I really couldn't see much in it. It seems to be a popular place, though. Kids were playing, adults were walking their dogs, and old people were sitting around watching the world go by.

My ultimate destination was a place called Sunset Park Diner and Donuts, which is located in a one-story freestanding building on a corner lot on 5th Avenue. The place would be politely described as having an eclectic décor. The nicest part is a pressed tin ceiling. There's also art deco signage, furniture and knick-knacks from the '60s and big screen TVs. When I arrived a bus driver was the only other customer in the place. A couple of families showed up while I was eating. I had French onion soup (which was surprisingly flavorless) and a Greek salad (which was much more tasty). While I ate I amused myself by watching the staff prepare numerous take-out orders. They seem to do the bulk of their business through delivery services like Uber Eats. They'd just get one order out the door and another delivery guy would show up on a motorcycle to get the next order.

I went back to the hotel and settled in for the night. I couldn't begin to estimate how far I walked today, but my feet definitely ached.

Tuesday, August 1

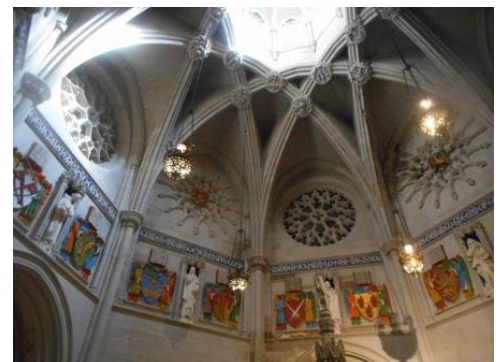
New York City and Ft. Lee, New Jersey

I made a point of sticking around late enough to have the hotel breakfast this morning. That turned out to be a mistake. This was even worse than most of the hotel breakfasts I complain about. They had absolutely no protein—no eggs, no meat, and no yogurt. There was also no fruit and not even the ubiquitous waffles you see at hotels these days—even though they had a big poster that showed waffles, eggs, and fruit. Basically there was a choice of cereal, toast, or bagels. For beverages they had watered-down coffee and Tang.

After breakfasting on a single bagel I made my way to the subway. I had a long ride, almost exclusively on express trains, ending up at 110th Street at the northwest corner of Central Park. I had a little bit of time to kill, so I stopped in for a much better breakfast at a well-known spot in the area, the Hungarian Pastry Shop. The place has been going since 1961, and in that time many famous writers have penned lines while lingering at its tables. Today a number of people were working on their computers over coffee, though I think the bulk of them were Columbia students. I had some coffee and two pastries—a sour cherry and cream cheese strudel and an almond horn. The latter is basically the same as the Dutch letters you can get in Iowa. Both pastries and also the coffee were excellent, and the price was no more than coffee and "fancies" would cost at Dunkin' Donuts.

I'd come up to this neighborhood (Morningside Heights) because before the trip I'd booked before a visit to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. This is the seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York. It's also an unfinished church that's theoretically been under construction for a century and a quarter. At the moment they appear to be cutting their losses and accepting the existing building rather than attempting to build the cruciform design that's supposed to be there. That makes sense given that the sanctuary is already enormous, and only about a third of it is filled with chairs. The rest is just empty space. Like most liberal churches, pretty much no Episcopal church is growing these days, so they really don't need more space.

Something that I found a bit disturbing was that I had to pass through a metal detector and have my bag searched to enter the cathedral. It appears that even people who are just going to church have to be screened. It's sad that the security exists, but



Ceiling at St. John the Divine

presumably it wouldn't be there if there weren't a need for it.



A side chapel at St. John the Divine

neighborhood is dominated by the massive George Washington Bridge and the Interstate 95, which cuts Manhattan at its narrowest point



ABOVE: George Washington Bridge

RIGHT: Little Red Lighthouse

underneath the George Washington Bridge

and then heads into the Bronx. I'd eventually get to the bridge, but first I followed a lengthy trail that led to the waterfront beneath it. While the trail continues south along the Hudson for another two miles, my destination was a landmark called the Little Red Lighthouse. This was the subject of an inspirational children's book called *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge*. It's still an active lighthouse, though today it's run electronically. Because it's active, you can't actually lit, but it still made a fun destination.



**George Washington Bridge
pedestrian path**

Next I spent an hour or so walking to New Jersey and back on the George Washington Bridge. Back when I was in college I actually drove over this bridge when my father and I spent the Fourth of July in New York City. The bridge is officially signed as Interstate 95, and the New Jersey side marks the start of Interstate 80. There are pedestrian and bicycle paths on both sides of the bridge, though at the moment the south path is closed for construction. (One of the eastbound traffic lanes is also closed.) It was a beautiful day. Even though it was hot, a brisk wind made for a pleasant walk. The view isn't really spectacular, but it is interesting. There are plenty of people traveling back and forth, but it's not at all crowded (very different from the vehicle lanes). Theoretically I could have avoided walking back by taking a bus across the Hudson. Those buses are pricey, though, and they're not included in my Metrocard pass. It was also interesting to see how different the views were walking in both directions. Walking the George Washington Bridge probably isn't on many tourists' radar, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I had a bit of time to kill before the next thing on my schedule, and I filled it by doing a bit more exploration on the subway. I took the 7-train out to where it's elevated in Queens. I generally prefer elevated trains to underground ones because you can see the city from the train. The view while the 7-train is moving is quite nice, though that view is blocked once you get to the stations. It's always seemed odd to me that the platforms are open in Chicago (where the weather is arguably worse), but in New York they build elevated stations as enclosed buildings.

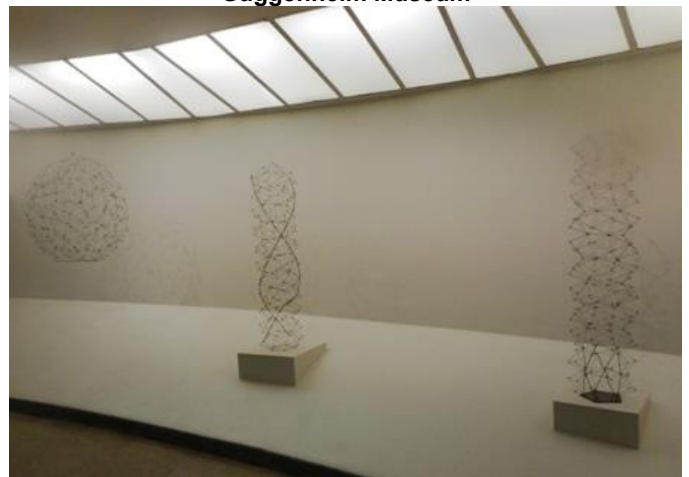
I came back to Manhattan to see the last thing I'd bought a ticket for ahead of time. This was the Guggenheim Museum, the cylindrical Frank Lloyd Wright building that houses one of New York's best known art collections. Unfortunately most of the main collection was not on display today. There was a small side gallery that showed off some works by Picasso and his contemporaries. Virtually all of the great ramp, though, was occupied by two temporary exhibits showing the work of two specific artists. One signed her works "Gego" and was described as the best female Venezuelan artist of the late 20th Century. There's a lot of qualifiers there, and I don't know many people who follow late 20th Century Venezuelan female artists. The vast majority of her work is wire sculpture in geometric shapes, pretty much all of them "sin título" (untitled). It wasn't ugly, but it was just boring. It certainly didn't merit as much space in the museum as they gave it. The other artist the featured signed her name "Sze" and was apparently African-American. Her work would best be described as "assemblages", basically collections of junk through which she attempted to tell a story. While some of it was interesting, most was frankly ugly. I only spent about half an hour at the Guggenheim, and it most definitely was not worth its \$25 admission.

I spent a while wandering around the Upper East Side. This is a lovely area, though a bit too posh for me to feel comfortable. Then I got on the Q-train at the end of the line (96th Street in Manhattan), transferred to the R-train, and ended up at the opposite end of the line (95th Street in Brooklyn).

95th Street is in the Brooklyn neighborhood called Bay Ridge, basically the next neighborhood south of Sunset Park. Bay Ridge is another place that's dominated by a bridge, in this case the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge that connects Brooklyn and Staten Island. This is both longer and higher than the George Washington Bridge, and it feeds I-278 into the Gowanus Expressway the elevated expressway that runs past my hotel. I drove across the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge the same day I drove across the George Washington Bridge, and I've also taken a bus across it from Staten Island to Brooklyn. Pedestrians are only allowed on the bridge one day a year, when it's used as the starting point of the New York marathon. The marathon was not today, so I wouldn't be walking to Staten Island.



Guggenheim Museum



Wire sculptures by Gego



**LEFT: Verrazzano Narrows Bridge looming over 4th Avenue in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn
RIGHT: Atlantic Ocean from Bay Ridge**

I did, however walk underneath the Brooklyn side of the bridge, ending up at John Paul Jones Park, which is right along the waterfront west of Coney Island. Partly this was so I could add a third ocean to what I've seen this summer. I saw the Pacific and the Southern oceans in New Zealand, so now the Atlantic was added to the list. That's kind of fun to have done in just a couple of months.

I made a quick stop at a Walgreens in Bay Ridge and walked through the neighborhood a bit. Though still denser than most other places in America, this is much less dense than most of New York City. Most of the homes in Bay Ridge are duplexes rather than row houses, and there's even a few single family homes (though with impossibly small side yards). There are still apartment buildings along the business streets and a couple of public housing projects, but overall it looks more like Chicago than other parts of New York.

I took the subway back to 45th Street. I had dinner at the Sunset Park branch of Pollo Campero, the Guatemalan fast food chain I'd previously patronized in several Queens, Chicago, Los Angeles, and St. Paul. I was the only Anglo in the place, and the clerk seemed surprised when I ordered in English. She understood, though, and I got a delicious meal. I had a lovely salad with chicken over mixed greens, carrots, corn, and cheese with a white balsamic vinaigrette. I also splurged on the carbs and ordered flan for dessert.

After a nice supper I went back to the Quality Inn and basically just collapsed. It was a long but enjoyable day.

Wednesday, August 2

New York City to Philadelphia

This morning I explored the area west of the hotel. The hotel is on 3rd Avenue, which the freeway runs above. West of there the area rapidly becomes industrial. There's a lot of metal working facilities, and several construction and shipping companies seem to be based in the area as well. There are freight railroad tracks that run right in the middle of 1st Avenue, serving the various businesses. It's a rather grimy area, but the sidewalks were still surprisingly busy with people early in the morning.

My ultimate destination was Bush Terminal Park, a city park erected in the area of some abandoned shipping docks. While a lot of cargo ships used to dock in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, that ceased decades ago. Cruise ships still call in Manhattan, and there's a big military port near Bay Ridge. No commercial goods arrive by sea anymore, though. Today the Port of New York is mainly in New Jersey, with an annex of sorts on Staten Island. Bush Terminal is one of many city parks (and a couple of state parks) that are built on those abandoned docks.



**Statue of Liberty
from Bush Terminal Park – Brooklyn**

The park is well hidden and badly marked. It's basically hidden behind junky industry. This was one time that the maps feature on my phone actually worked well, since I don't think I'd have found the place without it. There's a historic building (presumably the old Bush Terminal) that's being converted into a museum highlighting things that have been manufactured in New York over the years. For now they have a couple of signs out front that show that basically everything was made here until about the 1950s. Since then it's been things that are cheaper to produce locally than to ship from elsewhere. There are some pleasant walking trails and a dock that's now used as a fishing pier.

Mostly, though, Bush Terminal Park is used as a recreation center by area kids. There were dozens of teenagers playing soccer there at 7:00 in the morning, and more kept pouring in while I was in the park. Some walked, and some had parents drop them off in cars. For most of the kids, though, the form of transport was electric bike. I have no idea what electric bikes cost, but every kid in Sunset Park seems to have one.

I went back to the hotel and checked out. Then I dragged my bag uphill to the subway station on 4th Avenue. Avenues are far apart in Brooklyn, just as they are in Manhattan, so a single block between avenues is quite a hike. The subway was much more crowded today than it had been yesterday, so when a seat opened after one stop, I nabbed it. I rode the R-train to the World Trade Center stop. Then I switched to the A-train, which I rode back up to Penn Station.

I think as an apology for cancelling my train last winter, Amtrak had sent me two coupons that would provide access to any of the Metropolitan Lounges in stations around the country. There was no better place to use that than in New York. While all of Moynihan Train Hall (the nice part of Penn Station) is lovely, it's the sort of crowded, bustling station you'd expect in America's largest city. The Metropolitan Lounge gives a nice escape from that chaos, and they also provide essentially unlimited free food to guests who wait there.

I had both breakfast and lunch in the Metropolitan Lounge. For breakfast I had two egg and cheese croissants and a berry scone, and for lunch I had a salad of mixed greens and also a fruit salad. I also enjoyed coffee and iced tea, and while I waited I got a

lot of work done on this trip summary. You can pay to enter the lounge at a rate of \$50 a day. It's probably not worth that much, but I certainly got as much value as I could from it today.

While I was waiting in the lounge a dog came through and sniffed everyone's luggage. I have no idea what he may have been looking for, but fortunately nothing seemed to be detected.

They had made announcements of the track numbers for most of the trains well before they boarded. For some reason, though, no announcement was made for the 12:05 Keystone train. I happened to look up at a TV and noticed that it was scheduled to leave from track #13, so I hightailed it down to the main lobby to get to that track. While the new train hall is lovely, its big flaw is that it connects to the same old tracks that have always been at Penn Station—and in fact from the new location there's only a single escalator leaving to each track. The lobby is a zoo, with lines for different tracks crossing each other. Eventually I did get to the escalator, but by the time I was downstairs on the platform the train was nearly full. I walked forward to the frontmost car, which did have a few empty seats and nabbed the first free row I could find. By the time everyone had settled there were exactly two empty seats in the car, including the one next to me.

I was intrigued that someone had left a book in the seat pocket by my seat. It was *Sam* by Allegra Goodman. According to the cover it's a coming-of-age story about a girl who has to endure more than anyone should. The book was a library copy, so hopefully the borrower won't get in too much trouble for not returning it.

The train was scheduled to leave at 12:05. That time came and went, though. At 12:08 there was a violent jerk (which is often a signal of departure), but then we didn't move. Eight minutes later the conductor made an announcement saying that "we are being delayed due to mechanical issues", with no indication of how long that delay might be. At 12:23 we pulled forward, but then stopped again near the end of the platform. Finally at 12:25 we began crawling through the Hudson tunnel toward New Jersey.

The car (and I think the whole train) filled up entirely when we got to Newark. A middle-aged Asian woman sat next to me and proceeded to sleep all the way to Philadelphia. Beyond Newark we crept along. We were on the same express track that the Acela uses and wouldn't be stopping until Trenton. For some reason we went about 30mph through much of northern New Jersey, though. We finally sped up when we passed Rahway and proceed at track speed (115mph) through the rest of the Garden State.

There was a fascinating woman sitting right behind me. In line with many post-COVID memes, I'll call her "Karen". The front car on Northeast Corridor trains is called the quiet car, and Karen could be described as a quiet car Nazi. Whenever anyone—including the conductor—said a word, she would yell at them. "This is the quiet car!" she'd bellow. "You're not allowed to talk." Karen didn't seem to realize she was making far more noise herself than what she was stopping.

An advantage of being slightly behind schedule was that I didn't need to worry about arriving too early at my hotel. In fact, just as we crossed the Delaware River into Pennsylvania I got a text saying that my room was ready. The text also asked if I wanted to use my phone as a digital key. I opted to do so, which created an interesting experience. I didn't need to go to the desk at all. I've never had that happen at a hotel before, but from the time I showed up to when I checked out, I didn't deal with a hotel employee at all.

While the train would continue west to Harrisburg, almost everyone got off at Philadelphia. I made my way into the station and followed temporary signs that led past a construction zone to the subway station across the street. To use Philly transit I had to buy a Key card. This is very similar to the first generation "Chicago cards" they used to use on the CTA. They carry a Mastercard logo and theoretically can also be used as prepaid debit cards. They discontinued that in Chicago because the fees associated with the debit aspect meant nobody wanted to use them for that purpose. I don't know if anyone in Philly uses them that way or not. I put a three day pass on my card, even though I'd be here less than twenty-four hours. The day pass works for a calendar day, and the three-day pass was cheaper than a day pass and an additional fare to get back to the train station.

The 30th Street subway station serves the Market-Frankford blue line, but it also serves trolleys that run in a tunnel downtown and then fan out to neighborhoods on the west side. I knew the trolley tunnel was just a block away from my hotel, so I boarded the first trolley that stopped. I rode two stops east, exited, and crossed the street. From there I could see the entrance of the Motto Hotel where I'd be staying with a Hilton Honors point redemption.

Hilton describes Motto as "an efficient, modern concept in urban hospitality". They have a handful of these hotels in large cities in America, Europe, and east Asia. The Philadelphia location is a converted 1800s building with about 150 tiny rooms arranged on nine floors. While the rooms are small and sparsely furnished, they do have everything you need. Both in points and cash it's quite a bit cheaper than anything else in central Philadelphia, and it did seem like decent value.

The hotel was on 19th Street. I went back up to Market, but instead of taking the trolley, I walked down to 16th Street and caught a blue line train further downtown. I got off at 5th Street, which is right in front of Independence Hall and the liberty bell. I'd seen both of those before, and I didn't really feel a need to get a timed ticket to join a mammoth line. I just wandered through the historic area bit and snapped a few pictures.

One interesting sight downtown is a historic building that used to be the headquarters of the long-defunct *Philadelphia Ledger*. The building was bought and restored by Wawa, a chain of convenience stores based in Pennsylvania. The ornate brass doors now lead

to one of their few locations that doesn't have gas pumps. I picked up a bunch of cheese at Wawa, which I'd snack on as I made my way around the city.



Independence Hall

a place called Shopper's World that sells clothing and home goods at rock bottom prices. Both seemed to be doing a decent business, so hopefully that will continue.

I caught the blue line to the west end of the line at 69th Street. I can remember on that same trip when my father and I went to New York each day we'd drive my brother Paul to an NEA convention he was attending in Philadelphia. The route into the city went underneath the el tracks I was on this afternoon, so this trip brought back memories. The area it goes through is almost entirely rather run-down rowhouses. There are no lawns whatsoever, just cement front and back. It appears that most places don't have air conditioning, which must make them pretty miserable in summer. Lots of people seemed to be spending the afternoon sitting out on their front steps, where it was presumably cooler than indoors.

69th Street station is an enormous complex. The el makes a big loop into a yard and back there, and there are transfers to lots of buses and trolleys. I transferred to a trolley, and while I made the transfer without leaving the fare control area, for some reason I had to scan my fare card again. That made me glad I had a pass, because it would have been annoying to pay again.

I boarded trolley #101, which is one of two remains of what was once a vast suburban trolley network. Route 101 runs mostly through the suburb of Upper Darby, continuing to Springfield and on to the town of Media. While this started out looking like west Philadelphia, it rapidly became a much nicer area. The area is a mix of single family homes (many on enormous lots), duplexes, apartment buildings, and business strips. It's an older area that seems quite well cared for. If I were ever to live in a suburb, it would likely be a place like this. It looks far nicer than the sprawling cul de sac developments you see so many places.

I rode down to the Springfield Mall. Like most suburban shopping centers, this one has seen its better days. It's far from dead, but there is a lot of empty space inside. I had considered having dinner at an Italian restaurant in the mall, but that place turned out to be permanently closed—even though their website implied they were still open. I circled the whole mall but ended up just getting a pretzel at Auntie Anne's.

I tried twice more to have dinner. I looked for restaurants on my phone, and one thing that came up was an interesting Mexican place near the Drexel stop. I exited there, but as soon as I got off, I realized I probably should have stayed on the trolley. There was major construction in the area, and it was basically impossible to reach the restaurant without making a long detour. I walked down the street that parallels the trolley and made my way to the next stop (Drexel Brook). There was a Chinese restaurant in a strip mall that looked like it might be good. Unfortunately they were take-out only; there were no tables at all in the place.

I went back to the station and sat down on the bench to wait. A woman with a Holiday Inn nametag sat down next to me and spent the wait smoking. That stood out because she was sitting right under a sign that said smoking was prohibited on SEPTA property.

Having struck out three times trying to find a restaurant, I ended up going getting off the train at the Beverly Boulevard stop. There was a Save-A-Lot supermarket right across the street from that stop, and I ended up just buying some grapefruit and blueberries for my dinner. It was probably healthier than what I'd have had at any of the restaurants.

I made my way back to the hotel and enjoyed the fruit I'd bought for dinner. They had a much more user-friendly TV here, so I had some shows on in the background as I worked on this travelogue.

Thursday, August 3

Philadelphia to Central New York

I was up around 6:15 this morning and fairly quickly showered and got my stuff re-packed. I left my bag in the room but went out to do a little more exploration before I left Philadelphia. The Motto Hotel is located in an area called Rittenhouse Square, named after

one of the formal squares in William Penn's original plan for the city. This is one of the few close-in areas that's mostly residential. It's obviously in the process of gentrifying, but especially to the west of the square (as the street numbers go into the 20s) it gets a bit rough. Even in the nicer areas I was again struck by the incredible number of homeless people. Most of them were asleep at this hour, but I still had to make my way around them

The hotel was charging \$20 for their breakfast, so I went a block over to a place called the Good Day Deli. The proprietress was Korean, and at night she serves traditional Korean food. For breakfast and lunch, though, it's standard diner fare. The cook was Hispanic, and I wondered if he also prepared that night menu. I had their "Mighty Good Day Special". This is the middle offering in a good/better/best range of specials. I got two eggs cooked to order (I chose scrambled), a meat (mine was three slices of very crispy bacon), a choice of home fries or grits (of course I chose the former, though the were nothing special), and toast (mine was rye). For about half the price of the hotel breakfast, it was really pretty good.



Fountain in Rittenhouse Square

I spent a while riding around on transit, though not really seeing anything of great interest. I'd like to have taken one of the city trolleys into the neighborhoods like I did with the suburban trolley yesterday. I didn't know the schedules for those, though, and I certainly didn't want to get stranded far from downtown.

I made my way back to the hotel, grabbed my bag, and checked out on my phone. It really was weird to come and go without ever dealing with an employee. I took the trolley back to 30th Street and made my way over to the Amtrak station. I had another of those lounge passes, and I redeemed this one in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Lounge. It's not nearly as nice as the one in New York, but it did provide a pleasant place to wait.

In addition to the lounge passes, Amtrak had also sent me two coupons that could be used to upgrade from coach to business class. I'd tried to use one of those on the trip from Philly to New York, but neither the phone app nor the Amtrak website would let me apply a coupon. I inquired with the lounge attendant, and after doing a bit of searching she told me it was because my ticket had been purchased with a coupon. What I suppose is meant by that is that I used the voucher that was issued when Amtrak cancelled the train at Christmas. I wouldn't really call that a coupon, but I didn't really have a reason to complain. It was good to at least have a reason why things didn't work.

About 10:15 they announced that Train #86 would be boarding from platform #2. The lounge in Philadelphia has elevators that go directly to the platforms. Unfortunately the one for platforms 1 and 2 was broken. The attendant apologized profusely as she sent me down the stairs and through the main lobby. The train wasn't actually there when I went down to the platform. While that seemed strange at first, it makes sense since Philadelphia is an intermediate stop on the Northeast Corridor. Train #86 had originated in Norfolk and was heading to Boston. They wanted everyone on the platform early so boarding could be as efficient as possible.

Once again this was a very full train. I was glad to have gotten to the platform early, because it gave me a chance to move forward to an uncrowded area where I wouldn't be competing with lots of other people who were boarding in Philadelphia. I grabbed a window seat in an empty row, and the seat next to me stayed empty until we got to Trenton. A young black woman sat next to me there, and she got off at Newark. So I was by myself for the first and last parts of this trip. The seatmate I had across New Jersey was doing homework on her computer, and it appeared she was an electrical engineering student. I could recognize that much from looking at her screen, but I couldn't begin to actually do the problems.



"Trenton Makes – The World Takes"

The route between Philadelphia and New York is far from spectacularly beautiful. Mostly I looked out at the decaying rust belt and suburbia. Crossing the Delaware at Trenton is kind of pretty. There's an old bridge beside the railroad that says "TRENTON MAKES—THE WORLD TAKES" in enormous letters. I'm not sure what if anything Trenton makes these days, but the bridge is an interesting sight. Downtown Newark is also surprisingly attractive. It looks to be rather gentrified, which is definitely not the feeling I had when changing

from the PATH train to NJ Transit at Newark station the last time I was out east. You don't really see New York from the train, since between Newark and New York the train crosses under the Hudson and arrives underground.

Something that seemed very weird to me as we crossed the Garden State was that the engineer seemed to constantly be blowing the train whistle. These are high-speed tracks with no grade crossings anywhere, so I'm not sure why the whistle would be necessary. Perhaps there were workers, but I certainly never saw any as we flew by.

We got into New York right on time at 12:20pm. The escalator from the platform dumped out in the old part of Penn Station, the part that's the basement of Madison Square Garden. It's less crowded there since the Moynihan building opened next door, but that's about the only good thing that can be said of the place. I followed signs for the "Moynihan" and "Amtrak" and was surprised to find they led out to the street. I know there's a pedestrian tunnel between the two buildings, so I'm not sure why the signs don't direct passengers there. It was good weather, though, so crossing the street really wasn't a big deal.

Since I was again traveling in a sleeper tonight, I had access to the New York lounge without the need for a pass. (Technically I could have gone to the lounge when I arrived on Sunday, but it was easier to just get to the hotel.) I made a point of having lunch there today. They had a wide range of sandwiches, and I chose a Cubano. I also had a nice self-serve side salad. That alone was quite nice, but I'd be back for more later on.

I left my bag in one of the storage lockers they have in the lounge and then went out to do a bit more exploration in New York. I walked around a bit, enjoying a lovely view of the Empire State Building that is at the other end of 34th Street. I also took the subway down to Greenwich Village, where I just walked around a bit. One interesting thing I saw there was Artists and Writers Memorial Park, a fascinating greenspace I just happened upon by accident. I also saw two of the buildings where the MTA hides the substations that power the subway. They build them to fit in with the neighborhoods they're in, so they're basically just fake buildings of the style that surrounds them.

I took a roundabout way back to Penn Station, which turned out to be a mistake. There were apparently issues on the 7-train. I waited on a platform at Bryant Park—5th Avenue for twenty minutes. Every few minutes they announced that trains in both directions were approaching the station, and the MTA phone app showed those trains as well. No train in either direction showed up, though. I ended up walking over to Times Square, and I caught a train back to Penn Station from there. I'm writing this while my Amtrak train is stopped in Albany, and I just checked the MTA website. Apparently they've now suspended all 7-train service between Manhattan and Queens because a track fault is tripping the brakes on trains. Those ghost trains still show up on the app, though.

When I'd left the lounge I asked a woman at the door if I needed to show my ticket to return. She smiled and said, "Oh no, we'll remember you." She was busy when I came back, so I just flashed the ticket on my phone and kept on walking. Her coworker yelled at me and started laying down the law until the woman assured him that I was good to go



Empire State Building

The lounge was much busier when I returned than it had been earlier. Most of the seats are arranged in conversation groups, and almost all of them were occupied—though often by just a single person. I did manage to nab a chair by itself that was next to the dish busing station. There was lots of traffic in that area, but at least it was a place to sit.

I had some more lounge food this afternoon. I had some salad, some fruit salad, and a strawberry danish. I also rehydrated with a ton of iced tea. The food is basically unlimited in the New York lounge, though I did try to avoid asking the same employee twice.

At 3:05pm (thirty-five minutes before our departure time) they announced pre-boarding for passengers on the Lake Shore Limited. This was much nicer than boarding the Keystone train. An employee walked us straight to the escalator well before they'd announced what platform the train was on to other people in the station. That made the boarding process much smoother.

There were a number of empty rooms for much of the trip from Chicago to New York, but this direction the car seems to be entirely full. In fact it's full of people whose destination is Chicago. Normally they don't put destination tags in sleepers, but for some reason our car attendant did. There's one room tagged for Toledo and another for Syracuse. All the rest say "CHI". There appear to be a lot of families in this car, which means it will likely be louder than it was the other way. Hopefully I'll be able to get some decent sleep.

This time I'm on the right side of the train for the views. (Technically that's the **left** side, the one facing the Hudson and the finger lakes. The view going up the Hudson really is spectacular. It was interesting to look out at all the commuter rail stations we passed. Most were filled with people in Yankees clothes, presumably on their



View of Hudson River from Train #49

way into the city for a game. Metro North commuter trains stop on the opposite side of the stadium from the subway. The trains run into the wee hours, so it's easy for suburbanites to get to a game.

It began to rain between Rhinecliff and Albany. That was actually kind of nice, because it kept the sun from glaring through the window. We got to Albany about ten minutes early. I went into the station to use the restroom. I'm in an old car with the toilet beside the seat again. It does appear to work this time, but the indoor public restroom was definitely more pleasant.

The car attendant took orders for dinner right after we left New York, saying the food needed to be ordered whether people were eating in the diner or in their rooms. Since she offered it for delivery, being the antisocial person I am, that's the option I chose. Unfortunately there was some mix-up in the diner, and apparently all the delivery orders were lost. The car attendant came back shortly before we got to Albany to frantically take my order again. While we were waiting for the Boston section to be hooked up in Albany she made an apologetic announcement that people who hadn't yet gotten their food should go to the diner to get it. I started heading down there, but she stopped me and said she'd be bringing my food. It was about 4pm when the attendant first took orders, and I finally got my food around a quarter to eight.

What I had for dinner was called beef burgundy. This was another meal that looked dreadful but actually tasted quite good. It was beef chunks and assorted vegetables in gravy (which presumably contained wine, but I wouldn't have identified it except from the name). A dollop of mashed potatoes were on top of everything. Foods in sauces and gravy tend to reheat pretty well, which is probably why this was decent. The meal came with a tiny side salad, a roll, and a brownie.

While the New York section had gotten to Albany early, the Boston section was 35 minutes late. While they schedule a 45-minute layover in Albany, of course with a late train that needed to be extended. We ended up leaving about half an hour behind schedule.

We're stopped in Schenectady as I write this, and the sun has definitely set. For some reason they cut the power for a couple minutes while we were stopped here. We also made two stops (presumably one for the Boston section and another for the New York section), and that combined to add about another five minutes to the delay. Mind you, I don't particularly mind if we're late getting to Chicago, since I don't have any particular plans tomorrow until catching the train on to Princeton in the late afternoon. There are probably lots of people making connections to the big western trains, though, and those mostly leave early in the afternoon. Hopefully the delays won't compound and create issues for them.

I'd just written that paragraph when we did have more delays. As we headed west from Schenectady, the power kept shutting off repeatedly—as if we were tripping a breaker over and over. We slowed way down and eventually came to a full stop. We waited about five minutes, and the conductor said they were doing a connection check. The power returned to normal, and we started up at a crawl. Then we stopped again in the middle of nowhere. After about ten more minutes they announced that there was a problem with one of the engines. They were working on it, but we might have to wait for a replacement to be sent from Albany. A bit later they started things up again and announced the problem had been fixed. We're about an hour behind schedule now, though, and there's a good chance that will compound when we reach freight traffic further west.

The attendant announced that she'd be making up the beds at 9pm. I had her just pull down the top bunk. This time she put the bottom mattress on top of the one normally used on top, so it was a thicker base to sleep on. What she didn't do was put up the safety harness that is normally used in the upper bunk. I couldn't get it to latch myself, so I ended up sleeping without it.

I called it a night somewhere between Utica and Syracuse. I didn't have a great night's sleep, but I've certainly had worse.

Friday, August 4

Central New York to Peru, Illinois

Unsurprisingly we continued to get further behind during the night. The freight railroads build in slots for Amtrak trains on their tracks. As long as Amtrak remains in those slots, they generally run on time. When they go outside the designated slots, though, the freight railroads understandably give their own trains priority. So once an Amtrak train is late, it's likely to just get later.

I was not aware of the stops in Syracuse or Rochester, but there was a long stop at around 2:30am that turned out to be Buffalo. I think the long stop is what woke me up, and I also noticed it was raining fairly hard on the windows. I was asleep again through the stops in Cleveland and Elyria. We got to Sandusky, Ohio at about 6:45, and it was there that I decided to declare it day.

There are showers on Amtrak sleeping cars. On the Superliners west of Chicago they're always available, which makes sense given that some people can spend three nights on those trains. The Viewliners that run east of Chicago also have showers, but as often as not they're being used for storage and are therefore unusable by passengers. That's the case in car 4911 today. I went down to the shower, but it was full of dirty sheets and blankets. I'll be at a hotel again tonight, but it is kind of annoying that all the amenities aren't available.

When the attendant took my dinner order last night, she asked if I'd also like breakfast delivered to my room and then asked at what time I wanted it. I told her 7:30. With the confusion last night it wasn't really a surprise that nothing was brought at that point. I waited around quite a while, and when we were stopped in Toledo around 8am I decided to go down to the diner. The attendant stopped me in the hall and said my breakfast would be coming. She eventually did bring it around 8:15.

There really are no good options for breakfast on this train. Once again I opted for pancakes. The ones I got were lukewarm and rock hard. Almost worse than that, while they came with syrup, there was no butter. I did eat them, of course, but it was far from a wonderful meal.

It's around 8:45 Eastern time now, and the timetable says we should be in Elkhart, Indiana. In fact we're still in Ohio, now pushing two hours behind schedule. Amtrak's website says we should only be about 45 minutes late arriving in Chicago. While there is some padding at the end of the schedule, I'd be amazed if we made up that much time. They took their full twenty-minute smoke break in Toledo, so it's not like they're trying to shave off minutes as we go.

We reached Bryan, Ohio right at 9am. We blocked a grade crossing for the five minutes or so we were stopped there. As we pulled out by far the most noteworthy thing was the Spangler candy factory with a watertower painted in rainbow colors highlighting the flavors of Dum-Dum lollipops they make. The factory also has storage tanks with red and white stripes reminiscent of candy canes, which they also produce here.

As we near the Indiana border we're transitioning from forest to farmland. It actually looks quite a lot like eastern Iowa. We're paralleling U.S. 6, which appears to have an absolutely dreadful surface here. It's like they've patched and patched, but never resurfaced the road in decades.

While the attendant came to make up the bed (and presumably dump the used sheets in the shower), I went to the diner to get some coffee. I think I got the last dregs from their urn. It took the woman in the diner nearly five minutes to get enough out of there to fill a cup, and it definitely wasn't the best tasting coffee I've ever had. It did fill the time, though.

Around 10:30 we stopped in the middle of nowhere between Elkhart and South Bend. They appear to be doing track work in this vicinity, installing railroad ties. What's weird is that the ties aren't solid blocks of wood like I'd normally expect. They're basically a square framework made of metal rods with a thin wood covering on the sides. I don't know if that's typical of most railroad ties these days, but I suppose they would be stronger than solid wood. I've often seen cement ties used for urban transit systems, and that has to either be cheaper or stronger—or both.

It's been interesting to see the different rail infrastructure along this trip. The whole route is multi-tracked, but west of Albany there's so many freight trains that you end up going at the speed of the slowest train anyway. In the Midwest all the trains are diesel, while on the east coast they run on electricity. Even the electricity has different forms, though. The line north from New York to Albany uses a third rail like the subway does, while the Northeast Corridor has overhead wires like trolleys use.

I set my watch back to Central time at South Bend. Technically the change is a little ways west of there, but South Bend is the final stop in the Eastern Time Zone. Amtrak is now predicting we'll be just over an hour late in Chicago, which would mean making up about an hour of the time we're down. We'll need to go a lot faster than the commuter trains on the same line do if we're going to make up that much time.

Something I've never understood on Amtrak is why minor stops like South Bend should take more than a couple of minutes. There's no reason anyone would want to board here, when you can take a much more reliable commuter train into Chicago. I'm sure some people are getting off, but even elderly or handicapped people should be able to do that in less than ten minutes—which is how long we were stopped at South Bend. They don't offer checked luggage here, so it's not like they needed to unload stuff from the baggage car.

We ended up pulling into Union Station in Chicago right at noon, so about an hour and fifty minutes late. I was at the very rear of the train, so it took a full fifteen minutes to make my way down the platform and into the station. I made my way to the Metropolitan Lounge, but there was a bit of a delay as a handicapped guy with an attitude got into a rather heated argument with the lounge attendant. The attendant had verified that he was entitled to lounge access, and he asked the guy what train he would be leaving on. They want that information so they can be sure to announce the departures for people who are in the lounge. Often the attendants also specifically look for different people to make sure they've boarded. Well, the handicapped guy seemed to feel that the question was somehow an invasion of privacy, and he felt the lounge attendant was singling him out just because he was in a wheelchair. Eventually the attendant gave up and just let the guy in, but with the attitude he had, I secretly hope he missed his connection.

I showed the attendant my arrival ticket (confirming I was in a sleeper) and noted I'd be leaving on train 383 this afternoon. "See! That's how easy it is," the attendant said loudly enough so the handicapped guy and the whole line could hear. I left my bag in the storage room and set out for the afternoon.

My First stop was just up Clinton Street from Union Station. I had lunch at Naf Naf Grill, which is a Middle Eastern fast food place. It's been quite a while since I've eaten at one, but I saw a Naf Naf in Philadelphia, and that made me think of the West Loop

Chicago location for lunch. I had chicken shawarma over mixed greens with various Middle Eastern vegetables and sauces. A couple of my brothers would probably have avoided the onions and harissa (an African hot sauce). I tolerate both fine, though, and it was a delicious meal.

What I mostly did this afternoon in Chicago was shop. I'd bought almost nothing in New York and just a little bit in Philly. The first place I went to was a store that's opened just this year across from the downtown Macy's called Primark. This is apparently an Irish chain with locations around the world. It's very similar to the H & M store I went to in Auckland (and they have multiple locations of that in Chicago, too). They sell clothing and home goods at dirt cheap prices. While much of their stuff was quite a bit more trendy than I am, I did find a couple of new shirts I liked there—one for five bucks and the other for eight. I bought another shirt at Nordstrom Rack (the clearance center for the ultra-expensive chain) and yet another at the literal bargain basement they've opened in the downtown Macy's. They've actually done quite a few renovations to that store, and given that it's many years since Marshall Field's went out of business, I suppose they can do what they want to.

Downtown was absolutely packed. Chicago is hosting the Lollapalooza music festival this week, so there are thousands and thousands of spoiled brat suburban white kids with slutty outfits (for both sexes) and fresh tattoos and piercings. Something I couldn't help but notice was that these kids lacked street smarts. They'd go around staring at their phones while wallets were sticking out of the guys' pockets and the girls' designer handbags hung loosely from their shoulders. Meanwhile their conversations made it clear they were scared of anyone who was poor and/or of another race.

I made the mistake of taking the brown line 'L' on a short trip. The brown line goes to the heavily gentrified near northwest side. The twenty-somethings who live there and the friends who crammed into their spare rooms for concert week were all heading downtown. Many of them were actually drinking on the train. That's illegal, but there were no authorities on board to stop them. They were also loud and obnoxious. When I got off the train a woman who was much younger than me but significantly older than the partiers described them to her companion as "Lollapalooza-losers".

I'd taken the brown line up to Merchandise Mart and back. I stopped at the Amazon Go store there, where I picked up a salad for supper. That's cheaper than anything on the train and easier than picking something up by the hotel.

I had a much different experience riding the pink line 'L' out to Cicero. The near northwest and southwest sides are about as different as can be. The pink line goes through neighborhoods of working class Hispanic and black families, as opposed to the young white single businesspeople who live along the brown line. The kids downtown would probably be scared to take the pink line, but there's really nothing scary about the people on the train. On my ride out to Cicero there was a young family who had just bought a dog for their daughter, and on the way back an elderly couple from rural Mexico were visiting their son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter who live in Chicago. Grandpa was recording every minute of his first 'L' ride on his cell phone. It was far more fun being with those people than with the annoying kids downtown or the drunks on the brown line.

I made my way back to Union Station, reclaimed my bag. It was already bulging, but somehow I managed to make almost everything fit. The salad would have to stay in the Walgreens bag I'm carrying separately. I filled the hour or so wait getting up to date on this recap.

While I was waiting in the lounge I discovered two things that made me very glad I'd taken my trip when I did. First, I came across an article that noted that Penn Station (including Moynihan Train Hall) was evacuated yesterday because of a bomb threat. The evacuation happened about an hour after I left on the Lake Shore Limited. Most of Amtrak's afternoon and evening trains were delayed, and dozens of commuter trains were outright cancelled. I missed that by an hour, and I'm glad I got out of New York when I did.

Second, they made an announcement that today's eastbound Lake Shore Limited would be terminating in Cleveland, apparently because they're doing track work between there and Buffalo. (Tomorrow's westbound train would be affected as well.) Some of the affected passengers were apparently shifted to travel east on other trains, mostly via Washington. The other alternative was to take a bus in the middle of the night from Cleveland to Buffalo and then continue on the Empire Service trains that run multiple times a day between Buffalo and New York. I'm glad I didn't have to do either of those.

At about 5:30 they announced train #383 was ready for boarding. They seem to have gotten their act together better in the Chicago lounge. Now they're walking passengers to the trains. That makes things go more smoothly, and it also makes the lounge seem like more of an upgrade.

Most of the people on the Illinois trains who board from the lounge are travelling in business class, since the lounge is the major perk of that upgrade. Today my ticket was in coach, which I'd booked because it was cheaper and I'd have access to the lounge anyway since I was arriving in a sleeper. The conductor seemed surprised that I wasn't in business class, but he did eventually direct me to the correct car.

In some ways it was kind of nice to be in coach for this trip. They just finished installing Amtrak's newest cars (called Venture cars) in coach class on the Illinois trains. There was some sort of delay with the combination café/business cars, so they're still using the old ones for business class. It was interesting to see what the new cars were like. They're certainly shiny and new! The seats, however, are narrower and less padded than the old ones were. There's a trade-off there, because it allows for two good things as well. The aisle



In the new Venture coach on the Illinois Zephyr

is wider, and they also have armrests between the seats (something I've wished Amtrak would have on all its trains, since it provides a bit of division between strangers traveling next to each other). There's lots of electronic features, like doors that open automatically when passengers approach them and bathrooms with doors that shut and lock at the push of a button (making weird beeping noises that sound like a bomb is about to go off when they do). Some of the electronics didn't work right, though. The wi-fi on the train was down, and while they had a screen that could show the next stop and automatic announcements, somehow those were stuck on the initial screen and announcements used at boarding. For the whole trip the supposed "next stop" was LaGrange Road in the near west suburbs.

I ate my Amazon salad as others boarded the train. It was mostly full, but there were a few empty seats here and there. When the seat next to mine was empty after we passed Naperville, I knew it would remain that way. This is basically a train people use to go to and from Chicago. Only a handful of people board westbound at the

rural stops. Except for the new train car, the ride was uneventful. We arrived in Princeton at 7:50, ten minutes late.

I put my luggage in the car, but I kept out a bottle of Sprite Zero I'd bought with the salad at Amazon Go. I opened it after I started up the car. Apparently it had been shaking on the train, because Sprite Zero squirted all over the place. At least this was a sugar-free product, so it wasn't as bad as the pineapple Pepsi that burst open at the start of the trip.

My point redemption hotel tonight was in Peru, which is twenty miles east of Princeton. While pretty much every car on the road passed me, even though I was going about 73mph, the drive was otherwise not noteworthy. This hotel is easily the nicest of the places I've stayed on this trip. The room is large and clean, and—unlike the Quality Inn in Brooklyn—it has sturdy furniture. Everything seems to work as it should, and the room is surprisingly well lit. The only real problem is that the bed is too soft. I guess you can't have everything, though.

Saturday, August 5

Peru, Illinois to Algona, Iowa

I was up right at six this morning. The hotel breakfast was better than the one in Brooklyn, but only minimally. While some skuzzy senior citizens who looked like they belonged at a Trump rally were raving about it, I decided to pass on the waffles and frozen sausage biscuits that could be microwaved. Instead I went next door and had the classic Egg McMuffin value meal.

It was pouring when I left Peru, and it rained quite heavily most of the way to the Quad Cities. The rain stopped by the time I got to the Mississippi bridge, and about halfway to Cedar Rapids the pavement was finally dry. For variety as much as anything, I took a different route this time. I took U.S. 61 up to DeWitt and then followed 30 west to Cedar Rapids. There's less traffic than on 80 and 380, but it's honestly kind of an annoying route. Highway 30 goes through a town about every five miles, so I was constantly slowing down and then speeding up again.

I stopped at the Aldi at the north end of Cedar Rapids. Then I stopped at Shoe Carnival in Waterloo—both because I had a \$10 off coupon and to take advantage of the state's tax-free weekend. My final stop was for gas and a quick lunch in Clear Lake.

Gas had obviously skyrocketed while I was out east. Surprisingly it was cheaper in Illinois than in Iowa. Throughout western Illinois the prices were from \$3.50 to \$3.69. In Iowa the lowest I saw (which was E-15 in Clear Lake) was \$3.63. Most prices were, and most prices were between \$3.75 and \$3.90. It was only \$3.85 in the city of Chicago, and I don't think I've ever seen gas in Iowa higher than in the windy city.

I got home around 2:30. It took quite a while to take in both my travel bags and the groceries I'd bought. Once I did I paid some bills and settled down to finish up this re-cap. This certainly wasn't as memorable as the trip I took earlier in the summer, but it definitely was fun.