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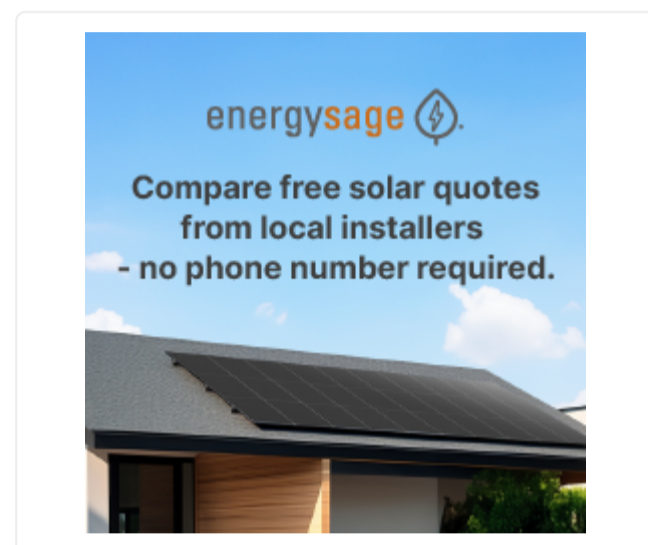
Taking the Train for Sustainable Travel



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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[sustainable transporation, train travel](#)



For many people, rail travel might suggest romantic images of the old West or the Orient Express. But not many Americans think of taking the train when they actually need to get someplace. Taking the train is rarely a practical option for travel in the US. And that's a problem, because passenger trains are usually the most environmentally friendly way to get between two cities. It only takes a quick look at the carbon data and the rail systems elsewhere in the world to figure out that train travel should be a lot more than just a nostalgia trip.

Despite [historical images](#) of sweaty laborers shoveling coal to power trains belching smoke as they cross the landscape, train travel is one of the most sustainable ways to move around. Americans have some of the largest carbon footprints in the world, mostly because of our [driving habits](#). Most of us generate more miles commuting than taking [road trips](#), but when it comes to regional travel, automobiles are only matched by [flights](#) for carbon inefficiency.

By [comparison](#), standard diesel rail travel generates a quarter the emissions of a single-passenger vehicle. And when the electricity source is low-carbon, electric trains generate only a small fraction of the emissions of a diesel train engine. [Eurostar](#), which combines operational efficiency with an ever-increasing proportion of wind energy, generates only 2.4 kg CO₂/person to travel from London to Paris, or [4 grams of carbon](#) per passenger per kilometer.

State of the Train

Although Americans tend to think of train travel as [slow travel](#), it doesn't have to ruin your schedule. Japan introduced [high-speed rail to the world](#) with its construction of the shinkansen connecting Tokyo to Kyoto in 1964. The country still sets the gold standard for rail travel, with a network of "bullet train" lines that carries nearly half a million passengers daily among 22 cities. In 50 years of operation, the trains, which now reach speeds of 200 mph, have never experienced a passenger fatality or even accident-caused injury.

High-speed rail has been developing rapidly in the rest of Asia. China's high-speed rail now carries more than twice as many passengers as its domestic airlines and has replaced some short-haul flight routes completely. The line connecting Beijing to Shanghai now generates more than \$1 billion in annual profits. Although the primary focus is on freight, China's Belt and Road initiative is [exporting high-speed rail](#) to its trading partners. A new passenger line connecting Yunnan province with the capital of Laos recently opened, and routes to the capitals of Thailand and Cambodia are planned.

The European Union has set a target of [doubling high-speed rail](#) travel by 2030, which will require major infrastructure investments and difficult regulatory changes. Train tickets are often [more expensive](#) than plane tickets in Europe, but rail travel provides a [better travel experience](#), with generally more comfortable seating, fewer luggage fees, better accommodations for pets and children, and centralized stations.

Getting on Track

By contrast, the United States lacks even a single high-speed rail line and many cities [do not even have access](#) to passenger trains. The completion of the first [transcontinental railroad](#) was a pivotal moment in American history. But only a few decades later, the U.S. embarked on a love affair with the automobile that derailed train travel for nearly a century. Today, the U.S. is just beginning to consider the benefits of high-speed rail that other countries have enjoyed for decades.

The most advanced high-speed rail project in America is [California High-Speed Rail](#), which will eventually connect cities from Sacramento to San Diego with up to 24 stations served by trains traveling over 200 mph. The [project](#) was approved in 2008, and construction began in 2015. The first segment of the high-speed line is expected to begin operation in 2030, running from Bakersfield to Merced.

Slower, traditional passenger trains are experiencing something of a [rail renaissance](#), thanks to a \$66 billion influx of federal funding through the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#). Amtrak has [announced plans](#) to triple its annual investment in infrastructure and add new intercity services by 2025.

All Aboard

If you live in an area that would be served by one of the nearly half dozen [regional high speed rail projects](#) currently under consideration or in the planning stages, lend your support to the project. Let your [state](#) and [Congressional representatives](#) know that you want access to high-speed rail service.

In the meantime, consider taking the train for your regional domestic travel. Current rail system improvements are improving connections between big cities that are less than 300 miles apart. If you are traveling internationally, always consider taking the train for intercity travel at your destination. Not only will it make your [travel more sustainable](#), but you could also [save money](#). Even when it costs a bit more, rail travel is a cultural experience that will enrich the trip, and it definitely provides more interesting views than sitting in the aisle seat of a short haul flight.



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Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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