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US lags in high-speed rail

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Several high-speed rail projects are in the development pipeline in the U.S., and the tourism industry is taking notice.

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Five decades have passed since the Japanese introduced the world to modern high-speed passenger rail service in 1964. In that year, regular service began on the Tokaido Shinkansen "bullet-train" line between Tokyo and Osaka. In the 50 years since, the Japanese Bullet Trains—with current speeds up to approximately 200 mph—have been joined by French TGV trains (190 mph), German ICE trains (198 mph), Spanish AVE trains (193 mph) and a host of others in providing passenger rail transportation that is fast, reliable, convenient and truly competitive with air service alternatives on the same routes.

China, a relative "newcomer" in the game, has a rapidly expanding high-speed rail network which carried more than 1.3 million passengers in 2013. Its trains travel at speeds of approximately 220 mph (with higher speeds planned in the near future). To put that in perspective, the roughly 990-mile trip from Midtown Manhattan to downtown Chicago would take approximately 4.5 hours. Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited takes approximately 19 hours to make the trip.

So where does the U.S. stand with respect to all of this? In two words – way behind. Our vast network of privately operated passenger trains shriveled to almost nothing during the 1950s and 1960s as the Interstate Highway system was developed and the airlines introduced jet (as opposed to propeller-driven) air service.

In 1971, Amtrak, the quasi-government National Railroad Passenger Corporation was formed and tasked with salvaging the sad remains of our once proud private passenger rail system. So, while the rest of the world was embracing and developing new passenger rail technology, here in the U.S. the attitude was quite simply: "Who needs trains? We'd rather drive our cars and fly in our jets."

At the moment, the closest thing to "high-speed" passenger rail service offered in the U.S. is Amtrak's Acela Express, operating on a frequent schedule along the Boston-New York-Washington DC "Northeast Corridor." Acela has been a resounding success with the traveling public, carrying more than 3.3 million passengers during Amtrak's 2013 fiscal year. Largely because of Acela, Amtrak controls approximately 75% of the non-highway mass transit market between New York and Washington D.C., up from 37% in 2000.

Airlines have been forced to reduce service in the market because of dwindling ridership. The public clearly has an appetite for rail as an alternative to air travel if the service is frequent, reliable, comfortable and fast.

Several high-speed (or higher speed, meaning re-works of older systems to allow high-speed service) are in the development pipeline in the U.S. And, with the expectation that convenient, reliable, faster, city-center to city-center rail transport is re-awakening, the tourism industry has been taking notice.
One such project—All Aboard Florida—is under development at present and is being watched closely by the Florida tourism industry. When finished in 2016, the scheduled rail travel time from Miami to Orlando will be less than 3 hours, competitive with air travel (when including ground transfers, check-in times, etc.) and also an attractive alternative to the grueling four- to five-hour drive on congested highways. What is truly interesting—and somewhat surprising—about All Aboard Florida is it is being developed by a private company, not a government mass-transit agency. Florida East Coast Industries, a direct descendent of Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway is the developer.

Talk about history repeating itself: It was Henry Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway (the very same – and using much of the roadbed to be used by All Aboard Florida) that brought rail service to South Florida in the first place more than 100 years ago. Most historians agree it was the arrival of the Florida East Coast rail service that was responsible for the birth of modern tourism in Florida.

So how will the arrival of All Aboard Florida service impact tourism patterns and how will other high-speed rail lines impact tourism in other areas of the U.S.? The jury is still out. Several things are becoming clear, however. Development clusters are already in the planning stages at major station stops along high-speed rail lines. As stated in the 28 May 2014 news release related to the unveiling of plans for All Aboard Florida's grand new Miami terminal:

"Each of All Aboard Florida's three planned stations in South Florida (Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach) will serve as both gateways to their respective cities, and as key portals and iconic destinations with terminals featuring spaces to shop, eat and connect. As part of the urban infrastructure, the stations are expected to generate significant economic impact to the state. Economists estimate that All Aboard Florida will add more than $6 billion to Florida's economy over the next eight years."

While unfamiliar to the present generation, once upon a time, rail service was intrinsically tied to tourism in major cities. Arriving travelers were greeted at major urban rail terminals by an array of hotel, entertainment, meeting and restaurant options. Take for example, New York City: Surrounding New York's Grand Central Terminal there were (and still remain) thousands of hotel rooms. The original owners and operators of Grand Central, the New York Central Railroad, developed and owned four hotels: The Roosevelt, Biltmore, Barclay and Commodore. Three of the four remain in operation almost 100 years after they were developed.

The great hope is, with a renewed focus on rail travel, older central city cores in other cities will be reinvigorated and that this type of synergistic development and rail, retail, restaurants, and hotels will flourish once again. Such is clearly the hope with All Aboard Florida, particularly with regard to its downtown Miami terminal.

Without doubt, it will take the current generation of travelers in the U.S., almost none of whom remember the days when the U.S. had high-quality, expansive inter-city rail service, a while to adjust to the idea rail travel can be used for more than just mundane commutation purposes. But the implications of even a slow shift back to longer distance rail travel are far-reaching.

It is indisputable that our airports and highways have reached or are reaching their saturation point. If rail becomes a viable alternative, especially on medium distance routes, existing airports would be relieved of "short-haul" passenger traffic and be able to focus on the true long-distance service only air can provide efficiently. If reasonable connections and car rentals were available along with rail service (as is planned with All Aboard Florida), the passenger shift to rail would help relieve highway congestion.

And, of course, let us not forget the word that is on everyone's lips these days: "green". Rail travel is, undeniably, a green alternative. Compare one diesel electric locomotive pulling a train with many hundreds of passengers versus that number of passengers in their individual gas-guzzling carbon-emitting automobiles. Compare that same train with the number of passenger jets needed to carry that many passengers (intermediate distance air travel is typically provided on standard, not jumbo sized jets) in terms of harmful emissions.

The younger generation of traveler gets it: Being green, being environmentally responsible is part of their fabric. And this younger, ecologically savvy travel customer, a customer who probably has never (yet) ridden on a true passenger train, might well be the single-most important reason the tourism industry is looking "back to the future" to a new travel paradigm in which fast, comfortable, reliable inter-city rail transportation reclaims its proper role in the movement of people. And isn't moving people what the tourism business is all about?

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