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**WASHINGTON, DC**  
**MARYLAND**  
**VIRGINIA**  
CAPITAL REGION USA

# ON TRACK IN VIRGINIA

**Climb aboard for some  
Southern hospitality**

By **SUE JOLLY**

THE last time I saw Reg, he was leaning out the door of a train carriage shouting something as we trundled our suitcases along the platform.

"Y'all don't have to take the stairs," he said, "There's an elevator over there."

As strangers in town, and the only people getting off at the stop, we were grateful for the advice. But that was Reg the American train conductor for you. So helpful I found myself wondering if he had a fan club.

My thoughts then turned to England, imagining the glum faces on a train going nowhere fast, the mutterings about poor service, the resigned sighing.

There was none of that here, even though our Amtrak train from Washington DC to Richmond, Virginia, had been held up.

When we slid out of the station 38 minutes behind schedule, there were cheers and good-natured "woo-hoos".

I put it down to the fact that Reg had been on the Tannoy at regular intervals telling us just what the hold-up was. And he did it with such wit and humour that people were actually chuckling.

Maybe we just struck lucky. But it was a joy to watch him in action, helping passengers with their luggage in his upbeat way. He walked into our carriage unannounced and asked: "Good morning all. You folks know each

other? No? Then get talking. It's good to make new friends."

A couple of minutes later I asked why he was sticking coloured pieces of card above the seats. He replied: "It shows where you're getting off so we can make sure you do even if you're dozing." Golly.

Then: "You let me know when you start to gather your luggage and I'll give you a hand." Golly again.

I was in America to explore Virginia, or the Old Dominion as locals call it, by train. I was loving it so far.

Although many of us are used to taking fly-drive holidays in the US, not everyone wants to get behind the wheel, especially in a big city. Travelling around the US by train, you can fly in, spend a few days seeing the Washington sights and then head off to wherever you fancy.

Amtrak has two lines running into Virginia - one going down around 100 miles to Richmond, the state capital, and another totting up 160 miles on the way to Lynchburg, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's an eco-friendly way to travel and with tickets available for under \$30 (£20) it won't break the bank.

After a couple of days in Washington, I made for rural Virginia. The smaller communities made for a great contrast

to the capital, and the countryside was very pretty. As we got there, the trees were just starting to turn - and trees don't get much more spectacular than the wall-to-



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wall maples seen in America during autumn.

That said, the small towns make the place memorable at any time of year. They're picturesque, very clean and each is incredibly proud of its history in that "let's celebrate

our past" way that most Americans have. The people were also incredibly welcoming. We're talking Southern hospitality here, with townspeople more than happy to stop and pass the time of day with a stranger.

And if you have an interest in the American Civil War, you'll quickly discover that Virginia is THE place to go.

We were told the film *Gone With The Wind* has a lot to answer for in making British people think most of the action was further south. Not so. With it being so close to the North, there were more battles in Virginia than anywhere else.

We started our civil war tour in Fredericksburg, scene of some of the conflict's bloodiest battles. Our guide, Scott, described everything in great detail and made sure to show us the bullet holes in

the walls of high street shops.

He was devastated we didn't have time for a battlefield tour: "Y'all really must come back." Welcoming indeed, these Southerners.

We stayed in Richmond that night, eating tasty seafood at The Hard Shell ([www.thehardshell.com](http://www.thehardshell.com)) and a delicious breakfast at The Urban Farmhouse ([www.theurbanfarmhouse.net](http://www.theurbanfarmhouse.net)).

Fully-fed, we headed out for a tour of the city's historic sites and downtown districts, stopping first at the fantastic Museum of Fine Arts ([www.vmfa.museum](http://www.vmfa.museum)) and then at the lovely Virginia State Capitol building ([www.virginiacapital.gov](http://www.virginiacapital.gov)), both of which are free.

Other highlights included Culpeper - another pretty-as-a-picture town with a tea shop notable for its vast collection of hats, one of which you can wear while drinking tea for two ([www.teaiaceanroses.com](http://www.teaiaceanroses.com)).

Just outside the city is a house that served as a field hospital for both the North and the South during the war ([\[stationfoundation.com\]\(http://stationfoundation.com\)\). Soldiers made drawings and signed their names on the walls. It's all terribly poignant.](http://www.brandy</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

With the pretty, upmarket city of Charlottesville and a tour of Thomas Jefferson's historic mountaintop home - where characters often wander round in period dress - nearby, there's lots to do if you have the time. Our tour ended in

Lynchburg, where we stayed at the beautiful Craddock Terry ([www.craddockterryhotel.com](http://www.craddockterryhotel.com)), a boutique hotel in which shoes were once made.

We caught the train back to Washington the next day - no Reg, but still a pleasant trip - and saw some of the sights. It's a great city to explore and the must-see sights - the White House, the Lincoln Memorial and the Mount Vernon Estate and Gardens - are just as impressive as you'd hope.

Even Union Station is well worth a look around. Its domed ceilings, marble floors, subdued lighting and beautiful elegance make it a marvellous building.

The station may well be different in rush hour, but mid-morning it was full of people strolling, not scurrying or rushing around. The atmosphere was, well, calm.

The vast spaces are full of good shops and proper restaurants - they keep the fast-food outlets downstairs - and I'm told plenty of city dwellers go there just for the grub.

I spent a happy hour or so just taking it all in before winding my way across to the platforms and putting myself in the hands of the Amtrak team.

I hadn't known what to expect from the American rail network.

Some friends who live there had told me they don't rate it very highly. Obviously, they've yet to meet someone like Reg...



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## What's the deal?

● AMTRAK is America's inter-city rail operator. With 21,000 route miles in 46 states, the District of Columbia and three Canadian provinces, it operates more than 300 trains every day – at speeds up to 150mph – to around 500 destinations. It runs round-trips to Lynchburg and Richmond from Washington DC up to six times a day. Tickets from Washington to Lynchburg cost from \$29 (around £18), while fares for a round-trip to Richmond start at just \$23 (around £15). Visit [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com) for schedules, prices, and more information.

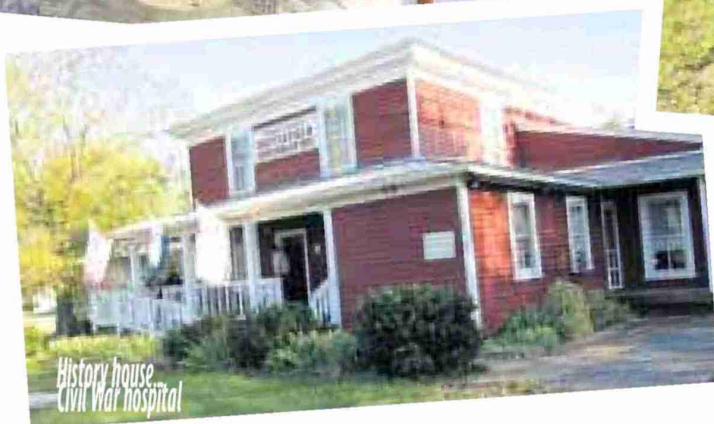
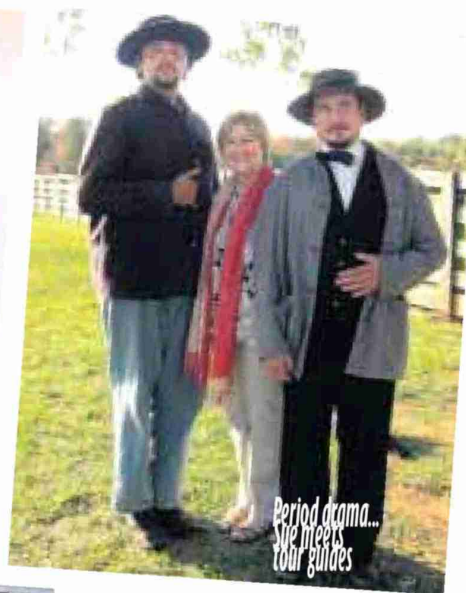


*AMTRAK HAS 500 DESTINATIONS*



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