

Talgo 200 shows value of high-speed rail

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Scripps Howard News Service

Monday, June 18, 2007

A few weeks ago I rode the Talgo 200, which leaves six times a day from the Atocha train station, near the center of Madrid, Spain, and arrives in Cordoba, 250 miles away, precisely two hours later.

The Talgo races through the Spanish countryside at around 140 mph, but the ride is extremely smooth, quiet and comfortable. Passengers walk through the train easily, to the dining car, to the bar, or to the restroom. The seats recline and have plenty of legroom. Each car has ample room for luggage. Some passengers read, some sleep and some watch the movie, in this case, Steve Martin in "Cheaper by the Dozen," dubbed in Spanish.

The young Madrilenos sitting across from me were on their way to Malaga, on the Costa del Sol. Their tans indicated that this wasn't their first journey from Madrid to a Mediterranean beach. He dozed and listened to his iPod; she watched part of the movie and finished her book. The map indicates that the trip from Madrid to Malaga should take 6-1/2 hours by car; on the Talgo, at 140 mph, it should be less than four.

After two hours of watching farmland, flowers and hills covered with olive trees, I stepped off the train in Cordoba, just a short walk from the center of the city.

Why don't we have this kind of luxury in the United States?

Many of the obstacles to high-speed rail service in this country are outlined in extraordinary detail in a report that experts Allison de Cerreno and Shishir Mathur prepared for the Mineta Transportation Institute last fall. De Cerreno and Mathur examine the few areas in our country where high-speed rail has been reasonably successful, as well as other places where it has failed, usually because of insufficient financing, a failure of leadership or political will, or lack of the clear authority needed to implement the projects.

But I suspect that the biggest obstacles are philosophical. Long ago, our country made a commitment to the freedom, flexibility and privacy that the automobile provides, and we've subsidized that commitment with cheap gasoline and the construction of an extraordinary road system. Because our train and bus service is generally inconvenient and uncomfortable, for many Americans, as well as for nearly all societies that have developed a sizable middle class, the automobile is, by far, the preferred means of transportation for all but the longest distances.

But is this a preference that we can continue to afford? The automobile's contribution of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere is well documented, and as cars proliferate in China, India and elsewhere, half measures like hybrids and higher gas-mileage standards are unlikely to resolve the essential dilemma, the fact that the world cannot tolerate an unlimited number of cars. All of the problems associated with the internal combustion engine -- petroleum depletion, traffic congestion, global warming -- show every prospect of getting worse.

A carefully planned network that integrates electricity-based high-speed rail with efficient local transportation could make a significant contribution to the resolution of these problems. The Europeans are way ahead of us on this.

Unfortunately, for many Americans global warming and petroleum depletion are abstractions, problems that may need resolution in some distant future, but which are unlikely to cause us to change our current behaviors and preferences in any significant way.

So consider the comfort, safety and speed that trains like the Talgo could provide, as well as much more efficient energy use and a cleaner environment. In spite of our deep commitment to and affection for automobiles, they're not inevitable; our society has the capacity to make other choices. But taking any other route requires the will to creatively re-think our whole approach to transportation at a national level, an undertaking that could represent the most significant challenge that our society has ever faced.

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