

Union Pacific. On certain winter runs, the northern lights would pull down all around him in swirls of bluish green. In the 1980s, Skow began leading trips, here and abroad, centered on the great old railroads. This weekend he's partnered with train owners Burt Hermey and Al Bishop to showcase three former *Zephyr* cars from the golden age of rail travel: the *Silver Lariat*, *Silver Solarium*, and *Silver Rapids*. For the next seven hours, we'll catch a ride with Amtrak, stopping when it stops, arriving in Reno when it arrives. Once in Nevada, we'll burrow even deeper into the odd cosmos of resuscitated trains.

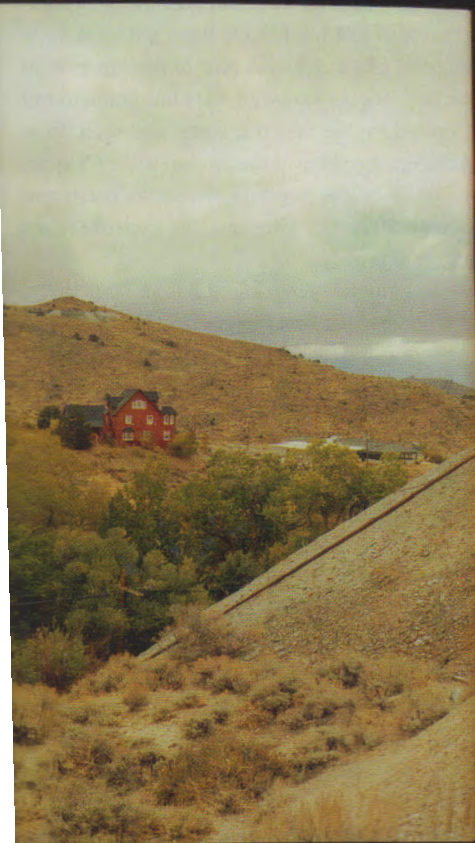
Private train travel is an uncentralized and therefore haphazard affair. Often it's arranged by charter—you gather a group and essentially rent one of these old cars for the duration of your trip. It takes some Googling to find them (see page 67), but Skow guesses that 75 private rail excursions of one kind or another originate each year in the West alone.

Outside my window, the damp Bay Area is giving way to the parched Sacramento Valley—but I'm consumed by the internal

scenery. My fellow travelers are a diverse group: Some are older white men with short white beards; others are older white men with slightly longer white beards. There are cowboy boots and hearing aids, a lone bolo tie. Radio scanners are the accessory of choice for the stalwart: Why focus on one train when you can listen to the chatter of many? One man wears a stopwatch around his neck, backstopping the conductor's timetable; his wife backstops him with a GPS unit. Most everyone I meet is delighted to help a newbie get his bearings.

The original *Zephyr* was officially retired in 1970, I learn. Amtrak used some of the cars until the arrival of Superliners in 1980. When Hermey and Bishop—just a couple of ordinary citizens—bought the trains from Amtrak, one of them had mushrooms and trees growing inside. A million dollars or more can go into restoring one of these cars.

Well worth it, the consensus seems to be. At one point a fellow traveler takes me aside and pulls something from his pocket. The tickets we were all mailed? He went to the copy shop and printed his



Watching the West from your window: In our era of scanning and swiping, the act feels radical.