

A new rail station, USA-style

Report and pictures
by Michael Weinberg

Because of continually increasing passenger numbers, it was decided to build this new station at Martinez, California, 200 yards from the old Santa Fe one that was 140 years old.

The opportunity was taken to include it in a general upgrading of the lines in the area, in particular to increase the number of tracks passing through the station from two to four.

The project, including station, tracks and signalling cost £20million.

Martinez is about 40 miles west of San Francisco on the transcontinental route from Chicago to Oakland, and is also the junction station for the line which runs down the central valley of the State, (the San Joaquin valley)

It is thus served by two routes which most closely resemble British inter-city lines in the USA apart from the North-East Corridor, Boston to Washington DC.

These are Oakland to Sacramento and Oakland to Bakersfield with some services being extended at either end giving journey times of between two and six hours. There are seven to eight journeys each way per day on both routes.

Pictured right is a typical train formation consisting of four or five double-deck coaches pushed by one of the new locos built for local services within the State, 'local' being a relative term!

These trains are superb to travel in, being incredibly spacious with leg-room that is at least twice what we'll get on Virgin's Pendolinos, or on their aircraft for that matter.

The ride is virtually silent and on good track, virtually motionless as well. The upper deck of one coach is given over to a buffet with a large variety of seating layouts.

The whole train gives an ambience of easy relaxed travel. What a price we pay here for our miserably restricted loading gauge, and the dreadful cramming which is the order of the day for British train operators.

Of course the Americans know that to get people to forsake their cars the journey experience must have the ease and comfort of their own vehicles.

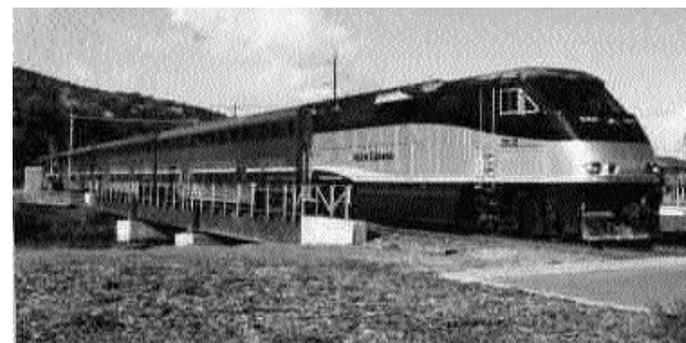
What a contrast to here where we have to pay through the nose or else book in advance to travel in some cramped, uncomfortable seat with a whole swathe of



THINK BIG: The new station at Martinez which is an inter-city interchange in California



THE LONG WAY: The California Zephyr at Martinez en route from Oakland to Chicago



LOCAL: Spacious, comfortable and virtually silent

restrictions and difficulties if we miss the train, together with the trend either to have no buffet cars or to have to eat anything in a noisy, draughty, packed-out diesel multiple unit.

The only decent trains we have are gradually being phased out in order to cram even more of us in any given space. To use these trains in California is to realise just how difficult and unpleasant it is becoming to use rail in this country. Martinez is also served by two long-distance trains, *The California Zephyr* which takes two days to get from San

Francisco (Oakland) to Chicago and *The Coast Starlight* running from Seattle to Los Angeles, taking about a day and a half. These trains are real hotels-on-wheels with restaurant service virtually all day, a buffet and snack bar which also serves hot meals, sightseeing lounge, videos, sleepers of various kinds and also day coaches for those going shorter distances. If you get the chance to travel on one of these I can recommend it as a reminder of what train travel used to be. But be quick, as they may not last much longer if

Congress gets its way!

When I saw it in December the Zephyr consisted of 18 cars. Many American companies and some rich individuals keep restored older vehicles for special trips or for hiring out to organisations for meetings.

The last two coaches of that day's Zephyr were of this type and apparently it is possible to attach these to any Amtrak train.

Incidentally the train included seven parcels and mail wagons. Amtrak apparently makes as much money carrying light freight as passengers – an opportunity missed over here?

Freight is the main raison d'être of US railways and Martinez sees many freights passing through each day. The line is now owned by Union Pacific and I saw a typical freight train with 87 wagons.

The most I've personally counted was 137! Once the east-bound freights hit the Rockies you can have as many as 5 locos at the front and three pushing! These 'helper' locos as they're called are sometimes marshalled in the centre as well.