

WAKE COUNTY

I Traveled Between Durham and Raleigh on Amtrak. It Was Great, Until It Wasn't.

Commuting on the local Amtrak route is fast, comfortable, and mostly convenient. But too few trains running daily, and unforeseen accidents, can make it challenging to be a regular passenger.

by **Chloe Courtney Bohl**

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A few times each week, I drive from Durham to Raleigh to meet sources for interviews or attend public meetings downtown. The trip takes anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour or more each way, depending on the time of day and sheer luck. I'd estimate each round-trip journey sets me back about \$3.50 in gas, plus the cost of parking—between \$5 and \$15 depending where I park and for how long.

The commute is tolerable (some of my INDY colleagues would beg to differ), but definitely not a highlight of my day. Sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic is maddening. Merging from I-885 onto I-40 from the left is harrowing. Never knowing what time I'm going to arrive at my final destination can be pretty inconvenient.

So I decided to give Amtrak a try, figuring it could save me time, money, and stress: on the train, one round trip between Durham and Raleigh costs \$16. Amtrak also offers a \$60 ten-ride ticket for the route, which lowers the cost of a single trip to \$6. The journey takes about 30 minutes each way, roughly equivalent to driving without traffic. Plus, the train lends an air of romance—mystery, mindfulness, main character energy—to an otherwise-blah journey.

Admittedly, there are some obvious downsides to commuting by train around the Triangle. Amtrak only runs about five trains between Raleigh and Durham each day, departing between 6:30 a.m. and 10:15 p.m. If you miss the last one, you're stuck overnight or with an expensive Uber ride. And the trip is only cost-effective if you can easily and cheaply travel from home to the train and from the train to your final destination (I was able to walk).

Despite the constraints, more and more people are riding the train each year. An NC DOT spokesperson told me the agency has seen a 71 percent increase in ridership at the Raleigh, Cary, and Durham stations since 2022.

To test the viability of an Amtrak commute, I arranged two trips within a few days of each other: one from Durham to Raleigh and back, and another from Raleigh to Durham and back. The results of my experiment were mixed.

Trip number one, on a Wednesday, started and ended in Durham. I walked from my apartment to the Amtrak station, housed in a circa-1897 former tobacco warehouse on Main Street. Inside, people laden with backpacks and suitcases—most traveling much further than I—waited

patiently on long wooden benches. Over the loudspeaker, a voice beckoned us to the platform, and we gathered our things and filed out in an orderly line as the train chugged into view, right on schedule.



Credit: Photo by Angelica Edwards

I picked out a seat in a mostly-empty car and watched the scenery glide by: the backsides of familiar landmarks passed in a blur, then gave way to industrial buildings and stands of new-growth trees. The Wi-Fi worked and the seats offered ample legroom. We arrived on time, give or take a few minutes. I disembarked and walked over to my final destination on Fayetteville Street, feeling extremely pleased with myself. The ride home, several hours later, was equally smooth.

The following Monday I embarked on Amtrak adventure number two alongside INDY's staff photojournalist, Angelica Edwards. Based on the previous week's success, I had promised her a

“super easy” travel day. The train gods had other plans for us.

We made it from Raleigh to Durham without incident. On the way, I surveyed a handful of our fellow travelers: most were traveling to Kannapolis or High Point for work. Many were frequent train-riders, lured by cost-effectiveness and the chance to multitask in transit. A few were riding Amtrak for the first time ever that day. As we disembarked, Angelica and I noticed that the train’s carriages were each named for a different North Carolina icon: sweet potato, fraser fir, channel bass.

Shortly after depositing us in downtown Durham, our train reportedly **struck** a man who was walking on the tracks, sending him to the hospital with serious injuries. We didn’t realize this at the time, but that same train was meant to pick us up for our return trip at 5 p.m. Throughout the day, Angelica and I received a string of email alerts from Amtrak announcing it was delayed by 30 minutes, then an hour, then two.

We considered catching the bus back to Raleigh instead, but GoTriangle estimated a 90-minute travel time. So we holed up in the INDY’s downtown office and waited it out, snacking on Goldfish and refreshing Amtrak’s online tracker as the sky darkened.

Our train finally arrived at 7 p.m. Once on board, the conductor recognized us from the morning ride.

“What are y’all, suckers for punishment?” he asked us, bemused that we were back already. We burst out laughing.

The conductor explained he works nine-and-a-half-hour days, five days a week. He has regular passengers: a UNC-Greensboro professor who lives in Durham, a man who lives in Cary and works at the Durham VA, plenty of people commuting to Raleigh. And he’s seen more than his fair share of railway accidents—“more than I would like to admit.”

A second conductor came over to chat with us and, when he spotted Angelica’s camera, showed off his own amateur photography skills: images taken from the back of the train at dawn, dusk, golden hour. Rail yards and city skylines from across the state. We talked until we pulled into Raleigh Union Station at 7:30 p.m.



Credit: Photo by Angelica Edwards

I'll be on the lookout for expanded rail service in North Carolina in the future. The NC DOT spokesperson says the agency is working to add an additional daily round trip between Raleigh and Charlotte (currently, there are five). The **S-Line Raleigh to Richmond** project is also underway, and the **Corridor Identification and Development (CID)** program promises to expand intercity passenger rail around the state in future years.

Will I be commuting to Raleigh on Amtrak again? Yes, though not on a busy workday when I have appointments I can't miss. I'll use it for day trips and outings with flexible start and end times. I'll probably buy that 10-ride pass, which is valid for 180 days, giving me plenty of time to get my money's worth.

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