

**February**



## **Sleek Commuting**

I've been catching the fast commuter train down to Lisbon for years.

Some things about that sentence need refinement. While 'years' is accurate enough - I've been a regular traveller to the capital on work business for about ten years - 'fast' and 'commuter train' require context. The trains are the rather smart pendolino vehicles which are capable of 220 kph. 'Capable' is the key work here as they rarely actually make this speed, not because the Italian manufacturers are lying about the performance of the machines but because CP - the Portuguese rail company - haven't yet upgraded enough of the rail track network to make this happen. Two points to note here: these trains are the tilting type, where the seating platform remains gyroscopically level when the train bogeys tilt around corners. This makes some travellers nauseous and, as a result, they usually choose to travel by the non-tilting intercity trains, which adds all of twenty minutes their journey and costs them about twenty percent less. The second point to make is that these trains are made by Fiat, whose cars are vehicles I would do my best to avoid due to their sadistically designed seats and general lack of safety features. Incidentally, the famous, or infamous, tilting device (depending on the level of nausea generated) is based on the patented British APT train, itself famous (or infamous) for its failure to work when trialled in the early 1980s, nonetheless costing the British taxpayer oodles of money.

The journey time to Lisbon from Porto, a mere three hundred kilometres, is two hours forty minutes which works out at an average speed of 115 kph. Clearly some time travelling device is in operation here because the train seems to spend most of its time, especially on the second half of its journey to Lisbon, grazing in the scrubland as it potters along at about 80. Gangs of railway workers line the track, leaning on picks and crowbars, and we are going slow enough to look into their eyes and exchange wordless greetings. Quite how we get to our destination on time beats me.

One of the perks of the job is that we get to travel first class on the train. (As I write this I am racking my brain to think of other perks we get to put in the positive column, to help redress the much longer list in the negative column, and if I think of one by the time I finish writing this piece then I promise to let you know). First class offers wide, reclining seats and table service with complimentary drinks and papers. My seat is usually carriage one, seat 72, which is a single seat, so not one of a pair, and has its own power point to plug the laptop into. Not all seats have power points, and two thirds of the first class seats sit as one of a pair, on the other side of the aisle from seat 72. The seats are pre-bookable, and if for some reason I can't get seat 72 then I sulk for most of the journey, and shoot dagger-like looks at the usurper in my seat. Today I have seat 72 secured, so normally I would be anticipating my usual routine of settling in the seat, pulling down the footrest and the individual table, setting up the laptop, arranging the work I have to do and plugging the mp3 into my ears before promptly falling asleep and dribbling down my shirt front.

Today is slightly different, though. I had been alerted to information that I had not been privy to for the previous ten years or so. There is a class distinction even within first class. My well-briefed informant told me that carriage one, where seat 72 is located, is the carriage for fat cats, old lawyers, grizzled politicians and the more aged and paunchy glitterati of the country. Carriage two, the other first class carriage, on the other hand, is occupied by the bright young things who are swarming up the business, political and media ladders. Well, blow me, but I'd never noticed. Probably too busy dribbling on my shirt to care, frankly. Why is it, then, that whenever I book my ticket on-line (which is ninety percent of the time) I am always automatically directed to carriage one? My informant, a younger colleague who is a much chattier person than me, always gets put in carriage two. What was CP trying to tell me? Only once, in my recollection, was I ever offered a seat in carriage two, and that was when carriage one was full because I'd booked at the last moment. Have I been stereotyped?

It was six forty in the morning and I looked at my fellow passengers waiting on the platform with renewed interest. Standing at the front end of the platform, where carriage one, containing the renowned and much sought after seat 72, would arrive, I could see mainly men on the crinkly side of fifty, wearing expensive suits under their wool coats, and two determined looking women in don't-mess-with-me heels. Further down the platform, where carriage two would come to rest, a far chirpier and chipper group had assembled, most of them looking as if they'd come straight from the nightclub, still buzzing from whatever

recreational habits they indulged in. This revelation as to the truth of my informant's observations left me feeling not a little unbalanced, something that no doubt the ex-APT tilting bogies would soon put right. Whilst I didn't especially want to spend the next three hours in the company of bright young things as they chattered and chattered their way to the capital city, neither did I want to be automatically classified with the self-satisfied and smug overfed felines in carriage one.

The train arrived quietly, its bright headlights cutting through the dark blue light of an early morning in February. Seat 72 was waiting patiently for me. As I settled, arranging my possessions like a nest, senior burghers greeted each other with subdued enthusiasm and made themselves comfortable while, from the open interconnecting carriage door, came the sound of mirth and high jinks. What kind of infernal software was it, I wondered, that could detect, on-line, the character of the intending traveller and place them in the appropriate environment? And how to reconcile my fate as being lumped together with the oily plutocrats? How to strike a small blow for the powerless? As I fought to stay awake long enough to get my complimentary coffee, and sucked the dribble back from my chin, I solemnly proclaimed the People's Republic of Seat 72. Or Person Republic. I probably just mumbled it. By the time the coffee came round I was fast asleep.