

## Warren Kessler: Fast train in China: You don't know what you're missing

In August 2013, I visited China for my first time. I went to meet a relative and then to do some touring in the vast, historic and rapidly developing nation. It was a remarkable experience in many ways. One unexpected treat involved two trips on China's high-speed rail system. These were amazing. Given all the controversy surrounding the development of HSR in California, I hope an account of my experience with the Chinese HSR can add a helpful dimension to our thinking and discussion.

After visiting my relative in Qingdao, a beautiful port city on the East Coast, I took a high-speed train to Beijing and met up with a Chinese tour company to complete my travel on a 16-day trip. Beijing is about 440 miles northwest of Qingdao driving. The train route needed a few stops at key cities, extending the distance to 510 miles. Mapquest estimates a drive would take over seven hours; my train made it in four hours and 40 minutes. Even with the longer train distance, the HSR averaged 110 mph and cut my travel time by 38%.

Following four marvelous days in Beijing, I took a second train from Beijing to the ancient city of Xian, the original capital of China. Xian sits about halfway down China, approximately 680 miles southwest of Beijing. The HSR covered the 680 miles in exactly six hours, at a clip of 113 mph. A car trip of that distance would have taken over 11 hours.

Using similar speeds in California, a 200-mile drive to San Francisco can run three and a half to four hours by car, without stops for gas, meals, bathrooms and traffic jams. If that trip were taken by a HSR traveling at the "slow" rate of the trains I took (110 mph), it would take an hour and 45 minutes. A four to five hour drive to Los Angeles would be cut to a little over two hours. If HSR speed rises to 150 mph, those trips to San Francisco and L.A. would be cut to an hour and a half and two hours respectively.

The trains I took were not the fastest in China. Two and a half million travelers use the Chinese HSR rail system annually. One system goes up to 186 mph; the other exceeds that pace.

The two trips cost me a bit over \$80 each. I bought business-class seats so I would have plenty of room. At 6-feet-4, trips of four to six hours could be unpleasant in a tighter setting. The extra room added only \$25 to each ticket. Believe me, the small investment was well worth it.

The cabins were immaculate and spacious. Seats were roomy, and so was leg room. I brought sandwiches and snacks in my carry-on knapsack, but iced tea, soft drinks and snacks were available from very professional staff, who resembled very classy flight attendants. There were TV screens in front of every seat.

The rides were smoother by far than any train I have taken in the U.S. Indeed, they were smoother than any passenger plane I've taken. None of the usual "clack, clack, clack" of the typical U.S. passenger trains, and none of the shaking side to side.

On both trips, I arrived relaxed and almost rested, certainly not the way I usually feel if I drive to San Francisco or L.A., or even if I fly for five to six hours. Both trips started exactly on schedule; one arrived exactly on time, the other was two minutes behind schedule (for a 680-mile trip)!

I am not trying here to assess the costs of the California HSR, issues of land acquisition, compensation for the use of eminent domain, or whether now is the right time for California to make this investment. Yet as someone who has had the pleasure and convenience of traveling long distances in the great comfort and ease of the Chinese system, I think it is fair to say that most folks in California have no idea of what we are missing.

In a state extending over 1,000 miles, with some of the largest, most prosperous cities in America spread from San Francisco and Sacramento down to Los Angeles and San Diego, it is foolish to ignore the potential of high-speed rail for business, family and tourism travel.

Warren Kessler of Fresno is a former philosophy professor. Comment by going to [fresnobee.com/opinion](http://fresnobee.com/opinion) and clicking on Valley Voices.