

All Aboard the Bakersfield Bluegrass Express by Ted Kuster

“She moves along like a cannonball, like a star in its heavenly flight.” This cannonball is hauling a few dozen pickers on their way to the greatest hotel jam party west of Raleigh. If you’re going to the Bakersfield Great 48 from anywhere in the northern half of California, the Amtrak San Joaquin is the way to get there.

Share the ride with fellow bluegrass and old-time devotees picking and singing all the way down the scenic Central Valley. Once in Bakersfield, the Marriott is a quick stroll across the parking lot from the Amtrak terminus. You’ll arrive rested and jam-ready, not so worn out from the I-5 you can barely drag yourself into the lobby.

Our train is called the 714 San Joaquin and it starts off at Jack London Square in Oakland at 11:36 am on Thursday, Jan. 5. Its first stop is at Emeryville, 10 minutes later. It stops at Richmond at 11:55 and at Martinez at 12:25. Whichever station you book your ticket for, get on the rear-most coach, the one with the twanging noises coming out the windows, and let the good times roll.

If you're driving from the North Bay, you might want to board at Richmond or Martinez. If you're driving from the East Bay or San Francisco, the Emeryville station is for you. There's ample validated parking there. If you're taking BART to the train, go to Jack London Square. Martinez has lots of free street parking within a block or three of the station; just watch out for the street cleaning signs.

If you're coming from the Sacramento area or up in the Sierra, you'll probably want to get on at Stockton (at 1:19) or Modesto (1:54). You can also get on at Turlock, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Hanford, Corcoran, or Wasco.

You have some options for the return trip. Trains leave Bakersfield at 12:12, 2:12, and 4:12 pm, getting back to the Bay Area a little after 6, 8, and 10 p.m. respectively. It's a good idea to pay the extra \$10 when you book the return leg so you can switch departure times if you have to.

Note that we aren't part of a group package: all we're doing is all getting our tickets for the same train on the same day. If you like the choo-choo but can't make the same ride the rest of the group is on, no problem! Amtrak will still be happy to have you.

When you book, don't forget to claim your 15% student, senior, or veteran discount. And kids 12 and under are half off. Pro tip: if you're coming with a group, you might be eligible for the Share Fare discount, which can come out to as much as 75% off.

OK, now to the most important part of all this. If you're thinking of joining our rolling picking party, please make known the train songs you like the most by [checking them on this list](#).

We'll count them up on board the train and see how the favorites compare to previous years, for no reason at all except fun. See you on board!

INFO LINE FOR MORE INFORMATION: great48train@californiabluegrass.net