



VIA Rail may reinstate Ocean service in November

Partial service ruled out between now and then

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NEW RICHMOND – VIA Rail plans to resume operations between Montreal and Halifax with its Ocean train in November, at a date that has not yet been determined. The possibility of offering a service on a partial section of the Montreal-Nova Scotia stretch is not in VIA Rail's plans.

The Ocean train service was suspended indefinitely in mid-March because of the measures adopted to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Since then, VIA Rail has reinstated many routes with a reduced frequency, mostly day trains linking destinations situated in the Quebec City to Windsor corridor, but not exclusively there.

Except for the Winnipeg to Churchill train, considered an essential service because there is no road linking most locations, all the long-distance trains were suspended, and are gradually being brought back. It is the case for the Montreal-Senneterre, Montreal-Jonquière, Sudbury-White River and the Jasper-Prince Rupert service over its whole length.

Could VIA Rail resume operations on the Ocean train between Montreal and Matapédia, for example, to serve its Quebec clientele, given the absence of the Orleans Express bus service and recent Air Canada cuts?

"Except for the Winnipeg to Churchill train, there is no luggage, no food and no sleeper

services onboard," explains Karl-Philip Marchand-Giguère, spokesperson for VIA Rail. In other words, servicing a long route like Montreal to Matapédia is currently ruled out.

The COVID-19 service halt also allowed VIA Rail to proceed with a thorough inspection of all its rolling stock, a rare occurrence for the transporter.

"That inspection allowed us to find a problem with some of our stainless steel cars, a crack that must be repaired. In fact, it is currently under repair at a speed that we could never have reached had all the passenger cars been in service. We were in a position to accelerate the process," says Mr. Marchand-Giguère.

Why is VIA Rail only coming back in November? "It is difficult to predict the resumption of traffic over the long-distance links because we have to offer all the services like those on the Canadian and Ocean trains. In the kitchen of the dining car, for instance, we have to figure out how it is possible to keep a two-metre distance between two cooks working together in a limited space," he explains.

Since the first stages of the pandemic, the Maritime public health authorities have prevented people from the rest of Canada from going to New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, barring a few exceptions. It is far from certain that they would open their borders again in Novem-

ber to the people of other provinces, or allow their own citizens to easily return if they leave the Maritimes.

"We always respect the decisions of the provincial health authorities," specifies Karl-Philip Marchand-Giguère. So, VIA Rail will not reinstate the Ocean train in November if New Brunswick and Nova Scotia are blocking their borders to people from outside then.

Would VIA Rail be willing in those conditions to resume some services on the Quebec part of the Ocean course in the context of the Maritimes still blocking their border to passenger trains? "I don't know," replies Mr. Marchand-Giguère.

Halifax loop problem resolved

Meanwhile, VIA Rail resolved the problem created at the beginning of 2020 when the Port of Halifax informed the passenger transporter that the loop used at the Halterm container terminal to reverse the Ocean train would no longer be available this coming November.

That particularity had many commuter transport observers worried about the future of the Montreal-Halifax train.

"In order to address this issue, VIA Rail is pleased to announce an operational plan that will allow to continue operating the Ocean without access to the Halterm rail loop. VIA Rail will be using a new hybrid com-

posed of different types (of) cars, and with two locomotives equipped with features allowing for back to back operations, thus negating the need to turn the trains in Halifax. The selected coach cars are equipped with seats that can be turned in order to be aligned with the direction of travel and ensure optimal comfort for passengers," the transporter recently communicated in a press release.

As VIA Rail continues its recently announced accelerated inspection program, the exact configuration will be finalized by late summer 2020. Also once finalized, the product offering and service delivery requirements will be adjusted accordingly, also mentions the document.

Temporary layoffs

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the travel industry globally, VIA Rail announced on July 8 "the difficult decision to temporarily lay off approximately 1,000 unionized employees," the transporter specified in another press release.

While VIA Rail has observed recent positive developments in service resumption, many routes are still interrupted. This has therefore led VIA Rail to reconsider its approach in order to further adjust to the increasing financial impacts this crisis has had on the company, also mentions the press release.

"The current year has been filled with unprecedented challenges: first with the blockades in February and now with the ongoing pandemic. We have made every effort to protect our employees to the best of our abilities against the impacts of the service reductions," declared Cynthia Garneau, VIA Rail's president and chief executive officer.

"Unfortunately, as we don't anticipate ridership to be back to pre-COVID-19 levels in the foreseeable future, we have had to make difficult decisions to deal with the situation as we gain a better understanding of the impact of the pandemic on our operations," she adds.

VIA Rail is aware that this is a very difficult situation for its employees and their families and we will take care of them through this period of transition.

The employees affected will receive a temporary written lay-off notice which respects the terms of the collective agreements. These temporary layoffs will take effect on July 24, 2020. To accompany its employees during these challenging times, VIA Rail will be maintaining access to different programs.

It is also mentioned in the press release that VIA Rail "continues to work on advancing its service resumption plan as the situation evolves with the objective of reintegrating its employees as soon as the customer demand allows it."