

Via Rail will gradually return to Eastern Quebec and the Maritimes on August 11

Gilles Gagné

MATAPEDIA - Via Rail will resume service between Halifax and Montreal on August 11, with only one round train per week in the first phase of a gradual resumption of this link. The Montreal-Halifax route has been suspended since mid-February 2020, with the exception of one week in March of the same year.

The Ocean train will leave Halifax on August 11, a Wednesday, for Montreal, where it will arrive the next day. The return will be made on Sunday, August 15. Normally, the Ocean train connects Montreal and Halifax with three weekly round trips. The public corporation does not specify in its press release whether Wednesday and Sunday will remain the travel days for a while, and it does not mention when a full schedule will be restored.

Shortly after February 10, 2020, the Ocean train was suspended for three weeks because barricades were erected in a few places in Canada by Natives supporting the Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia. The last

barriers were removed on March 5, but a week later, the state of emergency resulting from the pandemic once again paralyzed the Montreal-Halifax link. No Via Rail train has run east of the Lévis-Quebec City sector since then.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the travel options of Canadians in Eastern Canada," said Cynthia Garneau, Via Rail's president and chief executive officer, in a press release. "To follow and respect guidelines and recommendations from public health authorities and provincial governments, we could not provide our passengers the service and frequencies offered under normal circumstances. Our objective has always been the safe resumption of the Ocean when conditions allowed it, and we could not be happier to be able to finally proceed with this gradual return to service in this region."

Wearing a mask on the train, keeping one's seat and compliance with the sanitary measures recommended by the public health departments of the provinces served by the Ocean train will be in force when service is resumed.



Photos: G. Gagné

Via Rail must think of retuning to Gaspé in phases, assures Cynthia Patterson.

Travel to New Brunswick has been allowed since the end of June for Quebecers and the Atlantic bubble came back into force approximately at the same time. People entering New Brunswick and Nova Scotia have nevertheless to go through a border checkpoint.

The Ocean train serves in particular the communities in eastern Quebec located between Charny and Matapédia. In the Gaspé Peninsula the citizens are closely watching the situation of the Montreal-Halifax train because the Gaspe-

sians' train, connecting Montreal and Gaspé, has long been part of the Ocean train as far as Matapédia, where the two trains separate.

The Matapédia-Gaspé link has, however, been suspended since September 2013 due to the condition of the railway. Work is underway but it will not be completed until the fall of 2022 in the case of New Carlisle, and in 2025 in the case of Gaspé.

Cynthia Patterson, of Barabois, who has heavily contributed over the last 40 years

to the movement to protect rail services in her region, believes that Via Rail must show better engagement towards its clientele in the eastern part of the country, specifically Gaspesian users.

"It is not a matter of money, because they (Via's decision-makers) are investing in the (Quebec City-Windsor) corridor. (...) It would be ridiculous for Via to wait until the railway is repaired as far as Gaspé before serving us on a portion of our network. Who suffers from it? Again, these are the most vulnerable people, the people who need it most. I can't sit down all those hours, 16 or 18, to go to Montreal by bus," she notes.

She suggests another mobilization on the part of the region's elected people, regardless of their political allegiance. She is disappointed by Gaspésie-Magdalen Islands Member of Parliament Diane Lebouthillier's lack of involvement in the cause, as the politician has written that "it is Via Rail's prerogative" to make decisions about its train operations.

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"Disappointment? That is an understatement. (...) Our MRCs have been active but everyone has to be more active. Petitions don't work. We have to go and sit down, face to face, in Montreal, at Via Rail's head office, our Members of Parliament, our Members of National Assembly, the MRC prefects and the municipalities. In fact, the Via Rail people should make the bus ride to Gaspé. We

saved Via Rail's services in the past because politicians from all parties made enormous efforts. We try to have a good product, unique and we are hearing zero from them (Via Rail decision makers). I find that extremely disappointing, and it is unjust, for the Maritimes and the Gaspé Peninsula," states Ms. Patterson.

Bernard Babin, of the Coalition of Gaspésians for the return of the train, has mixed feelings about the July 9 announcement by Via Rail.

"I am pleasantly surprised to see that Via Rail is finally returning to the Maritimes, but there is still a long way to go to adequately serve the Gaspé Peninsula. The rails are in good condition between Matapédia and New Richmond, in better condition than on the Bathurst-Miramichi portion, in New Brunswick. The state of the network would allow a gradual return to New Richmond, while waiting for New Carlisle at the end of 2022. I ask Via to find solutions to re-

turn to the rest of the Gaspé Peninsula very quickly," he specifies.

Mr. Babin hopes that the federal carrier will invest in rail equipment for the eastern Canada service.

"Slowly, we have to give Via Rail the idea of acquiring equipment for the east. We must also look at what is happening on the United States' side with Amtrak, where they are investing heavily in re-establishing several links, and in increasing the frequency of

trains. In Canada, we are investing in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor, but there must also be money invested in the rest of the network," he insists.

Via Rail has already sent a train from Montreal to Halifax, on July 12, a month before service resumption. That empty train covered the distance in about 27 hours, including a four-hour stop in Campbellton, where the crew waiting for the arrival of a freight train.