

**CANADA'S NATIONAL OBSERVER**

## **Riding the Slow Train to Churchill in the Shadow of Trump 2.0**

By Christopher Pollon

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Getting to Churchill by rail requires a serious commitment to taking it slow.

A one-way trip on VIA Rail's passenger service from Winnipeg takes about two days, rounding Canada's prairie breadbasket, skirting the colossal Lake Winnipeg into Saskatchewan, with an eastward swing back through the heart of Manitoba's boreal forest.

The terminus of this voyage is the town of Churchill on the west coast of Hudson Bay, set amid a mostly treeless sub-arctic biodiversity hot spot globally known for [polar bears](#), [beluga whales](#) and northern lights displays better than practically anywhere else.

It is also the site of Canada's only deep water Arctic seaport to be connected to the continent by rail — the very rail line I am riding — which in this new era of “nation building” has become [Canada's great northern hope for trade](#) beyond our unfriendly neighbours to the south.

I could have flown to Churchill in less than three hours from Winnipeg, but I chose the slow track to better understand the path western resources must take to reach Hudson Bay.

Choosing the train, I accepted there would be deprivation, if you can call it that: there are northern sections without internet access — a welcome digital detox from my Trump 2.0 news vigil. But as I would discover before this journey was over, going off the grid did not avoid the rising impact of US tariffs and threats to make Canada the 51<sup>st</sup> state.



*Winnipeg's Union Station was a prairie gateway for thousands of immigrants to Western Canada in the early 20th century. Its Beaux-Arts style can be seen in the grand central arch flanked by paired columns and topped by a large dome. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer)*

On a Sunday afternoon in April, still off-season for tourists, I boarded the train with about a dozen other passengers in Winnipeg. The deserted, grandiose Beaux-Arts style train station that opened in 1912 feels like a mausoleum — a grand monument to the golden age of rail when a more civilized travel mode before it was usurped by jet planes.

The train crawled out of Winnipeg, on a [track system](#) congested with Canadian National Railway freight trains destined for Montreal, Vancouver and points in between.

About 20 minutes into our trip, a mild-mannered train conductor named Daniel (who started all of his announcements singing a two-toned station ID) came over the intercom with an apology.

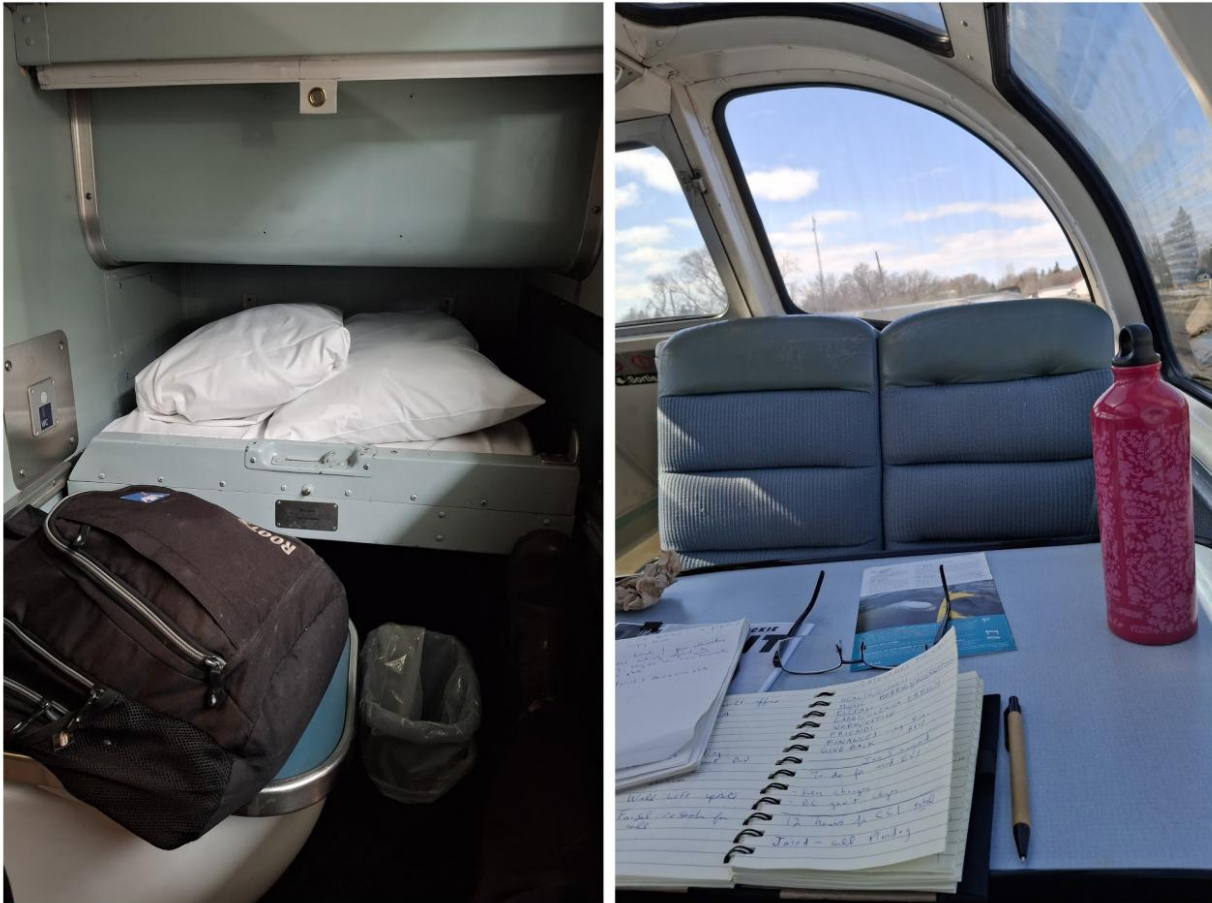
“Via Rail rents the track from CN, so they have the right of way,” Daniel said.

It's the hard reality of passenger rail in Canada – freight is always the priority.

This was a small train by most standards: two locomotives pulling a food and dining car, two economy passenger cars and two sleeper cars, with a clear ceiling sky car to provide the full horizon view. I camped out in the latter for most of the trip.

I also booked a “room” in the sleeper car — a two-metre-by-two-metre space featuring a hide-a-bed the railway staff called a “coffin.”

It rolls out with a switch in the wall and encompasses the whole space. It’s actually more like one of those roll-out morgue corpse storage slabs than a coffin.

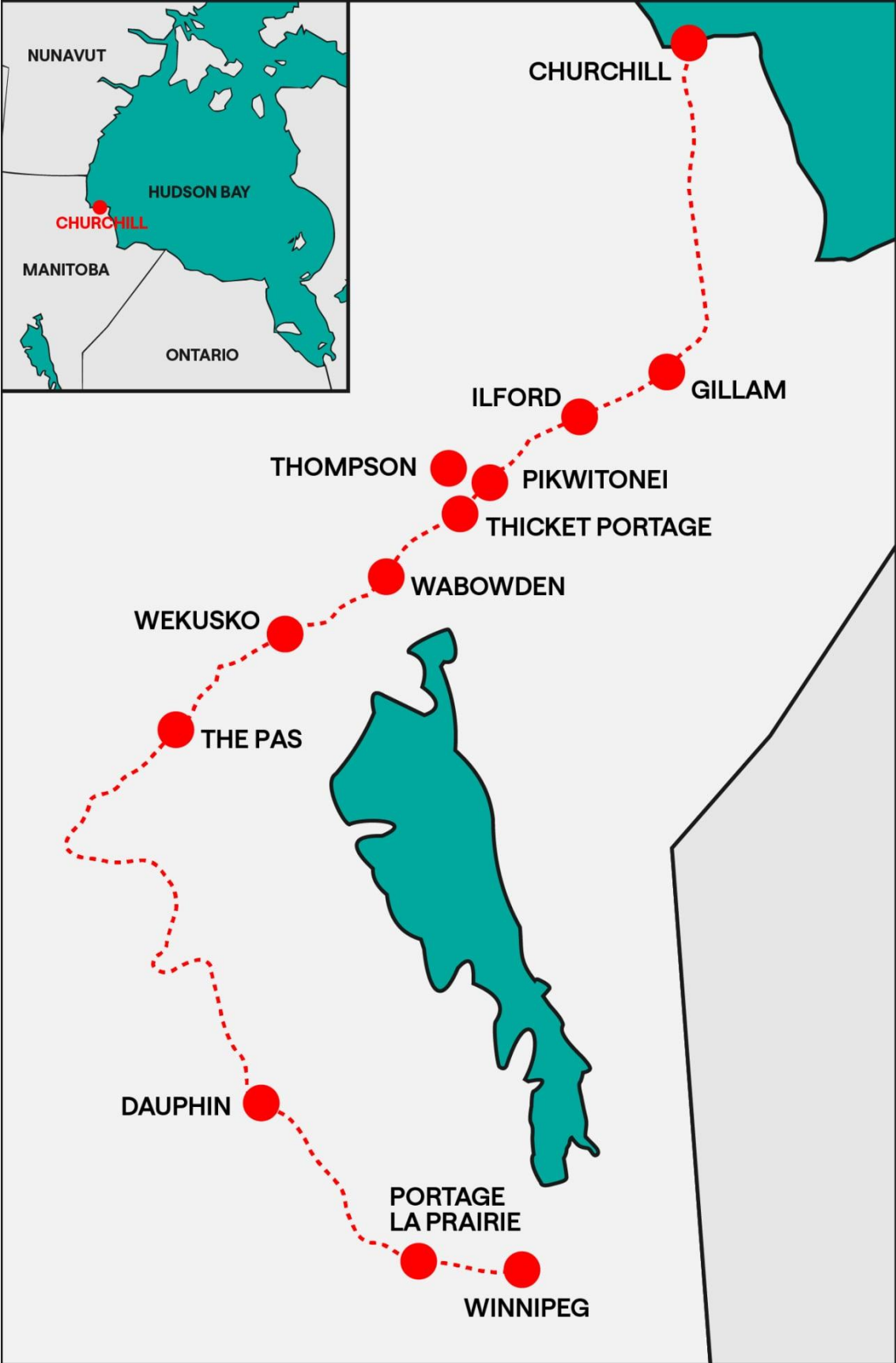


*My sleeper berth (L) included a 1950s-era hide-a-bed known as the “coffin”, shown here before it is rolled out for sleeping. The sky car (R) was my office during the two-day trip. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada’s National Observer)*

The design and fixtures were all vintage 1952. A bit tattered, but comfortable and supremely functional.

“It’s an essential service,” Daniel told me later during the trip, adding the twice-weekly service is a lifeline for many communities that dot the northern part of the rail route, many of them home to Indigenous people without road connections.

Much of the freight shipped to Churchill on this track also continues northward to multiple Indigenous communities on the west coast of Hudson Bay and beyond — including Whale Cove and Rankin Inlet, both the site of mines.



The route

*of the Polar Bear Express from Winnipeg to Churchill. The Via Rail train winds through Canada's prairie breadbasket, skirting the colossal Lake Winnipeg into Saskatchewan, and an eastward swing back through the heart of Manitoba's boreal forest. (Graphic: Ata Ojani)*

As an essential service, anyone can call ahead and arrange for the train to stop at a milepost — literally posts in the ground that serve as distance markers and line the 1300-km route of the Hudson Bay Railway.

For example, local hunters, adventure wilderness trekkers and clients of hunting lodges can ask for the train to stop at milepost 45.



*The first leg of my train journey ran through farm fields stretching beyond the horizon under a cloud-filled sky. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer)*

Much of the first day ran through a classic flat, prairie grain farming hinterland, circumnavigating Lake Winnipeg, the remnants of a [vast glacial lake](#) that today is almost 25,000 square kilometres in area.

I fell asleep in farm country and woke up in boreal forest, just east of Snow Lake and near a rich zinc mine that last year started exporting zinc to Europe through the port at Churchill. Black spruce dominated the world passing my window — ram-rod straight, pipe-cleaner trees — the iconic boreal conifer.



*Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer*

At a stopover in Thompson, a town 740 kilometres north of Winnipeg that bills itself as the “hub of the north,” I met André Barubé — a Québécois locomotive engineer, as he boarded the train to start a shift.

Our two-day voyage had five engineer shift changes in total. They worked in teams of two at all times, with one controlling the train speed, and the second focused on monitoring all communications with a train traffic controller.



*André Barubé, a Via Rail locomotive engineer, gets ready to board the train at Thompson, Man. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer)*

Barubé told me about the big INCO nickel mine on the outskirts of Thompson, which was in decline, and was now rumoured to be coming back to life with new deposits found. US-financed INCO Ltd was the original mining company here, then sold to Brazil's Vale in 2006. It is [possibly for sale again](#).

“They should sell it to someone Canadian,” he said.

The 1300-kilometre Hudson Bay Railway that stretches from The Pas to tidewater is the Achilles' heel of this nascent trade corridor — in particular the [northern sections that skirt through bog, fen and swamp, navigating washout-prone bridges](#), and sections of permafrost that seasonally melt and threaten the stability of the railbed, thanks to climate change.



*After a two-year shutdown, the Hudson Bay Railway needs to show it can operate consistently in the face of melting permafrost and a changing climate. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer)*

Not far above Thompson, there was extensive spring flooding in 2017 that washed out sections of rail.

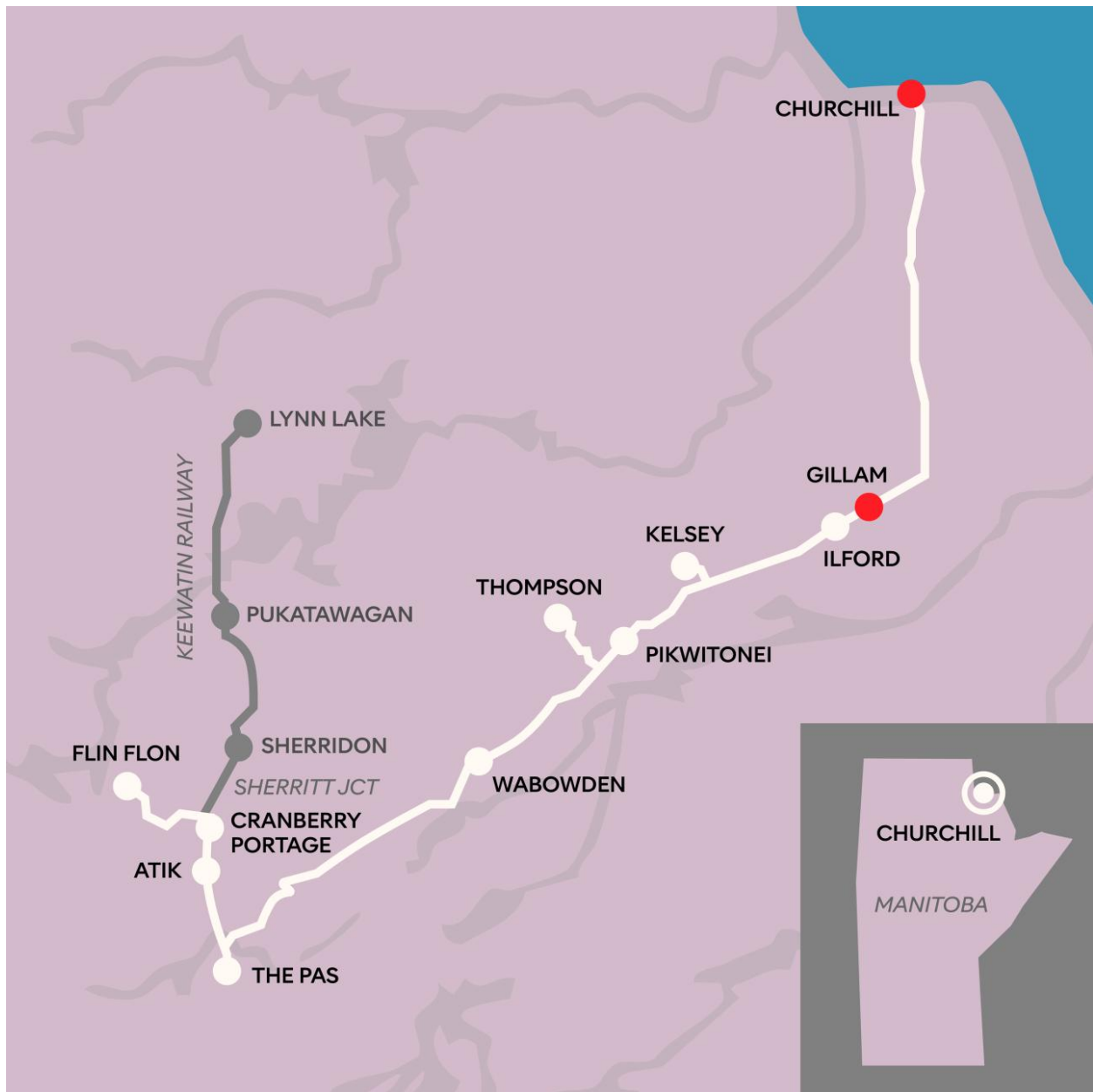
As a result, no trains ran for two years, even though many communities all along the line rely on rail for virtually everything.

### Bitter Memories

During that time, the American company that owned the port and rail line lost its shipping contracts and all freight was forced to come either by air (Churchill has a long airstrip, a holdover from its days as a US military base), or by ship from Montreal.

Is this rail line fit for an expansion of freight to Churchill?

Barubé said there are spots where he still has to slow down because the bed slumps as it passes through swampy land, including one stretch just above this station. The Arctic Gateway Group, the new owners of the Hudson Bay Railway, have done much to improve and upgrade the rail line, he added.



Map shows the Hudson Bay Railway route and the final stretch from Gillam to Churchill. This year alone, the federal government has pledged \$175 million to upgrade the port and rail line. (Graphic by Ata Ojani)

He pointed to a 20-metre-long pile of gravel stretching as far as the eye can see in either direction — “ballast” which will further reinforce the rail line once the weather is better.

Novel tactics are also being used to keep the track operational. In addition to patrolling drones and the use of ground-penetrating radar mounted on locomotives to collect GPS-tracked data on the permafrost, at least 13 wash-out sites have been reinforced by “geo-cells” — plastic brick-like containers packed with rock and sand to create a stable base for the tracks.

I slept through an overnight stop at Gillam, the last town before the train made an abrupt northward sprint to tidewater; the permafrost here, like much of Hudson Bay itself in April, was frozen solid. *[story continued on next page]*



*VIA Rail kitchen staffer Brian BBQ'd Brown, a Red Seal certified chef and Winnipeg native who legally changed his*

*middle name to “BBQ’d” in a tribute to Kansas City-style cuisine. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada’s National Observer)*

I got a surprise during my morning coffee with VIA kitchen staffer Brian BBQ’d Brown, a Red Seal certified chef and Winnipeg native who legally changed his middle name to “BBQ’d” in a tribute to Kansas City-style cuisine.

He told me a high-level US diplomat showed up unannounced in Churchill the week before, asking pointed questions about [Canadian plans to export potash and other critical minerals](#) to non-US markets through Churchill. “They want our resources,” he said.

Within an hour, I was interviewing Churchill Mayor Mike Spence by phone in the dining car, who confirmed the rumours were true — forming the basis for [this story](#), the first in a series on Churchill’s future for *Canada’s National Observer*. It would not have materialized unless I had taken the slow train to Churchill.



*The final leg of my train journey with Churchill on the horizon. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada’s National Observer)*

By this point, the view outside my window was transitioning from boreal forest to Hudson Bay Lowlands and tundra. As the forest disappeared, a flat expanse of permafrost was unveiled by the sun rising over a seemingly endless horizon of snow and ice.

From kilometres away, the grain storage silos appeared out of nowhere, and the town of Churchill came into view — lying dormant amid an iced-in Hudson Bay, glaring under a brilliant sun without warmth.

I stepped off the train into minus 26 temperatures — all exposed skin felt burned by the northwest prevailing winds — a harsh reminder that Churchill's short Arctic summer shipping season was still months away.



*My final destination: arriving at Churchill station. (Photo: Christopher Pollon / Canada's National Observer)*



[Christopher Pollon](#)