

Europe by Train

Worried about the impacts of flying? Fed up of hanging around in airports? Want to see more of the places you're travelling to? Trains could be the answer!

Travelling by rail around Europe really isn't as daunting as it might seem. Many European countries have networks of high speed lines which make it easy to cover long distances quickly. There are also many slower but incredibly scenic lines to enjoy, which really make the journey an enjoyable part of a holiday.

Using trains typically results in only 10 to 20% of the CO₂ emissions of the equivalent journey by air, so it's better for the planet too!

Where to start?



Let the adventure begin - St. Pancras International

The gateway to Europe is London St. Pancras station. From here Eurostar services run at up to 186 mph direct to Paris in as little as 2 1/4 hours, Brussels in under 2 hours and Amsterdam in under 4 hours.

Regrettably Eurostar does do its best to be like an airline, though the imposition of increased border controls as a result of Brexit and the need for security screening of luggage hasn't helped here.

So it is necessary to arrive at the station in plenty of time before departure to allow for these formalities.

Then where?

From Brussels Midi station there are excellent onward connections into and beyond Germany. How about a cruise along the Rhine, exploring the Black Forest, or maybe visiting the capital Berlin?

From Paris all parts of France can be reached. A change of station is required in the capital – easy enough via the comprehensive Metro network. Fast trains from Paris also run direct to Barcelona, Milan, Geneva and Zurich.

All of these places can be reached in a (long) day from London, but there are plenty of options for overnight stopovers when heading to some of the more far flung destinations.



Just some of the routes from Paris

Lille Europe

A good option, particularly bearing in mind the need to get from Lichfield to London, is an overnight stay in the northern French town of Lille. Most of the Eurostars bound for Brussels call here, and an evening departure from St. Pancras allows a comfortable night's sleep in an inexpensive modern hotel close to the station, before continuing your journey next morning.

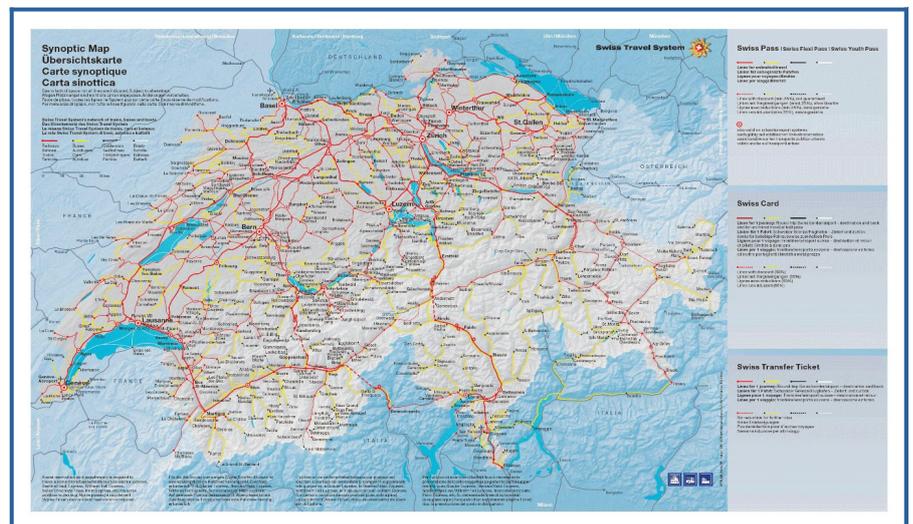
Direct trains run from Lille to Strasbourg, Marseilles, Montpellier and Bordeaux, all avoiding the hassle of crossing Paris. Beautiful Avignon can be reached in just over 4 hours, and with an easy change at Valence it is possible to be in Barcelona at 16:30.

Another plus when travelling via Lille is the easier passport control and security clearance when returning to the UK – it's much quieter than the equivalent at Paris Nord (Eurostar's departure station in the French capital), which can turn into something of a scrum!

Switzerland – the standard bearer

If there's anywhere that exemplifies how a public transport network can be it's Switzerland. Here timetables are completely integrated, with seamless connections between trains, buses and boats, often taking just 3 minutes. And it all works!

Switzerland is an expensive country and rail travel is no exception, but a Swiss Pass can give great value, with most buses and boats also included in the price. Some of the most spectacular scenic and mountain railways do require a supplement or only offer a discount off the normal price, but there is still a vast network to choose from, much of it through stunning scenery.



The Swiss public transport network - a masterpiece!

The return of night trains

If you're feeling really adventurous how about travelling on one of the network of overnight trains?

For many years night trains were in decline, seen off by ever-faster daytime services and low-cost airlines. But recently there has been a comeback, helped by *flygskam* or 'flight shaming'.

Leading the way is Nightjet, part of Austrian railways operator OBB, but stretching its tentacles across much of Europe.

It's possible to leave Paris at 19:00 and after a night in a comfortable sleeping compartment arrive in Vienna at 10:00 the next morning.



A Nightjet sleeper train

Couchette cars and ordinary seating coaches are also available if on a restricted budget, though these are not so conducive to a good night's sleep! Also bear in mind the overnight journey will save the cost of a stopover hotel.



One of the great travel experiences – walk out of the front of Venice Santa Lucia station and you're right on the Grand Canal!

How much does it cost?

There is no escaping the fact that travelling by train will usually work out more expensive than flying, particularly if using low-cost airlines, though add-ons can result in these not being quite the bargain they seem.

There are ways to reduce the cost however. Firstly book well ahead if possible, particularly if intending to travel on faster long-distance services – booking horizons vary but can be as much as 6 months for Eurostar, and more typically 3 months on other high speed services. Eurostar fares can be as low as £39 each way if booking a return journey, though this would usually require travelling on early morning or evening services. On the other hand if you have to travel at peak times such as Friday afternoons and aren't able to book far ahead then fares can be truly eye-watering!

If booking well in advance it is possible to find fares as low as £38 per person from Paris to Zurich for example, but the same journey would cost nearly £100 more when booking at busy times close to the date of travel.

InterRail

Another option worth considering, especially if intending to make multiple journeys, is an InterRail pass.

These are available as single country or 'global' versions, the latter being valid for travel in 33 countries including Turkey! Your outward and return journeys within the UK are also included.

For travel on Eurostar a special fare of €30 applies for InterRail pass holders, though on busy services only a small number of these fares will be available and they will sell out quickly.

A 'Youth' version is available for those aged 27 or under, and for anyone over 60 a 'Senior' pass also offers a reduction in price. Kids aged up to 11 travel free with an adult.

Various durations of passes can be obtained, with adult prices ranging between:

- 4 days travel within a period of 1 month £227
- to
- travel every day for 3 months £833

For those who prefer to travel in a little more luxury 1st Class passes are also available.

Something to bear in mind however is that most high speed trains require supplements to travel on. Supplements for high speed trains will vary from €10 euros up to as much as €40 euros for some international services, so it is very important to factor these in when comparing with point to point fares.

The Benelux countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland *do not* require supplements, even on high speed services with the exception of international trains, so travelling in these areas is much easier with an InterRail pass.



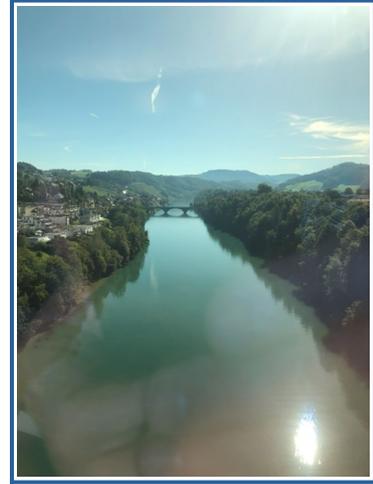
Where you can travel with an InterRail Global Pass

Views from a train window

To give a flavour of some of the beautiful scenery to be enjoyed, the following views were all taken from a train window...



Isola dei Pescatori on Lago di Maggiore, Italy



Rhein, Eglisau, Switzerland



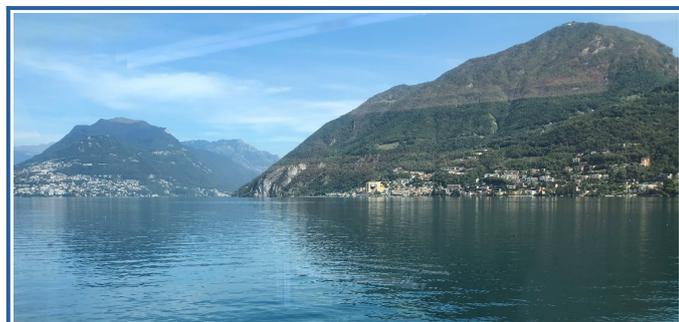
Landwasser Viadukt, Switzerland



Rheinfall, Schaffhausen, Switzerland



The Matterhorn, Switzerland



Lago di Lugano, Italy

Resources

An excellent place to start if looking for more information is The Man in Seat 61 – this site contains a wealth of detail about travelling by train in Europe and beyond:

<https://www.seat61.com/>

There are several options when it comes to booking tickets. The easiest site to use is Rail Europe, though a fee of £6:45 is charged for each booking:

<https://www.raileurope.com/en-gb>

Eurostar will sometimes offer special fares not available on other websites:

<https://www.eurostar.com/uk-en>

All of the main European train operators have their own websites with English language options, and don't charge booking fees, though some are easier to navigate than others. As an example the French national operator SNCF can be found at the following address:

<https://www.sncf.com/en>

If not confident enough to book your own tickets an agent specialising in rail travel might be the answer, such as Ffestiniog Travel. Fully escorted or non-escorted tours by rail are also bookable here, which is a good if expensive option for more inexperienced travellers:

<https://www.ffestiniogtravel.com/>

Details of the various InterRail passes can be found on a dedicated site:

<https://www.interrail.eu/en/interrail-passes/>

It's possible for InterRail pass holders to book supplements which include seat reservations for many countries here:

<https://www.interrail.eu/en/book-reservations#/>

Read all about the various passes for travel within Switzerland on this link:

<https://www.swiss-pass.ch/>

For details of the Nightjet network look here:

<https://www.nightjet.com/en/#/home>