

Swiss mystery
Hurling through snow-covered peaks is one of the great moments of Swiss train travel

25

BEST EUROPEAN RAIL JOURNEYS

See Europe how it was meant to be seen. From mountain climbs to luxury sleepers, we pick the greatest train adventures to get you under the skin of the continent...

WORDS **HAZEL PLUSH**



1 Glacier Express, Switzerland

Best for... Seeing Switzerland in the slow lane

The journey: Zermatt to St Moritz (290km; 7.5 hours)

We say... Don't be fooled by its name: the *Glacier Express* (glacierexpress.ch) averages 38kph, but who wants to rush when the scenery is this spectacular? Linking two of Switzerland's best-loved ski resorts, the route is an opus of snow-capped peaks, rugged valleys, 291 bridges and wild tangles of alpine forest. The view will keep you glued to the train's panoramic windows – though the traverse of the towering Landwasser viaduct (pictured right) might have you reaching for a second glass of Valais wine.

Top tip: In Zermatt you can extend your trip by taking Europe's highest cog railway (gornergratbahn.ch) to the summit of Gornergrat (3,089m). The view of the Matterhorn is worth it.



3 Rhine Valley Line, Germany

Best for... A riverside ramble

The journey: Cologne to Mainz (152km; 2.5 hours)

We say... The *Rhine Valley Line* (reiseauskunft.bahn.de) finds its muse just after Bonn, where it starts to tightly hug the waterline. Sure, you could take the high-speed intercity route and save yourself an hour on your journey, but then you'd miss out on the patchwork of vineyards, Koblenz's hilltop fortress and the legend of Lorelei Rock.



DID YOU KNOW?

Although many believe the 'real' *Orient Express* train was scrapped in 1977, the name continued on w/in a variety of services and along different routes until 2009, when it ended its days as a night train on Austria Railways' Strasbourg to Vienna route.

Top tip: Interrail passes (interrail.eu) are valid on this line – and get you a discount on KD Rhine Line boats.

4 Venice Simplon-Orient-Express, UK, France & Italy

Best for... The 'golden age' of rail

The journey: London to Folkestone; Calais to Venice (1,636km; 24 hours)

We say... While the final descendent of the real *Orient Express* met its end in 2009, a US businessman had long since bought up 1920s and '30s carriages (many belonging to the original service) and resurrected its route to Venice. This journey (belmond.com) is played out on two heritage trains – the *British Pullman* on the UK leg and the *VSOE* between Calais and Venice – and as the mountains and meadows slip by, you can sip martinis in the piano bar, devour lobster in its *Étoile du Nord* restaurant car and just dream.

Top tip: Though the southbound journey is popular, the northbound experience is just as fabulous – and doesn't book up so quickly.



5 West Highland Line, Scotland

Best for... The wildest of Scottish rides

The journey: Glasgow to Mallaig (264km; 5.5 hours)

We say... After slipping away from Glasgow, the *West Highland Line* (scotrail.co.uk) weaves some of Britain's wildest scenery: to lonely moorlands, forest-bound lochs and crumbling castle ruins. Up here, you're more likely to spot red deer than humans – though the Glenfinnan viaduct is familiar thanks to its cameo in the *Harry Potter* films. If travelling southwards, sit on the right-hand side of the train for the best views.

Top tip: The *Royal Scotsman* (belmond.com) and *Jacobite Steam Train* (westcoastrailways.co.uk) are rather luxurious – if pricey – alternatives to this £16.80 (one-way) ScotRail journey. ▶

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6 Bernina Express, Switzerland & Italy

Best for... Jaw-dropping (and ear-popping) views

The journey: Landquart to Tirano (163km; 5 hours)

We say... Starting this summer, you get even more bang for your buck on the *Bernina Express* (rhb.ch), as its transalpine journey has been extended for around 50km. It now starts (or terminates) at Landquart before looping through the Prättigau mountains and over Zügen Gorge's sheer-sided ravines. Running between May and October, its climax is the 2,253m-high Bernina Pass, the gateway to Italy. It's a smooth ride but one that's big on drama, encompassing dizzying and panoramic views from the Brusio Spiral viaduct along the way.

Top tip: For the best views, grab a seat on the right-hand side of the train (if travelling southwards).



7 Mariazell Railway, Austria

Best for... Alpine hikes and hijinx

The journey: St Pölten to Mariazell (78km; 2.5 hours)

We say... Traversing one of the wildest regions of the Austrian Alps, this narrow-gauge service (mariazellerbahn.at) is officially split into two sections: 'Valley' and 'Mountains'. The former stretches from St Pölten to Frankenfels, a land of pretty grazing meadows and gentle pathways (tickets allow you to hop on and off), while the latter climbs up through the ruggedly handsome Erlauf gorge and the peaks of Ötscher-Tormäuer Naturpark. Allow a full day – at least.

Top tip: For widescreen views, grab a first-class panorama carriage (May–October on weekend and holiday services), while heritage rail fans love the 100-year-old Ötscherbär train that runs from June to late September.

8 Inlandsbanan, Sweden

Best for... A jovial jaunt

The journey: Kristinehamn to Gällivare (1,288km; from 2 days)

We say... The *Inlandsbanan* (inlandsbanan.se) is slow travel at

its best, heading up past the Arctic Circle and into Swedish Lapland. In fact, its drivers love an excuse to stretch their legs, and scheduled stops to take a dip in Lake Stiljan or visit Sami villages and their reindeer herds along the way are worth it. Before you know it, you're cooing over moose and foraging for berries under midnight sun (June–early July) – all thoughts of the timetable long forgotten.

Top tip: At each stop you can order fresh dishes from local restaurants, such as smoked Arctic char and lingonberry crumble.

9 Trenino Verde, Sardinia (Italy)

Best for... Island adventures

The journey: Palau to Tempio (59km); Sindia to Bosa (33km); Mandas to Laconi (37km); Mandas to Sadali (58km); Arbata to Gairloch (62km); times vary

We say... The best way to get under the skin of Sardinia is by catching the *Trenino Verde* – or *Green Train* (treninoverde.com) – for a picturesque pootle around the island. The Mandas-Laconi line weaves through wild woodlands, the Palau-Tempio track culminates in a town famed for its cork groves,

and Sindia–Bosa forges from the island's untamed interior out to its western coast.

Top tip: Don't be surprised if the conductor hops out to shoo sheep off the line, or to stop traffic at level crossings. Slow travel at its purest.

10 Nice-Moscow Express France to Russia

Best for... Interrailing for adults

The journey: Moscow (Russia) to Nice (France) via Monaco, Italy, Austria, Czech Republic, Poland and Belarus (3,315km; 2 days)

We say... Crossing a whopping eight countries, this European epic (pass.rzd.ru) is marketed almost exclusively at Muscovites travelling west. But, for the rest of us, the magic lies in leaving behind France and Austria for the great forests of Poland and Belarus, where the train's wheel gauge is adjusted to the narrow local tracks, before ploughing on to the onion-dome churches of Moscow.

Top tip: Solo travellers can book a single bunk in a same-sex cabin (with two or four beds), or pay extra to have the space all to themselves. ▶

DID YOU KNOW?

In 1992, the Inlandsbanan line (a route built to help develop Sweden's remote communities) went bust, only for those very communities to step in and turn it into a tourist train.



11 La Ligne des Cévennes, France

Best for... Gallic grandeur

The journey: Clermont-Ferrand to Nîmes (304km; 6.5 hours)
We say... Every twist and turn of this train line is an engineering marvel: it ticks off a mighty 106 tunnels and over a thousand bridges, as well as the seriously lofty (46m high) Chamborigaud viaduct. With 29 long-legged arches arranged in a semicircular loop, Chamborigaud is a scene-stealer – although the track reaches its pinnacle on the summit at La Bastide (1,023m). There are gentler pleasures still to be found in the rolling vineyards of the Auvergne, the chestnut forests of Cévennes National Park and the track's picturesque dalliance with the River Allier.
Top tip: Visit in springtime to see the area's wildflowers in bloom.

DID YOU KNOW?
 The railway tracks of the Derry/Londonderry-to-Coleraine train actually run alongside the sands of the Benone Strand (pictured right), affording some incredible views.



12 Derry/Londonderry to Coleraine, Northern Ireland

Best for... A budget Irish beauty

The journey: Derry/Londonderry to Coleraine (55km; 38 minutes)
We say... This route doesn't need five-star cabins or steam

locomotives for wow-factor: it's all about the scenery. Explore a banquet of windswept beaches, razor-edged cliffs and wild views on the no-frills Translink (translink.co.uk) service. Sit on the left-hand side (if travelling eastwards) and settle in for a ride that Sir Michael Palin hailed in his *Great Railway Journeys* series as "one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world", as you hop-skip peregrine falcon habitats and the thread the longest railway tunnels in Ireland.
Top tip: Stop for a yomp on the wide, wild sands of Benone beach.

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13 Linha do Douro, Portugal

Best for... Giving the city the slip

The journey: Porto to Pocinho (160km; 3.5 hours)
We say... Don't take a day cruise from Porto: hop on the *Linha do Douro* (cp.pt) instead. Most boat trips only venture as far as the port-producing village of Pinhão, but this

train line ploughs further into the heartlands, past great walls of rock and rambling *quintas* (wine estates). Better yet, the track swaps between shores, so there's no such thing as a duff seat. Pinhão Station must be one of Europe's prettiest terminals, trimmed with intricate *azulejo* tilework, but look out, too, for the towering gorge around Régua and the ancient rock art of the Côa Valley at Pocinho.
Top tip: In Pocinho, linger over lunch and local port at Taberna da Julinha (+351 965 398 826) – its steaks are worth the trip alone.



14 Septemvri to Dobrinishte, Bulgaria

Best for... Making new friends

The journey: Septemvri to Dobrinishte (125km; 5 hours)
We say... Bulgaria's only operating narrow-gauge railway is a lifeline to its remote south-west, so make room for the *babas* (grandmothers) heading to market. The train travels at a glacial speed (you can walk beside it in parts), but it's a journey to savour, with stops for hiking in Bansko, Velingrad's hot springs and Belitsa's dancing bear sanctuary.
Top tip: The train only has a simple café on board, so bring a picnic. ▶

DID YOU KNOW?
 Until the 1990s, the Bulgarian town Belitsa, on the Septemvri to Dobrinishte railway, was famed for its dancing bears, which were kept in appalling conditions. It's a practice long-since banned, and now the town is known for its sanctuary, a habitat for rescued bears that couldn't be returned to the wild.



15 Krasnaya Strela, Russia

Best for... *The novelty factor*

The journey: Moscow to St Petersburg (635km; 8.5 hours)
We say... The *Krasnaya Strela* (pass.rzd.ru) – *Red Arrow* – has been riding Russia's rails since the 1930s, and while its overnight service can't keep up with the new high-speed day train (the Siemens-built *Sapsan*) that rides this route, it's still thrilling to board a Soviet relic – just don't expect a seamless night's kip. Bedtime is a bumpy affair, although a medicinal vodka might help...
Top tip: When the train departs St Petersburg, loudspeakers play 'Hymn to the Great City'. Stirring.



DID YOU KNOW?
Legend says the big bend in the otherwise straight railway between St Petersburg and Moscow came of Tsar Nicholas marking a line on a map and accidentally drawing around his finger. The builders were so scared that they copied it.

We say... Never has the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela felt so indulgent. *El Transcantábrico's* (renfe.com) lavish compartments and plentiful excursions make for an easy, enlightening ride. The Clásico itinerary hugs the northern coast, with stop-offs at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, seafood suppers in Santander and, on longer trips, hiking in the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve of Picos de Europa National Park.
Top tip: The rail network actually runs between San Feliz and Ferrol – a few kilometres shy of León and Santiago de Compostela – so the trip is bookended by brief coach journeys.

16 El Transcantábrico Clásico, Spain

Best for... *Exploring the north*

The journey: León to Santiago de Compostela (643km; 4–8 days)



17 Belgrade to Bar, Serbia, Bosnia & Montenegro

Best for... *A cross-country caper*

The journey: Belgrade to Bar (476km; 10 hours)
We say... This Balkan line can't be booked online with national operators, so you'll need to get tickets at the counter, but once on board you'll hop ravines and rivers with the greatest of ease, thanks to its 254 tunnels and 435 bridges. It took railway engineers decades to blast through the Dinaric Alps, traverse the thick birch forests, skirt the shores of Lake Skadar and build the 200m-high Mala Rijeka viaduct, which, until 2001, was the tallest railway bridge in the world.
Top tip: There are two trains a day; set off early for the best views.

18 Golden Eagle Danube Express, Turkey to Hungary

Best for... *The east with ease*

The journey: Istanbul (Turkey) to Budapest (Hungary) via Bulgaria & Romania (1,832km; 7 days)
We say... On the *Danube Express's* 'Castles of Transylvania' route (goldeneagleluxurytrains.com), you'll whizz between two of Europe's most beguiling cities in the lap of luxury. Off-train excursions allow for easy exploration of medieval towns and Romanian castles, while the on-board experience includes opulent perks: think plush double cabins, starched linens and piano recitals.
Top tip: Spend your time socialising in the cocktail lounge; this journey tends to attract fascinating souls.

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19 North York Moors Railway, England

Best for... *A time-travelling treasure*

The journey: Whitby to Pickering (38.6km; 1 hour, 45 minutes)
We say... With a shrill whistle and a scorching blast, this steamy trip (nymr.co.uk) into the North York Moors National Park begins in lively Whitby, so spare time to visit its recently reopened Abbey. From there, it travels windswept dales, lush carpets of heather and, so it seems, time itself. Though devoid of most mod cons, the NYMR's hundred-year-old steam trains make surprisingly quick work of these rolling moors, as you stop off for picnics and village walks along the way.
Top tip: For a taste of life at the steamy end, join the railway's 'experience days' and ride on the footplate. ▶



20 Bohinj Railway, Slovenia & Italy

Best for... Slovenia made simple

The journey: Jesenice to Trieste (approx 150km; 3 hours)

We say... To ford the peaks of the Julian Alps to the northernmost sliver of Italian coastline, the *Bohinj Railway* (slo-zeleznice.si) must slice a route it has plied for over 110 years. It was built as a strategic network for the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, but these days it's catnip for hikers and cyclists who revel in the easy connections to Most na Soci, Lake Bled and Nova Gorica's wineries.

Top tip: For a special trip, catch the heritage steam train (May–Nov) between Jesenice and Nova Gorica, where staff still don the uniforms of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire.

21 Semmering Railway, Austria

Best for... UNESCO-listed joys

The journey: Gloggnitz to Mürzzuschlag (41km; 40 minutes)

We say... Praised by UNESCO as 'one of the greatest feats of civil

engineering', the *Semmering* (oebb.at) teeters on two-storey viaducts and narrow mountain passes, with twists and steep inclines aplenty. The reward for your fortitude? Swoon-worthy views of the Austrian Alps, and opportunities for great hiking or skiing. It took six years and 20,000 labourers to build this track, and this pioneering project from the 1850s became the blueprint for mountain railways all over the world.

Top tip: Gloggnitz is just an hour by train from Vienna, so don't miss out.

DID YOU KNOW?
The *Bohinj Railway's Solkan Bridge* was built in 1906 and is the longest stone railway bridge in the world, with a whopping 85m span.

22 Bergen Railway, Norway

Best for... Scandi splendour

The journey: Oslo to Bergen (500km; 6.5 hours)

We say... Even in the cosy comfort of your compartment, Norway's desolate Hardangervidda plateau will send a shiver down your spine. While the forests and lakes outside Oslo are beautiful, it's the *Bergen Railway's* (vy.no/en) eerily empty mountain passes that steal the show. Stretch your legs at Finse, the highest station on the line (1,222m), to see where Robert Falcon Scott and his crew trained in advance of their infamous 1912 South Pole expedition. A lonely spot indeed.

Top tip: Hop off at Myrdal and pick up the extraordinary 20km branch line to Flam (1 hour), whose spiral tunnels and steep gradient will sweep you up further into these breathtaking mountains. ▶



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Brocken Railway, Germany

Best for... Saving your legs

The journey: Drei Annen Hohne to Brocken (19km; 51 minutes)

We say... The summit of Brocken (the Harz mountains' loftiest point) is a doddle for these steam trains (hsb-wr.de; in German). They climb thick pines and wildflower meadows up to the 1,141m peak, forming one of three lines on the Harz Railway, Europe's longest network (140km) still running daily steam trains.

Top tip: Buy a one-way ticket and hike back down, walking the famed 8km trail to Torfhaus.



We say... Operated by the oldest-surviving train company in the world, the *Ffestiniog Railway* (festrail.co.uk) has run for almost 200 years through Snowdonia National Park, and has a gleaming troupe of steam locomotives. The route is a rich feast of rivers, waterfalls, mountains and ancient woodlands, with a looping spiral section lending some thrills.

Top tip: Add on the Welsh Highland Railway – Ffestiniog's sister route – between Porthmadog and Caernarfon to extend your fun.

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Ffestiniog Railway, Wales

Best for... Steaming Snowdonia

The journey: Blaenau Ffestiniog to Porthmadog (21.7km; 1 hour 15 mins)



25 Belmond Grand Hibernian, Ireland

Best for... Seeing Ireland in style

The journey: Dublin to Westport and back (1406km; 5 days)

We say... As if the Emerald Isle's landscapes weren't lush enough, the *Belmond Grand Hibernian* (belmond.com) offers a five-star flourish, with top-notch service, deluxe sleepers and lashings of single malt whiskey. Take the 'Legends and Loughs' trip for a coast-to-coast journey with stop-offs at Cork, Galway and Killarney National Park. It's a convivial affair that doesn't skimp on the fine dining and has live music every evening.

Top tip: For a more humble train trip, catch the DART from Dublin to Bray – a 50-minute jaunt past pretty harbours and empty beaches. 🍷

DID YOU KNOW?

The Ffestiniog Railway began in 1832 as a way to haul slate down from the mountain quarries to the river by gravity; it was only 32 years later that it added passenger carriages, and is still run by the same company that began it.

AND FOR MORE TRAINS...

We pick some of the world's most adventurous sleeper-train escapes (p74) and offer you expert advice on the enduring headache of booking European rail trips (p142)