

The lure of the train

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December 4, 2016



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Many Americans, so used to driving, assume that a vacation in Europe must involve renting a car. But driving in Europe means you miss out on the amazing system of high-speed European trains and the chance to enjoy the fun and ease they offer you.

They're fast, efficient, on time, and zip across long distances while you sit back and relax. In addition, Americans are able to purchase a variety of different rail passes from Rail Europe that are extremely good buys.

In contrast to taking the train, driving in Europe can be challenging. Toll roads allow you to step on the gas, but also cost you. The alternative smaller roads wind around, taking longer to arrive than planned and during the week contain all the trucks. Frequent roundabouts force you to choose a direction quickly and many times the road signs don't match the map or don't include the place you're headed.

Gas is expensive in Europe—a clue to why they drive such tiny cars. If you feel you must drive, there are rail/drive options that let you take the long journeys on the train, as from Paris to Aix-en-Provence, then rent a car for poking around the little villages of Provence.

In short, driving in Europe can be costly and harrowing for all but the little jaunts where you have all day to putter between small towns. But otherwise, get the most relaxation possible out of your vacation and enjoy the trains.

After a trip in France with my teen-aged daughter that involved too many hours in our tiny rental car, I learned my lesson. Now I always take the train. On a fall trip from Paris to Marseilles, for example, I settled into my comfortable seat by the window on the TGV, the fast train from Paris. The journey, 482 miles, is roughly similar to the distance between San Francisco and San Diego. The TGV travel time? Three hours and 15 minutes at speeds up to 200 mph. In contrast, the estimated driving time? About 7.5 hours.

On the train, I sipped some wine with my cheese, baguette and fruit picnic, then settled back with a book. Later, after strolling to the restaurant car for a cup of tea, I stared out the window at passing farms and sheep against a backdrop of bright fall leaves. I watched clouds change shape in the sky, then snuggled under my warm wool coat and snoozed.

I awoke a few minutes from Marseilles to the bright sun sparkling on the Mediterranean, feeling relaxed and refreshed.

My conclusion? In addition to all the other advantages and benefits, trains give you cloud-watching time. Now that is a precious commodity.

Tips for traveling on the train:

Plan to arrive at the station with enough time to find the right train and voie, where you get on the train. These will be indicated in overhead information boards.

Pack a picnic. Food prices on the train are high and the choices limited. Fresh fruit, bread, cheese and a beverage can always be picked up before you get to the station. Most large train stations also now offer a variety of delicious take-out options.

Pack light. One small rolling bag and one carry-on maximum. Taking the train can mean going up and down stairs in the station and hauling your bags up and down stairs to get on and off the train. It's always a good idea to pack light, but for train travel, especially. (To practice at home, try running up and down stairs with your luggage. Too difficult? Time to lighten your load.)

Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride. Read, chat with your friends or family or stare out the window at clouds! For busy Americans who pack every second into some sort of productivity, use this time for a welcome break.

For detailed prices and itineraries for the extensive system of trains connecting all of Europe, go to <https://www.raileurope.com>.