



# **The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Travel and Tourism**

## **Rail Travel, Europe**

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Three countries among the five world's top tourism destinations are in Europe: France, Spain, and Italy. These three countries link across national borders in a number of different ways, including motorways, highways, seaways, and airlines. Railway travel also provides interconnection for the locals and tourists alike between the three countries as well as between them and the neighboring European states such as Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, and Britain.

Since its inception in 1830s in the United Kingdom, railway has always been a crucial element of transport, economic development, mobility, cultural exchange, and tourism in Europe. For long decades, it was the symbol and conveyor of modernity, a sign that represented a new era. In the beginning of 21st century, railways in Europe experienced a second birth, despite the presence of daunting challenges, through the development of high-speed rail across the continent.

**Image 1 A high speed train cuts through the countryside in Yorkshire, United Kingdom.**



*Source:* Richard Wilkie

Whereas non-Europeans have to use air travel and transoceanic peregrinations to reach the continent, tourist travel within Europe is maintained with organized ticketing via buses, trains, ships, and airplanes as well as informal means of travel such as hitchhiking, backpacker travel, and movements without passes or permits. However, tourists from other continents can arrive to European ports on the coasts of Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, with permits, or they land in international airports and continue their travels via other forms of transport, including railways.

In this sense, European railways consist of three types of trains that people use in their travels: fast, intercity (sometimes transcountry), long-haul lines for leisure and travel; slower, cheaper regional–local trains for commuters; and the touristic trains for excitement and

pleasure. Thus, it is rather reasonable for an American visitor to land at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport and take the French high-speed train TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse*) to, for example, Lille or Lyon, and then take another regional train toward his or her ultimate destination.

On the other hand, it is also popular among visitors in Europe to stay in a city and arrange daily trips to nearby places by fast, frequent, affordable, and comfortable trains. A voyage to Turin, for example, may easily include visits to Milan and Genoa by train.

### **The Charm of Rail Travel: Nostalgia and Environmental Concerns**

Railways' relation to geography and landscape is multifold. Train travel represented the dynamism, speed, and technological innovation of modernity until the 1950s, when flying with jet engine airplanes started to become prevalent. Railways, especially in the 19th century, provided passengers with a totally new experience regarding their relationship with landscape, place, distance, pace, and time. Railway travel was defined by what people see through the window, the organization of seating, public interactions, proper manners on the carriage, radically new perceptions of spatiality and temporality, the introduction of a centralized clock hour system, tariffs, the significance and resplendence of station buildings, the amazement from the power of the locomotive, and the allure of rapid movement.

Today, despite the high-modern, "nonplace" effects of contemporary trains and stations, people still imagine and incorporate the sense of traditional voyages on the rails, the old-fashioned sense of belonging to community and location, and the embodied involvement with the act of traveling from one point to another. Therefore, train travel engenders nostalgic feelings and enables passengers to make contact with the past.

People may not be enchanted by the unknowable mysteries or the surprising novelties that the train brings any more, but there is still an affective aspect that ties them to the railways. The unique landscape that the train passes through, the soundscape on board, the rhythm and vibration of the wagon, and the inescapable territoriality of train travel makes it not only a practical and mundane aspect of everyday lives but also the tiniest enjoyable form of travel in which people can relax, reflect, and come into contact with their social and physical surroundings.

Another great concern that plays a crucial role in shaping passengers' predilection toward rail travel instead of forms of ground travel (e.g., cars and buses) and flying around is about environmental responsibility and concerns about global warming. As oil prices increase and people become more aware of the subversive outcomes of excessive carbon emission, cycling and train travel (and their flexible combination—i.e., bicycle-friendly stations and wagons) became the most embraced forms of transportation in Europe beginning in the 1990s.

The now-hegemonic ideas of sustainable means of travel in Europe find their best expression in railway's rebirth as fast, clean, nature-friendly transportation. Despite the fact that some of the most renowned traditional train journeys (e.g., the original Orient Express) have just extinguished, railways have an increasing importance in tourism as the main competitor of airline industry.

### **The View of the Contemporary Railway Industry in Europe**

## France

Established in 1938, the state-owned Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français (SNCF) is the national company that manages traffic on 32,000 kilometers (19,884 mi) of track and operates more than 15,000 daily train services throughout France. SNCF conducts the famous French high-speed trains TGV, which emerged as the European answer to the Japanese bullet train *shinkansen* and transports more than 100 million passengers annually. SNCF is the leading figure in the railway industry in the world.

A special version of empowered TGV achieved the record land speed of 575 kilometers (357 mi) per hour under experimental conditions in 2007. It has had one deadly accident, a derailment in 2015 with 11 casualties, since its inauguration between Paris and Lyon in 1981. Although some of the trains it operates reach 320 kilometers (199 mi) per hour (record speed for regular passenger trains at service) on the lines between Paris and the southeast of the country, SNCF commits to protecting environment as it goes green by decreasing carbon emission rates by increasing its use of electricity rather than oil.

SNCF operates eight high-speed lines from Paris to destinations in different directions:

1. *Sud-Est* to Lyon since 1981
2. *Atlantique* to Tours since 1989
3. *Nord-Europe* to Calais, Brussels, and Amsterdam since 1993
4. *Rhone-Alpes* to Valence since 1992
5. *Mediterranee* to Marseille since 2001
6. *Est* to Strasbourg since 2007
7. *Perpignan-Figueres* to Spain since 2010
8. *Rhin-Rhone* to Dijon since 2011

French railways are connected to the Spanish, Belgian, Dutch, and British lines. Among them, the most well known is Eurostar, which opened in 1994, a high-speed train that links France and the United Kingdom through an undersea tunnel. Passengers can depart from London's St Pancras Station and arrive in Brussels in 120 minutes and the Gare du Nord station in Paris in 140 minutes.

TGV operations of SNCF not only revolutionized transportation within French cities and the neighboring countries, but they also changed the tourism dimension of rail travel. Tourists travel on the comfortable, safe, and speedy TGV train sets between diversely attractive cities as they watch the beautiful French pastoral scenery, and this double act constitutes the basics of the unique experience of voyage in France.

## Spain

Like its French counterpart, the Spanish railway giant Renfe Operadora is owned by the state. Spanish railways were nationalized in 1941, and in 2016, Renfe had 15,000 kilometers (9,320 mi) railway network across the country in addition to the smaller regional networks, especially in the autonomous Basque and Catalanian regions. Renfe carries about 50 million travelers a year in its different operations; about 20 million of them use high-speed trains.

It runs the high-speed AVE (Alta Velocidad Espanola) trains between great Spanish cities: Madrid, Seville, Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga, Zaragoza, Santiago del Compostela, Toledo, and Valladolid. AVE has the longest high-speed railway lines in Europe (3,100

kilometers/1,900 mi), and with the new constructions, such as the Ourense-Zamora, Madrid-Lisbon, Leon-Oviedo, Alicante-Almeria, and the Basque Line that will connect Vitoria-Gasteiz, Bilbao, and San Sebastian-Donostia to the existing high-speed rail network, Renfe will continue to be the significant Iberian actor in the railway travel in Europe.

On July 24, 2013, an AVE train from Madrid to Ferrol derailed near Santiago del Compostela, Galicia. Seventy-nine passengers died, and 130 were injured at the accident, which was largely an outcome of wrong direction through a curve on the passage from the high-speed track to the conventional track. Following the accident, Spain's rail network and signaling systems were reviewed thoroughly, the drivers' education was intensified and new speed-restricting installations were introduced for safer travel conditions.

## Italy

The state-owned company Rete Ferroviaria Italiana (RFI) governs railway traffic and train operations in mainland Italy and Sicily over 17,000 kilometers (10,563 mi) of track. Italian ETR 200 (Elettro Treno Rapido) was the first high-speed train in the world. It was developed Turin Technical University and started to work between Bologna-Rome-Napoli in 1937. With the devastating effects of World War II, this high-speed line between Florence and Milan stopped. Since the 1990s, Italian high-speed railways were revamped by Treno Alta Velocita (TAV). The TAV project initially centered in Milan and connected the northern metropolis with Florence, Rome, Naples, Salerno, Turin, Venice, Trieste, and Genoa. The lines are designed for 300 kilometers (186 mi) per hour speed; the trains on these lines carried 25 million passengers in 2011.

Further expansions are under construction, and when all projects are completed, the high-speed rail network of Italy will be connected with neighboring France, Austria, Switzerland, and Slovenia. With the completion of Brenner Base Tunnel under the Alps in 2025, the Italian, Austrian, and German high-speed train systems will be linked through Verona, Innsbruck, and Munich, and travel will be without interruption through one of the busiest railway corridors of Europe between Berlin at north and Palermo at south.

## Germany

The German railway system consists of approximately 43,000 kilometers (26,720 mi) of track, owned and managed by the national company Deutsch Bahn (DB), which carries more than 140,000,000 travelers in a year on its medium- and long-haul trains. DB operates six long-distance trains: Intercity-Express and ICE Sprinter, Eurocity, Intercity, City Night Line, and Railjet between German metropolises and between Germany and the neighboring countries. DB also governs the rapid transportation systems S-Bahn and U-Bahn in German cities. Since Germany is located in the middle of the European continent, German railways can connect vast geographies. Some major connections that can be traversed by train include Amsterdam to Berlin, Amsterdam to Frankfurt, Copenhagen to Hamburg, Novosibirsk to Astana to Moscow to St. Petersburg to Berlin, Prague to Berlin, Strasbourg to Frankfurt, and Munich to Verona.

The high-speed Intercity-Express (ICE) trains connect Germany, Austria, Denmark, and Switzerland; they are the German answer to the French TGV, Spanish AVE, and Italian TAV projects as well as the Japanese shinkansen. ICE trains are jointly operated with TGV on a high-speed line between Paris, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt since 2007. The newest third generation ICE trains travel between Nuremberg and Ingolstadt with the highest speed of 300 kilometers (186 mi) per hour.

Whereas in other major European railway systems where high-speed trains anchor from one center (i.e., Paris, Milan, Madrid), DB operationalizes its trains in a polycentric fashion in all major cities, such as Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Dresden, Dortmund, Cologne, and Mannheim. Other than the Eschede accident that happened on June 3, 1998, and caused 101 deaths, and several derailments without injury, ICE trains have a safe history.

### Great Britain

Rail travel started in Britain, and it still provides passengers one of the most diversified travel experiences on the tracks. British trains were privately owned and organized through four main corridors (Great Western, London and North Eastern, London-Midland-Scottish, and Southern) until nationalization in 1947 with the establishment of the state-owned company British Railways. However, this company was privatized again in 1990s.

Following the Hatfield train crash on October 17, 2000 (four passengers died, 70 were injured), the company was restructured and named Network Rail, which in 2015 had more than 15,760 kilometers (9,790 mi) of track; passenger services on these lines are operated by a number of private, franchise companies. In 2014, approximately 160,500,000 travelers used long-distance train services in Great Britain. Today, more than 20 companies operate franchise train services across the island.

British Railways implemented a number of projects to increase speed on conventional tracks during 1970s, including the APT and Intercity 125 and 225. Virgin Trains presented Pendolino as a new high-speed railway service on the West Coast Line, but due to signaling problems that had not been solved since 1970s the train was restricted to 200 kilometers (124 mi) per hour.

The high-speed train travel in Great Britain will take place in the north–south direction between Glasgow and Edinburgh and London via Manchester-Liverpool-Birmingham on the west corridor and via York-Newcastle on the east corridor after the completion of projects and ongoing constructions. London is now connected with continental Europe by the opening of the High Speed 1 line between London and Kent, which was articulated with the Channel Tunnel toward Brussels and Paris, in 2003. Eurostar trains work on this line and reach 335 kilometers (208 mi) per hour speed. The High Speed 2 is projected to link London with Birmingham by 2025.

### Other Countries and Regions

Other than the five major players in railway industry in Europe, other countries provide a large number of travelers rapid transportation and invest in the modernization of conventional tracks and the construction of new high-speed lines. The Netherlands has more than 3,000 kilometers (1,864 mi) of track operated by the state-owned ProRail. All major cities in the country, such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht, are connected via tightly scheduled passenger trains alongside the heavy freight traffic on the Dutch lines. The internationally owned Thalys is the most important high-speed train that runs in the country linking Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam as well as Lille, Cologne, and Essen via adjacent lines.

Among the geographically more challenging Scandinavian countries, the state-owned company SJ (formerly SJ AB) administers 13,000 kilometers (8,078 mi) of track that connects major destinations, including Stockholm, Gothenburg, Falköping, Malmö, and Uppsala in

Sweden. The dated Norwegian railway infrastructure links cities such as Oslo and Bergen, and political contestations continue to build a high-speed railway system between the southern cities of the country. The declining Finnish railway network basically functions to integrate Helsinki to other southern towns and rural areas.

In Eastern Europe, Poland has the longest track with approximately 20,000 kilometers (12,427 mi). But the railway system is pretty much dated, and there is no high-speed line in the country although some modernization and improvements took place recently, especially in the busiest Warsaw to Krakow corridor and the Warsaw to Poznan line, which is connected to Berlin via the DB system. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Turkey have interconnected railway systems that link major cities in the region, including Prague, Budapest, Belgrade, Sofia, Bucharest, Athens, and Istanbul. In all these countries there are discussions and activities to modernize railway systems and integrate with the high-speed European trains.

### European Railways and Tourism

Railways function like a nervous system in Europe. Thousands of trains work on the existing tracks, carrying millions of passengers every day, and there are nonstop endeavors for improvement and construction of new lines. Although trains were the motivating force for the initial mobilization of tourists in the past, today they lag behind airplanes. However, trains have advantages over flying, including easier access from within city centers, more comfortable and flexible seating opportunities, cheaper ticket prices, and the chance to see outside while traveling; they also do less harm to the environment. Obviously, the biggest superiority of airplanes is their speed, which is relatively faster than the land velocity, but railway travel progresses constantly as technological innovations and aerodynamic engineering enhances rapidly.

Station buildings, “dream factories” as recounted by German Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin, had a special role in visualizing and urbanizing railways in the past. These spectacular structures resembled museums, temples, libraries, theaters, and other public urban buildings that both gathered masses together in their urban lives and transmitted to them a sociopolitical message belonging to their times. Represented as a materialization of modernity in the paintings or decoded as spaces of escapade in literature and film, railway stations are one of the most intriguing and complicated places within the city.

Train stations of the 21st century are larger, more functional and technical, minimalist, and full of shopping venues. They are not romantic, nostalgic, or melancholic. They are not the “tragic places” of French novelist and critic Marcel Proust. Instead, they are more like “non-places” of French anthropologist Marc Auge, much more like airports: full of the same commercial activities virtually everywhere, ubiquitous architectural elements around the world, and almost robotic passengers hurrying without experiencing sensations and emotions.

Just like tourism and mobilities in general, train travel should also be understood as embedded in the present sociocultural frameworks and everyday practices. Cities have become spatial intersections of a number of different mobilities and traveling has become a new custom of ordinary lives, which are increasingly dependent on technological developments and cultural configurations.

This also requires a new logistics that becomes visible in the making of new high-speed lines, the separation of freight traffic from passenger trains and further connections on the existing

tracks, such as the Germany to the United Kingdom high-speed train link via the Channel Tunnel. Historic discourses about rail travel, such as “democracy through speed,” “effortless mobility,” and “transnational dreams” becomes the new reality, as more people adapt to purchasing tickets online or from automated machines in the stations in multiple languages in flexible times or free Wi-Fi service on trains becomes standard.

Despite the brisk and rational dynamism of the 21st-century rail travel that perpetuates mobile experiences free from nostalgic feelings and literary representations, there are also countertrends that serve to the pleasure of train enthusiastic tourists in Europe. Some of the abandoned railways across the continent are rediscovered and mapped again, sometimes globe-trotted, and rarely reconstructed, although different examples of heritage railways are revived. Preserved and run with old technologies and restored installations, these lines are among the top tourist attractions, especially in Britain, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, and Sweden. Railway museums, mostly in Germany, Italy, Sweden, and United Kingdom, also present tourists with excursions of the history of trains and rail-related transportation.

*Cenk Özbay*

**See also** [Backpacker Tourism](#); [Economics of Tourism](#); [History of Travel and Tourism](#); [Rail Travel, Asia & Pacific](#)

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