

Rail Travel Tips

Rail travel has a lot of advantages over other forms of transport. This article considers the benefits of travelling by long-distance train compared to going by bus, car or plane.

The Basics

Pretty much any large city in the world is serviced by at least one railway line, along with countless local and commuter services. Many of today's trains still have historic names such as the Trans-Siberian Express or Sunset Limited, Blue Train or Orient Express and follow the same routes as their original namesakes.

Advantages of Train Travel

Trains allow you to travel in safety and comfort, and their oldworldly charm sets them apart from more mundane means of transport. They pollute less, rarely suffer from weather delays and won't give you jet lag. You can talk to your companions, read a book, or have a snooze. If the scenery palls you might go for a stroll, have a meal in the dining car, make friends in the bar or watch a movie.

Trains can also be an inexpensive way see the world, especially if you use an unlimited ticket such as Interail or a North America rail pass. Some people are afraid of air travel, or have a medical condition which would make it unsafe, and train travel is more convenient (or feasible) than driving. It may also be a novelty, especially for families with children, who are usually fascinated by trains. It's often easier to care for small children on a train than on a plane or car trip. Some people go by train solely for the amazing views en route or relish the extra time it takes, giving them an interval alone on either side of a holiday or business trip.

Travel at Night

Travelling overnight is a good way to save money on hostel or hotel accommodation. The reclining seats found in most modern standard carriages make it easy to sleep in comfort - something that is almost impossible on a crowded airplane or bus let alone in a car. The gentle rocking and steady rhythm of the wheels are usually enough to lull you to sleep. It's a good idea to take a blanket or light sleeping bag in case the air-conditioning becomes too much, and choose a seat away from the doors.

Alternatively, there are sleeping compartments, ranging from singles up to family size. These are not cheap, and usually need to be booked in advance, but you do get extra privacy and facilities (sometimes even including a free meal!) plus the unique pleasure of hurtling through the night in your personal travelling capsule. Bed linen and blankets are provided, and usually also complimentary tea or coffee in the morning.

Disadvantages of going by Train

This isn't the fastest way to travel (except perhaps for 150 mph Eurostar or Shinkansen Bullet Trains) and you usually need to buy your tickets in advance to get a good deal. Timekeeping can't always be relied on, since many long distance and tourist trains operate on lines also used by other services and don't always have first priority.

Some trains only run once every few days and they may not stop where you want to go, although local trains or buses are usually available to allow you to continue your journey.

Recommended Journeys

Trains frequently go through wilderness areas with spectacular scenery that is not easily or safely accessible by any other means. Here are a few favourites:

- **The Trans-Siberian Railway** - possibly the most famous rail journey in the world linking Moscow with Beijing, crossing the vast wooded wilderness of Siberia and the sands of the Gobi desert.
- **The Northern Line from Morden to Edgware** - cross London in style on its most famous underground line! An experience not to be missed when staying at a hostel in London.
- **Bernina Express** - the highest rail crossing of the Alps, helping to make it one of Europe's outstanding train journeys. Where else can you travel from glaciers to palm trees in two hours?
- **The Zephyr** - often voted one of the greatest rail journeys - takes two days and nights to travel between Chicago and San Francisco, following America's earliest transcontinental rail route across farmland, prairie, deserts, rivers and the Rocky Mountains.
- **The Cairo to Aswan Express** - a more back to basics train, but nonetheless a great journey experience taking in the whole length of Egypt from the Mediterranean coast to Lake Nasser and the Sudanese border

More comfortable than the bus, more fun than flying and more relaxing than a car trip, trains keep you in touch with the landscape and the civilised pace is ideal for sightseeing. Planes may be quicker for distances over 1,000 miles but involve lengthy security checks as well as tedious journeys to and from congested airports.

