

Feature

# FLIGHT-FREE TOURING

TRAINS AREN'T JUST GREENER THAN PLANES FOR TRAVEL INTO EUROPE – THEY CAN BE FAST AND MORE FUN, AS ANNA HUGHES FOUND OUT



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Photos by Alamy and Anna Hughes

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wareness of climate change and our need to reduce emissions has been growing in recent years, and the way we choose to travel can have a big impact on our carbon footprints. Trains, especially those on the Continent, can have a tenth of the emissions of a flight ([seat61.com/CO2flights](http://seat61.com/CO2flights)). But it's not just emissions: the experience of train travel enhances the journey in a way that air travel doesn't.

Bikes and trains are natural partners, not only because they are both low-carbon but because the combination means that, with a little imagination and time, almost nowhere is off limits. When it works well, transit is easy. And it's flexible: a cycle tour could start and end in a far-flung location with train travel at either end, or rail could take you to your starting point or bring you home after a long cycling trip.

This is what I chose for my tour last year. Cycling to the sea has long been my favourite type of adventure – usually within the UK. For this tour I decided to swap the chilly North Sea for Mediterranean warmth and ride the length of France from Dieppe to Nice.



This page: Touring cyclists in Leipzig, Germany  
Right: Plenty of space for bikes – and clearly marked (Germany again)

To add to the challenge, along the way I would complete the Cinglés ascent of Mont Ventoux (three times in one day), then catch the train home.

### ACROSS FRANCE AT 320KM/H

There are more bike-friendly routes than this one: to get back to London from Nice I would be taking the intercity TGV followed by the Eurostar. Cycling UK worked hard to convince Eurostar to allow fully-assembled bicycles on board ([cyclinguk.org/cycle/eurostar](http://cyclinguk.org/cycle/eurostar)), but the same does not apply to the TGV from Nice to Paris. I would have to dismantle my bicycle and put it in a bag.

The bag I chose was the inexpensive Tifosi Light Weight Bike Bag ([bit.ly/cycle-tifosibikebag](http://bit.ly/cycle-tifosibikebag)). It's light but bulky, though I avoided having to add it to my panniers because my boyfriend came out by train to join me in Nice. If this hadn't been the case, I could have posted it to the hotel.

The morning of our journey home was supposed to be a relaxed affair, after one last coffee and fresh croissant on the seafront. I had successfully cycled the length of France in 12 days, completed my triple ascent of Ventoux, survived sore knees and sunburn, swum in the glorious Mediterranean several times, enjoyed



cocktails in the famous Hotel Negresco, and generally spent time recovering from the tour. All that remained was to board the TGV home.

I'm a terrible last-minute dasher but not that day. This was a train that could not be missed!

TGV specifies that your bagged bike must not exceed 120x90cm so I removed the rack and mudguards as well as the wheels to be sure. So, even though I thought we had arrived at Nice Ville in plenty of time, dismantling and bagging the bike took us much closer to the train's scheduled departure. It was pulling into the platform as we struggled through the barriers with my luggage. I ran to the door and chucked the bags on, then came back to help my boyfriend with the bike. He raised his eyebrows at me as we collapsed into our seats.

### EUROSTAR: THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Mad dash aside, I would recommend travelling this way. Though the dismantling and manhandling was a pain, it was worth the effort: the bag sat snugly in our eye line for the entire journey, with no need to make a booking, buy an extra ticket, pay a fee, or hand it over at the airport and then worry about broken derailleurs or frame dents. Train travel is so civilised: the landscape unfolded outside the window as my two-week tour passed by in reverse over mere hours.

Given that bikes roll easily and are awkward to carry, especially heavy touring bikes, I reassembled it as soon as we'd extracted ourselves from the train at the Gare du Lyon, ready for the ride across

Paris. It's a common transfer if you're coming from many European destinations. The ride is easy, thrilling, and on this occasion, quicker than the Metro.

"How much did you pay?" asked a girl waiting with her Dutch bicycle at EuroDespatch in the Gare du Nord, before boarding the Eurostar.

"€55," I replied. "It would have been cheaper but I didn't book early enough."

Surprised at both the cost and the need to book in advance, she was lucky – bike and rider travelled on the same train. It's not always the case if you do it last minute.

### BIKE-RAIL OPTIONS

If you can handle the logistics – including the long walk and wait to reclaim your bike – using Eurostar for one leg of your journey does offer quick transit to and from a huge number of European destinations. These include Barcelona, Madrid, Milan, Frankfurt and Geneva on the TGV, and further afield using trains such as AVE (Spain), Thello (Italy), ICE (Germany) and Thalys (Belgium). Most of them require your bike to be bagged.

Some French trains do allow fully-assembled and unbagged bikes – TGV routes from Paris to Biarritz or Nantes, for example, as well as regional TER trains. In fact, I could have travelled home from Nice on a combination of regional trains, but I chose the ease and speed of the TGV.

The same pattern applies in most countries: for those intercity trains that do take full-sized bicycles, you need a reservation. Local trains have bike spaces that generally don't require a reservation, though you might need to pay a fee, e.g. in

### Costs compared

Here are some comparisons for travelling from London to Barcelona by train, plane, ferry, and coach.



#### TRAIN

- **Route:** Eurostar to Paris, TGV to Barcelona
- **Cost:** variable. Anywhere between £120 and £200+
- **Time:** 2 hrs 20 mins on Eurostar + 45 mins check-in, transfer (typically 1.5 hrs), 4.5 - 6.5 hrs on TGV = approx 10 hrs
- **Emissions:** 7.01kg CO<sub>2</sub> per passenger



#### PLANE

- **Route:** Ryanair, London Stansted to Barcelona El Prat
- **Cost:** £25 (return) + £30 Stansted Express (return) + extras
- **Time:** 2 hr flight, 2 hours check-in, 2 hours transfers, baggage claim = 6 hours +
- **Emissions:** 181kg CO<sub>2</sub> per passenger



#### FERRY

- **Route:** South Western Railway to Portsmouth, Brittany Ferries Portsmouth-Bilbao, Alvia train Bilbao Avando to Barcelona
- **Cost:** ferry £60, train £90 incl. UK & Spanish leg
- **Time:** 1.5 hour train UK, 24 hour ferry + 45 mins check-in, 16km cycle into Bilbao (or take metro), 6 hrs 20 mins on Alvia = 2 days
- **Emissions:** ferry 22.42kg per passenger + train 2.8kg CO<sub>2</sub> per passenger = 25.6kg per passenger



#### COACH

- **Route:** Flixbus direct London to Barcelona (NB. This route does not have bike carriage so you have to bag your bike and stow as luggage)
- **Cost:** £140 + £9 special luggage
- **Time:** 28 hours 35 mins
- **Emissions:** 42kg CO<sub>2</sub> per passenger

Emissions sources: rail and flight, [raileurope.co.uk](http://raileurope.co.uk); ferry and coach, DfT emissions data.

### Tweets from the tracks

 **@DTFooty** In Luxembourg bikes are allowed on all trains, at any time, free of charge (humans also free). Also here, bikes free on trams, funicular AND BUSES! There is a limit, but the odd times I've seen

it reached everyone just squeezes more in and no one (including the guard) seems to worry about it.

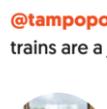
 **@g\_m\_liesch** In Switzerland, even with odd bikes travel couldn't be easier.

 **@sallyhinch** Got on the train at Bordeaux to discover our

booked bike space was full of suitcases. Got the bikes crammed on anyway and was facing the inevitable confrontation with the conductor, possibly missing

our Eurostar connection. Conductor comes in: "These your bikes?" I brace myself for a row. "Hmm," he says. Good naturedly, and in three different languages, he and his colleagues firmly but calmly got all the luggage stowed elsewhere and our bikes are installed

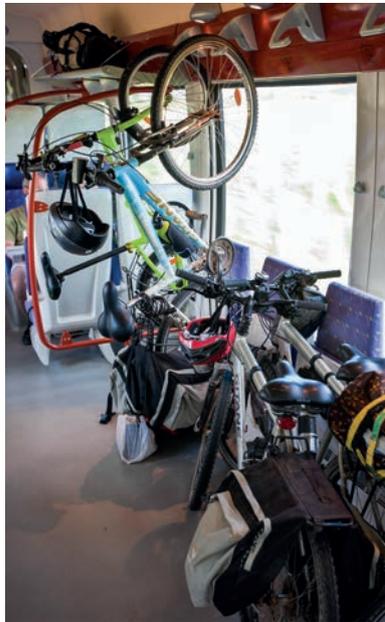
like kings in their rightful place.

 **@tampopo 2236** Finnish trains are a joy. As are Lithuanian, so clean, so nice, air conditioned, beautiful.





**Left:** Anna completes her third climb of Ventoux in a day  
**Below:** A local train in southern France. No dismantling required



The Netherlands, Austria and Switzerland. This gives many options for travel, including a hop-on, hop-off tour if you want to keep your plans loose.

If fully-assembled bicycles aren't allowed and boxing or bagging won't work for you, there are ways to 'beat the system'. Hiring a bicycle at your destination could offer all the flexibility you need. Or you could follow in the footsteps of world-traveller Heinz Stucke who, after cycling around the world for 50 years, switched to a Brompton folding bike so he could use other modes of transit more easily. As well as folders, there are separable bikes – Cycling UK tested a Ritchey Breakaway and Surly Travellers Check a while ago ([cyclinguk.org/article/bike-test-ritchey-break-away-and-surly-travellers-check](https://cyclinguk.org/article/bike-test-ritchey-break-away-and-surly-travellers-check)). Or you may be able to pack your bike small

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enough 'Rinko' style; see the review above for instructions.

### BEFORE YOU START

Before setting off from St Pancras, most of us will first have a long journey to get to London. Intercity trains typically need bikes to be booked in advance. Some rail franchise websites allow you to do this when you book your ticket. Don't forget that you can make bookings for trains run by one franchise through another's website.

You can also make a reservation through Twitter, which I have found to be by far the most reliable way to book my bike on a train – just search the train provider and send them a message. I have even booked my bike on a connecting train while on the previous train this way.

Another option is in person at the booking office. The computer systems are all connected so the person behind the desk should be able to book your bike from any station, not just the one you're at.

For further information about taking your bike on the train in Europe, the excellent Man in Seat 61 ([seat61.com/bike-by-train](https://seat61.com/bike-by-train)) offers encyclopaedic instructions. Also useful is the bicycle page on RailEurope ([bit.ly/cycle-raileurope](https://bit.ly/cycle-raileurope)), or the hashtag #bikesontrains on Twitter. ●

## Transport alternatives

The train isn't the only way to get to Europe without flying, of course. There are also ferries and coaches.



### COACH

Coach travel can be an excellent budget alternative to taking the train. Flixbus ([flixbus.co.uk](https://flixbus.co.uk)) has a bike carrier at the rear for fully-assembled bikes on most of its coaches – charge, £7.99 – and the European Bike Express ([bike-express.co.uk](https://bike-express.co.uk)) tows a trailer of fully-assembled bicycles behind the coach, allowing you and your steed to travel in comfort and style to your destination.



### FERRY

One of the simplest ways of crossing to continental Europe with your bike. I travelled on the DFDS Newhaven to Dieppe ferry for my trans-France ride, but there are plenty of other options: Brittany ferries from Portsmouth to Le Havre, Caen, St Malo, Cherbourg, Bilbao and Santander; DFDS Newcastle-Amsterdam, Calais-Dover/Dunkirk; P&O Hull to Rotterdam (Europort)/Zeebrugge, Liverpool-Dublin; Stenaline from Harwich-Hoek van Holland, Holyhead-Dublin.

Ferries are terrific, with plenty of space and numerous options for food and drink. Longer journeys with overnight crossings mean a dawn arrival in a new country. Make sure to pack seasickness tablets.

Cycling UK member Robin Bevis has written a guide for ferries to Europe. Visit [cyclinguk.org/article/guide-taking-bike-ferry](https://cyclinguk.org/article/guide-taking-bike-ferry).

### Coronavirus

Check the latest advice from the Government and [cyclinguk.org/coronavirus](https://cyclinguk.org/coronavirus) before making travel plans.