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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 FEATURE FLIGHT-FREE TOURING

A LINE ACROSS FRANCE AT 320KM/H

There are more bike-friendly routes than ever 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), but the same does not apply to the TGV from TGV from Paris to Nice. I had Successfully cycled the length of France in 12 days, completed the Cinglés ascent of Mont Ventoux (three times in one day), then catch the train home.

This is what I chose for my tour last year. Cycling to the sea has 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.

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

ACROSS FRANCE AT 320KM/H

The bag I chose was the inexpensive Tubi Light Weight Bike Bag (http://tubibags.com/tubi-light-weight-bike-bag). 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 120×90cm 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 derailours or frame dents. Train travel is so civilised, the landscape unbridled outside the window as my two-week tour passed by in reverse over more hours.

Given that bikes roll easily and are allowed on trains, at any time, free of charge (human also free). Also here, bikes free. Travellers could probably travel anywhere with their bikes, though this is not always the case if you do it last minute.
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 Stücke 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). Or you may be able to pack your bike small 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) offers encyclopaedic instructions. Also useful is the bicycle page on RailEurope (bit.ly/cycle-raileurope), or the hashtag #bikesontrains on Twitter.

Transport alternatives

COACH
Coach travel can be an excellent budget alternative to taking the train. Flixbus (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) 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.

“BIKES AND TRAINS ARE NATURAL PARTNERS. WITH A LITTLE IMAGINATION AND TIME, ALMOST NOWHERE IS OFF LIMITS”

Coronavirus
Check the latest advice from the Government and cyclinguk.org/coronavirus before making travel plans.