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Ten great rail journeys

From Vietnam's backbone to Central Europe's cultural charms, our pick of the top train journeys

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Published August 19, 2011

By Chris Moss

The renaissance of train travel is here, so settle into your seat and watch the world go by. From the rusty Australian Outback to Mexico's mighty Copper Canyon, here's our guide to the world's top 10 train rides.

01 AUSTRALIA'S INDIAN PACIFIC

The route: Adelaide to Perth.

The train: 1970s, US-style rolling stock with stainless steel-clad carriages.

The experience: Having flown in to Adelaide from Hobart, I feel only a teeny bit shameful for boarding the legendary Indian Pacific part-way along its 2,700-mile route from Sydney to Perth. After numerous journeys onboard intercontinental railways, including a testing eight-day ride from Moscow to Beijing with not one English-speaking person, I've learned to do journeys that encourage tranquillity and idle contemplation, but not too much of either.

So instead of three nights, I'll be doing just two, and while I'll miss out on the stretch through the Blue Mountains, I'll see lots of dry, plain and empty space — archetypal Australia — with a good chance of kangaroos and emus en route.

During lunch on my first full day on the train, I ask a fellow diner how the first stretch, a two-day journey via the isolated mining city of Broken Hill, had been. "Terrible," she sighs. "I couldn't get to sleep there was so much movement all night, and during the day it was cloudy outside."

We're crossing the Nullarbor Plain, a vast treeless limestone plateau that takes an entire day to traverse. It's been raining and the desert is in bloom but there's still a brownish, flat nothingness all the way to the horizon. I eat my cured kangaroo meat in the lovingly retro-fitted dining car and wonder when the big reds might appear. Such are the pleasures of train travel. One woman's boredom is another man's meditation.

Trains and deserts were made for each other. As this is my first time in Australia, I'm happy simply soaking it up — the size, sameness and scrubbiness of the Outback — and to be doing so from the very comfortable vantage point of a private compartment. I have with me a great novel (Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* — about Perth, its people and its poetry), a notebook for scribbling down random ideas and my iPod. My 'Gold' cabin is small but comfortable and is furnished with the most important luxury in life: a private WC. It also comes with a handy little faux newspaper called *Far Horizons*, which fills me in on the stops we're passing through.

The Indian Pacific was built in stages between 1920 and 1970. It took so long because of the conflicting gauges used by regional governments. It was the completion of the Cockburn to Broken Hill section at the end of the '60s that allowed a train to run all the way from Sydney to Perth on a so-called standard gauge line (for anoraks, that's 4ft 8.49ins between the inner heads of the two tracks). Though still well-used by cargo trains — especially for the movement of mining ores — the Indian Pacific line is no longer a vital link for passengers, and since 1997 has been run as a tourism venture by Great Southern Rail, a firm that also runs The Ghan train from Adelaide to Darwin.

The trains are 1970s rolling stock, built to a US design, with stainless-steel silver carriages and compartments ranging from Platinum (spacious with a sort of mini lounge area) to Gold (private shower and loo for each two-berth cabin; loo only for single berths) and Red class, sometimes called 'Red Kangaroo' (sleeper or seats, with no meals included).

The whole coast-to-coast trip takes just over 66 hours, when it runs on schedule. Passengers who'd boarded at Sydney and visited the National Wine Centre, during a three-hour stopover in Adelaide, had only praise for the whistle-stop tour of the city. The next stop of any significance would be Cook, a remote two-dingo town in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain.

The station's souvenir shop touts middle-of-nowhere memorabilia: postcards, fridge magnets, tea towels. A sign, in blaring capital letters, above a shelf of tat reads, 'Any arsehole that steals from this camp will be gut shot + left for the eagles to feed on.' Two tough-looking local women in their 50s take the cash and answer passengers' questions.

"Do you like it here?"

"It's alright. We've got dogs."

"What do the men do?"

"What do men do anywhere?"

"Do you get bored?"

"The trains keeps us busy."

The trains that keeps them busy arrive maybe 20 times a week — two passenger trains from each direction plus the cargo trains; staying at Cook only as long as it takes to refill their water tank. We only get half an hour here; it's plenty.

That evening, we arrive in Kalgoorlie, a mining town. With three hours to kill, I head for a pub where some miners are drinking pints and laughing at Prince Philip's spurs. I happen to have turned up on the day of the Royal Wedding and the event is being broadcast on all channels.

Due to the early 20th-century facades on some hotels and saloons, in places Kalgoorlie resembles a Western film set, behind which the desert rolls away to the horizon. The town is sleepy for a Friday night — although, according to the train crew, the brothels are always busy.

At around 2am that night, the train stops. Dead. And it stays there. A cargo train has derailed in front of us. At breakfast, we are informed that for the time being we are stranded on the fringes of Western Australia's wheat belt. We are allowed off the train to stretch our legs (and prevent an insurrection). No one, however, complains much. You don't take long-distance trains if you're in a hurry. The story in my Tim Winton novel suddenly shifts to the wheat belt — art and life merge as the sun rises high in the sky.

When we finally roll into 'Greater Perth', after a 10-hour delay, it's dusk. I haven't done the classic, complete route, but I've done 1,935 miles — plenty. I love long rail journeys for their own sake, and because they make the arrival so thrilling, with the lights of a new city gathered round the train as night finally sweeps over the western sky.

Best value: A ‘day/nighter’ reclining seat, with shared loo and bathroom, from Adelaide-Perth costs from A\$485 (£316), with food and drink extra.

Bust the budget: The Platinum service, in a luxury compartment with a shower plus all meals (breakfast served in your berth) costs from A\$2,409 (£1,568).

www.gsr.com

www.australia.com

02 INDIA

The route: Mumbai to Delhi via Rajasthan.

The train: Indian Rail state rolling stock.

The experience: Travelling by train in India is a social experience and a real eye-opener to local life. Whether you opt for a wooden seat in second class or for the relative comfort of a two-tier, first-class compartment, you’ll be in the company of at least half-a-dozen people, eating, sleeping, chatting and passing the time together. As chai vendors, ticket inspectors, curious passers-by and fellow travellers come and go, you’ll swap stories and learn a lot about the way Indian people live and what to look out for on your journey. On long trips such as this you’ll experience a couple of night trains and, at major stations, have the opportunity to get off, stretch your legs and eat delicious samosas and birianis. A great route is Mumbai-Jodhpur-Jaisalmer-Jaipur-Delhi, allowing you to visit three stunning forts, two major cities and, from Jaisalmer, the Thar desert — for camel rides. If you’re on a budget, all these towns have low-grade hostels and B&Bs, but you may want to combine low-cost travel with some opulent stays at the Taj-managed former majarajah’s palaces in Jodhpur and Jaipur.

Best value: Tickets can be bought with relative ease from www.cleartrip.com (see also the Indian government site www.indianrail.gov.in for timetables). First-class tickets for the above one-way route will cost from £80-£100.

Bust the budget: For those who want to do India in style, one option is the eight-day Maharajah Express Princely India tour, visiting Mumbai, Vadodara, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaipur, Ranthambore, Agra and Delhi. This is operated jointly by the Indian government’s rail catering and tourism arm, IRCTC, and Cox & Kings. From \$7,160 (£4,363).

www.rirtl.com

www.coxandkings.co.uk

03 CENTRAL EUROPE

The route: Vienna-Budapest-Prague-Krakow-Warsaw-Gdansk.

The train: Assorted European rolling stock.

The experience: During the Cold War years, train travellers would go behind the Iron Curtain — perhaps with Kraftwerk’s Trans Europe Express or David Bowie’s Station to Station playing on their Walkman — in voyeuristic mode. There was something about the old terminals that harked

back to World War II but also linked eastward to the Soviet Union. For all the changes of the past two decades, there's still a vestige of difference on the eastern lines worth exploring. This six-city journey, which can be done independently on a variety of European trains, brings to life the literary, musical, artistic, ecclesiastical and geopolitical heft of Mitteleuropa.

Best value: An Adult InterRail Global Pass allows travel in 30 countries, including all those listed in the above route, and costs from £259 for five days travel within 10 days.

www.interrailnet.com

Bust the budget: Danube Express offers several itineraries aboard itself, dubbed the grand 'hotel on wheels'. For the nine-day 'Bosphorus to the Baltic' service from Istanbul to Warsaw, via Budapest, Krakow and Gdansk, prices start at £6,390. These trips fill up fast, so book early.

www.danube-express.com

04 SCOTLAND

The route: London to the Scottish Highlands and back.

The train: Scotrail's Euston-Aviemore sleeper train plus local trains.

The experience: Only two sleeper services operate in the UK — the Night Riviera from Paddington to Penzance and the two evening trains linking London Euston with Glasgow, Edinburgh and the Scottish Highlands. For the first leg — the sleeper — take the direct train up to Aviemore, a combination of ski hub and Scottish village. Then it's a short bus ride into the Cairngorm National Park. To get around the Highlands, options are limited. There are regular trains up to Inverness and down to Pitlochry and, if you have time, you can go all the way up to Wick or Thurso. Return to London on the Fort William-Euston service.

Best value: A one-way Scotrail ticket on the Caledonian Sleeper costs from £19 (£100 for a berth). www.scotrail.co.uk

Bust the budget: Orient-Express' five-day Classic Journey leaves Edinburgh Waverley for Fife, Arbroath, Montrose, Aberdeen, Keith, Inverness and the Kyle Of Lochalsh, then heads back through the central Highlands, via Aviemore, Kingussie and Perth to Edinburgh.

Prices start at £3,940 per person.

www.royalscotsman.com

05 NORTH AMERICA

The route: New York to San Francisco, via Canada.

The train: Canadian ViaRail and US Amtrak.

The experience: A taste of Canada and the US over 12 days. Canada has the big views, America the railroad mythology. From New York's Penn Station, take the 'Maple Leaf' north-west to Toronto Union Station via the Hudson River Valley; do the trip in autumn for the golden fall experience. For a side-trip to Niagara, stop at Niagara Falls station in the US or make Toronto your base. The next stage, the 34-hour ride to Winnipeg, takes you into the cold, lonely heart of Canada. Vancouver is a good base for wolf- and moose-watching, rafting, adventure cruises and sea kayaking. You reach your final stop, San Francisco, via Seattle.

Best value: Great Rail Journeys offers the above tailor-made trip from £3,050 per person, including stopovers and accommodation. www.railselect.com www.viarail.ca

www.amtrak.com

Bust the budget: Break your journey in Alberta and book a Royal Canadian Rockies

Experience, aboard the Royal Canadian Pacific, from Calgary to Banff, Lake Louise and the Canadian Museum of Rail Travel. From \$8,200 (£5,113).

www.royalcanadianpacific.com

06 SOUTH AFRICA

The route: Cape Town to Pretoria.

The train: Shosholoza Meyl economy class.

The experience: Africa has many fragments of railway but few connect in any useful way. South Africa still has something of a network, linking Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Many tourists know of the Blue Train (see below) but the Shosholoza Meyl economy service is much cheaper, far more likely to allow you to meet ‘ordinary’ South Africans and — for those who like to get to the end of the line — runs for a longer distance, beyond Pretoria, to the mining town of Messina/Musina. It also provides a window onto a spectacular landscape, ranging from mighty Table Mountain to lush valleys of orchards and vineyards, windswept desert plains and undulating tracts of bushveld.

Best value: A one-way economy fare from Cape Town to Johannesburg costs from R520 (£47).

www.shosholozameyl.co.za

Bust the budget: Take the ultra-luxurious Blue Train from Cape Town to Pretoria and you get a lavish suite, meals, high tea, drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) and off-train excursions. A low-season one-way trip costs from R11,805 (£1,068) per person, based on two sharing.

www.bluetrain.co.za

07 THE TRANS MANCHURIAN EXPRESS

The route: Moscow to Beijing via Irkutsk and Harbin.

The train: The ‘Irkutsk’ (train No. 10) from Moscow to Irkutsk is functional, clean and has showers. The ‘Vostok’ (No. 20) is a big, lively train that picks up the route from Harbin to Beijing.

The experience: Trains that ply the Trans-Siberian Railway — a track, not a train — are public ones, not tourist choo-choos, so most people speak Russian or Chinese, not English. That includes the provodnitsas (female carriage attendants) who adjust the beds, change sheets and keep the samovar (tea urn) boiling with water. The obvious city stop-off on this seven-day, 5,580-mile journey is Irkutsk: a city known as the ‘Paris of Siberia’ and gateway to Lake Baikal. Other recommended stops are Ekaterinburg (for pre-Soviet historical sites), Novosibirsk (scientific sites) and Harbin, China (winter ice sculpture festival). Stock up on books (Trailblazer’s Trans-Siberian Handbook has details on what you’re seeing, or sleeping through), chocolate and snacks for this epic journey. Although you’re likely to end up at some stage in a friendly Russian’s compartment necking neat vodka and chewing the fat, in broken English and tortured Russian, while also chewing smoked fish.

Best value: The Red Express from Moscow to Beijing via the Manchurian route costs from £799, excluding flights. www.onthegotours.com

Bust the budget: GW Travel offers a 15-day eastbound service from Moscow to Vladivostok, including 12 days aboard the Golden Eagle train. A single (based on a twin bed) one-way in Gold class (with power showers, under-floor heating and DVD players) is £9,995, excluding flights and transfers.

www.gwtravel.co.uk

08 AN ALTERNATIVE ORIENT EXPRESS

The route : London to Istanbul.

The train: Eurostar, TGV and assorted European and Turkish trains.

The experience: There have been many routes named ‘Orient Express’ since the 1880s, ranging from bog-standard inter-city trains to the Venice-Simplon train, currently owned by luxury hotel and train operator Orient-Express. For this trip, the suggested route is London-Paris-Strasbourg-Munich-Vienna-Budapest-Bucharest-Istanbul, following the path of the classic Orient-Express, which ran up until 1962. It lacks posh perks but is a chance to see some great cities. It can be done in five stages (London-Paris, Paris-Strasbourg, Strasbourg-Vienna, Vienna-Belgrade and Belgrade-Istanbul). Highlights include the Orient-Express restaurant at Istanbul’s Sirkeci terminus.

Best value: An Adult InterRail Global Pass allows travel in 30 countries, including all those listed in the above route. From £259. www.interrailnet.com

Bust the budget: A 23-day London-Aqaba tour, using trains from St Pancras to Konya in Turkey and then buses through Aleppo, Damascus and Petra and on to Aqaba. From £2,539 per person excluding flights.

www.explore.co.uk

09 MEXICO’S COPPER CANYON

The route: From the Chihuahua Desert to Los Mochis, on the coast of the Sea of Cortez.

The train: El Chepe economy service.

The experience: The Sierra Madre mountains are the backbone of Mexico’s Northern Highlands. You can drive round them, fly over them and even go trekking in tiny corners of them, but the 15-hour budget service that leaves Chihuahua station on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays gives perhaps the best overall impression. The highlight of the 405-mile journey is the Barrancos del Cobre (Copper Canyon) — not a single cleft but a vast system of gullies, gorges and mountains, larger in scale than the Grand Canyon, and far less popular with tourists. The track passes through 86 tunnels and crosses 37 bridges, climbing from 3,280ft to nearly 8,000ft before descending to sea level. There are 11 stops en route, including Cuauhtémoc, home to the world’s largest Mennonite community; Posada Barrancas, ideal if you want to look at or trek into the canyon; and Bahuichivo and Cerocahui, close to a Jesuit Mission, and the departure point for the Urique canyon (the deepest in the system).

Best value: Chihuahua to Los Mochis on the regular economy service costs from M\$2,179 (£114). www.chepe.com.mx

Bust the budget: The trip can also be booked as a 10-night tour via Last Frontiers on the daily first-class train. It includes excursions and nights in stylish lodges. From £2,199, excluding flights.

www.lastfrontiers.com

10 VIETNAM

The route: Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City.

The train: The infamously slow Reunification Express.

The experience: Savour the scenic 30-hour, 1,072-mile route from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City via Hue, Da Nang and Nha Trang, while dining on dumplings and sticky rice. Take a faster, modern SE train with air-con, loos and sleeper cars, or save £20 on an older SE train, which can add up to 10 hours to the trip.

Best value: Travel on a SE train from £79 one-way. www.internationalrail.com

Bust the budget: Go to Thailand, for Eastern and Oriental's seven-day Epic Thailand trip from Bangkok to Chiang Mai. From £5,500 per person, excluding flights. www.orient-express.com

Published in the Sept/Oct 2011 issue of National Geographic Traveller (UK)