

**DOING THE EUROPEAN CIRCLE BY NIGHT TRAIN**  
**STARING POINT: OSLO, HAMBURG, OR BERLIN**  
**FINISH: MUNICH (OR HAMBURG, OR OSLO)**  
**14 NIGHTS**

Just a couple of years ago, the era of sleeper trains seemed to have come to an end. In the 1970s the French company *Wagon Lits* had started to sell or rent out its rolling stock to other European railway operators. Switzerland ceased night services in 2009. Germany followed suit in 2016. In the age of mass air travel and low-cost airlines, why would any sane person waste a whole night on a train, when the same distance could be done by plane in a couple of hours at a fraction of the costs? Then came Greta Thunberg and *Flygskam* (flight shame) and a more climate-aware public that was willing to spend a premium to lower carbon emissions. A romanticised notion of travel from a bygone age helped too, as did the increasingly tedious experiences of overcrowded airports, baggage restrictions and enhanced security measures. Austrian Railways (ÖBB) put sleeper trains back on the agenda. Together with other European train companies, it now offers an astonishing 27 lines (see: [www.nightjet.com](http://www.nightjet.com)) and travellers can take comfortable trains in sleeper compartments from as far north as Hamburg in Germany to Rome in Italy.

Indeed, when looking at all night train operators and the services that are on offer (check out [www.interrail.eu/en/plan-your-trip/trains-europe/night-trains](http://www.interrail.eu/en/plan-your-trip/trains-europe/night-trains) for a comprehensive list) it is now feasible to circumnavigate Europe by using mostly sleeper services. This not only saves time; it can also be supremely comfortable (unless you suffer from motion sickness or share a compartment with an apnoea sufferer) and can also be rather cost-efficient. Keep in mind though that most, but not all services are operational throughout the year. Prior booking is now absolutely essential, even when travelling outside the holiday season or during mid-week.

The entire tour integrates some 14 night trains, and thus you might want to break it up into several separate journeys (to which I am alluding to later in this article). But it is perfectly feasible to do the whole loop in one go. An itinerary might look as followed (but please keep in mind that train departures are subject to change, so please check with the respective operators)



Stockholm

## Stage 1: Scandinavia and Northern Germany: from Oslo to Berlin

This leg of the trip starts in Oslo and finishes in Berlin around one week later. Norway is a vast place. Looking at a map the distance between its southernmost and northernmost points is exactly the distance between its southernmost end and Rome in Italy. No wonder you would need two night journeys. Oslo is well served by international airlines as well as trains and ferries. From the capital, a year round service brings you halfway up the country to Trondheim, from where another train crosses the Arctic Circle and into Bodø. And then you are stuck: you can either do the return journey or take a regional bus (6 hours) even further north to Narvik, the northernmost passenger station in Europe, where the *Arctic Circle Train* awaits ([www.sj.se/en/we-offer/arctic-circle.html](http://www.sj.se/en/we-offer/arctic-circle.html)) for a three hour trip to Kiruna in Sweden. Sweden might not be as long as Norway, but this is another huge country and a whopping 17 hour ride will transport you to the capital Stockholm. During the 2020 Corona pandemic, Swedish company *Snälltåget* reorganised its night-time schedules and by the summer of 2021 was offering a revamped service from Stockholm, via Copenhagen, and onto Hamburg and our ultimate destination Berlin. (see: [www.snalltaget.se/en/increased-cross-border-night-train-services-2021](http://www.snalltaget.se/en/increased-cross-border-night-train-services-2021)). The trains run nightly in June, July, and August and at weekends in April, May, and September.

Night 1:	Oslo to Trondheim	23.06 – 06.30	<a href="http://www.yo.no">www.yo.no</a>
Night 2:	Trondheim to Bodø	23.12 – 09.17	<a href="http://www.yo.no">www.yo.no</a>
Bus transfer	Bodø to Narvik:	6 hrs	<a href="http://www.rome2rio.com">www.rome2rio.com</a>
Day train	Narvik – Kiruna	3 hrs, 2x day	<a href="http://www.sj.se">www.sj.se</a>
Night 3:	Kiruna – Stockholm	13.48 – 07.15	<a href="http://www.sj.se">www.sj.se</a>
Night 4:	Stockholm – Berlin	16.20 – 08.25	<a href="http://www.snalltaget.se">www.snalltaget.se</a>



Berlin

## Stage 2: Central Europe: from Berlin to Vienna

Warsaw is conveniently close to Berlin and a frequent 6-hour day train will bring you to the Polish capital. Once there, you can travel all the way to Prague in the Czech Republic, followed by another night train to Budapest in Hungary. You can even venture further into the Balkans with the *Euronight Ister* train, which arrives in Bucharest in Romania some 17 hours later. But there your sleeper journey would come to a temporary halt and you would have to make the reverse journey back to Budapest (unless you take an additional 19-hour night train down to Istanbul, which takes you even further away from our loop). I have therefore excluded this option from the itinerary and have instead chosen Vienna as the next stop. There is a night train to Vienna, bundling along local stops, which means you would be hard-pressed to get any sleep at all, so it might be wise to just take a regular day time connection, which makes the journey in under three hours.

Day train	Berlin – Warsaw	6 hrs, 5x day	<a href="http://www.bahn.de">www.bahn.de</a>
Night 5:	Warsaw – Prague	19.20 – 07.56	<a href="http://www.booking.polrail.com">www.booking.polrail.com</a>
Night 6:	Prague – Budapest	21.56 – 08.35	<a href="http://www.czech-transport.com">www.czech-transport.com</a>
Day train	Budapest – Vienna	3 hrs, +10x day	<a href="http://www.thetrainline.com">www.thetrainline.com</a>



Lisbon

## Stage 3: Heading South: from Paris to Lisbon, Barcelona and back

In Vienna, the plethora of Austria's *Nightjet* services are at your disposal. North to Hamburg? South to Rome? West to Zurich? But we somehow have to get to France and on to the Iberian Peninsula, so we have to head towards western Germany and Paris. Our next stop is Cologne from where the *Thalys* train takes you in three hours to the *Gare du Nord* in the French metropolis. You might want to spend the night in Paris, as you have to catch another day train (this time leaving from *Gare Montparnasse*) down to Hendaye on the country's south-western border with Spain, where the night train to Lisbon



awaits. A regular day time service from the Portuguese capital travels along the Atlantic coast to Vigo in northern Spain, where the *Trenhotel* 921 to Barcelona departs. The final leg of this stage is an overnight *Intercité de Nuit Couchette* back to Paris (Gare du Lyon).

Night 7	Vienna – Cologne	20.38 - 07.05	<a href="http://www.tickets.oebb.at">www.tickets.oebb.at</a>
Day train	Cologne – Paris	3 hrs, at least 3xday	<a href="http://www.thalys.com">www.thalys.com</a>
Day train	Paris – Hendaye	5 hrs, at least 2xday	<a href="http://www.en.oui.sncf">www.en.oui.sncf</a>
Night 8:	Hendaye – Lisbon	18.35 – 07.30	<a href="http://www.thetrainline.com">www.thetrainline.com</a>
Day train	Lisbon – Vigo	6 hrs, several per day	<a href="http://www.thetrainline.com">www.thetrainline.com</a>
Night 9:	Vigo – Barcelona	17.55 – 08.49	<a href="http://www.thetrainline.com">www.thetrainline.com</a>
Night 10	Barcelona – Paris	15.00 – 07.30	<a href="http://www.raileurope.com">www.raileurope.com</a>



Venice

#### Stage 4: from Paris to the Adriatic Sea

No station changes this time, as the next sleeper to Venice leaves from *Gare du Lyon*. From there, you can either make your way back to Vienna or Munich (once again using the Austrian *Nightjets*), or you continue even further south to the port of Ancona where a night ferry (which in the summer months metamorphoses into a glorified party boat) drops you off in Croatia's second city Split. You can board a sleeper to the capital Zagreb, and then connect with another night train to Munich (or Zurich if you have spare cash to burn and crave for some cheese fondue). The journey across the Adriatic and along the Croatian coast is spectacular (and even better if you find your inner John Travolta or Uma Thurman) and thus simply must be included in this itinerary.

Night 11	Paris– Venice	19.15 – 09.25	<a href="http://www.thello.com">www.thello.com</a>
Day train	Venice – Ancona	4 – 5 hrs, plenty per day	<a href="http://www.thetrainline.com">www.thetrainline.com</a>
Night ferry	Ancona – Split	07.45 – 07.00	<a href="http://www.jadrolinija.hr">www.jadrolinija.hr</a>
Night 11:	Split – Zagreb	21.52 – 05.48	<a href="http://www.prodaja.hzpp.hr">www.prodaja.hzpp.hr</a>
Night 12:	Zagreb – Munich	21.23 – 06.10	<a href="http://www.nightjet.com">www.nightjet.com</a>

## Stage 5: Competing the Loop: from Munich back to Oslo

In case you would like to finish where you started from, you can complete the circumnavigation by taking a couple of night trains and one daytime service back to Oslo. Once again, an ÖBB *Nightjet*, and Swedish *Snälltåget* will take you there.

Night 13: Munich - Hamburg 20.50 – 08.36

[www.nightjet.com](http://www.nightjet.com)

Night 14: Hamburg – Malmo 23.26 – 07.30

[www.snalltaget.se](http://www.snalltaget.se)

Day train: Malmo to Oslo around 7 hrs, plenty a day

[www.thetrainline.com](http://www.thetrainline.com)



Copenhagen

## Shorter Loops

For smaller budgets and compromised time frames, there are obvious short journeys that could easily be organised. Here are some examples:

There is a '**Scandinavian loop**' from Oslo to Narvik, Stockholm, Malmo and back to Oslo. Adding Copenhagen to this list (which is just a short hop from Malmo) would make a wonderful trip. The websites of the travel operators listed in Stage 1 and for the final leg of Stage 5 should help you in the organisation.

We also have what we might call an '**Iberian loop**' starting in Paris (I know, in France, not Iberia), you have to take a regular day service down to Hendaye on the French-Spanish border, followed by the night train to Lisbon, and further night trains from Vigo to Barcelona and back up to Paris. Stage 3 is covering parts of this journey.

There is also a '**Central European loop**' starting in Berlin, followed by night trains from Warsaw to Prague and on to Budapest (see Stage 2). From there you can make your way back to Vienna before departing to Berlin (22.10 – 09.53; see: [www.nightjet.com](http://www.nightjet.com))

And finally, sun seekers might appreciate the '**Mediterranean loop**' starting in Vienna with a night train to Rome (19.23 – 09.10; see: [www.nightjet.com](http://www.nightjet.com)). From the eternal city, you have to make your way to the Adriatic port of Ancona (around 4 hours by train; check out [www.rome2rio.com](http://www.rome2rio.com)), followed by the night ferry to Split and then back up north via the Croatian capital Zagreb. This shorter trip is listed in part in Stage 4.

### Other Night Train Journeys

Even shorter but nonetheless adventurous journeys are listed on Inter Rail's website (see: [www.interrail.eu/en/plan-your-trip/trains-europe/night-trains](http://www.interrail.eu/en/plan-your-trip/trains-europe/night-trains)). These do not follow a circular pattern and you might have to make the trip back along the same route to reach your point of departure. But they certainly deserve to be mentioned. For instance:

The oxymoron-named **Hellas Express** runs from the Serbian capital Belgrade down to Skopje in North Macedonia and further on to Thessaloniki in Greece. The whole trip takes a cool 16 hours leaving Belgrade at 18.21 and arriving in Greece at 10.21 (see: [www.rail.cc/night-train/belgrade-thessaloniki-b335/416](http://www.rail.cc/night-train/belgrade-thessaloniki-b335/416)). Please note that as of 2019, the Greek leg of the journey (from Gevgelija in North Macedonia to Thessaloniki involves a 2-hour bus journey. But once there, access to several Greek islands is straight forward with multiple links to Crete, the Cyclades, and islands in the north-western Aegean.

I would also like to highlight two services, which not only take up a whole night, but some of the day as well: The first one is the **Euronight Ister**, which in a leisurely 17 hours connects Budapest in Hungary with the Romanian capital Bucharest (19.10 – 12.05; see: [www.rail.cc/night-train/budapest-bucharest-en-473/120](http://www.rail.cc/night-train/budapest-bucharest-en-473/120)). From Bucharest, a further night train - this time taking at least 19 hour – brings you to the Turkish metropolis of Istanbul (11.00 – 06.20; see: [www.rail.cc/night-train/bucharest-istanbul-bosfor/134](http://www.rail.cc/night-train/bucharest-istanbul-bosfor/134))

And for those spending time in the UK, London offers two night train outfits: The **Caledonian Sleeper** which connects the capital's King's Cross Station with Glasgow and Edinburgh and either Fort William on the West Coast, or Inverness on the eastern side (the journey to Fort William takes about 12 hours. see: [www.sleeper.scot](http://www.sleeper.scot)). Or there is the Night Riviera, connecting London Paddington with the Cornish resort of Penzance (see: [www.gwr.com](http://www.gwr.com)) in a swift 7 ½ hours.



Scotland



## Prices

If you go through the cumbersome process of booking tickets individually, these can come at a significant expense, in particular when opting for luxury class. For instance, travelling on the Caledonian sleeper between London and Edinburgh can set you back between 200€ and 350€ depending on the type of accommodation and service. At the slightly cheaper end of the scale the Euronight Ister from Budapest to Bucharest could still set you back around 150€ per person. However, rock bottom prices are offered between Bucharest and Istanbul for about 35€ in a 4-person couchette. But the price of sleeper train tickets become just that little bit more acceptable once you factor in the savings made on hotel accommodation. Still, night trains might be convenient, but most often they are not bargains.

This is where Interrail (for European citizens) or Eurail (for non-Europeans) come in. Both services are by and large identical but operate under different websites and apps, so it is crucial to choose the right one. The apps by the way are fantastic tools that provide for a surprisingly seamless process of booking all your train journeys and sleeper tickets. Hats off. Let's stick with Interrail for now ([www.interrail.eu/en/interrail-passes/global-pass](http://www.interrail.eu/en/interrail-passes/global-pass)): There are four age ranges (Child, Youth 12 – 27, Adult 28 – 59, and Senior 60+). And for each of these age ranges you can choose between first and second class travel. And lastly, you can choose the type of pass. Options include 15 days, 22 days, 2 months, 3 months, four/five/seven days within a month, and 10/15 days within two months.

Rather conveniently, night trains only ever take up one day of your allocated allowance. So, if your sleeper train departs on a Thursday night, that is the day of travel, although you might spend most of Friday on that train. Interrail also insists that you reserve all night trains in advance with the price obviously depending on the type of service that you choose (or that is available). For instance, the *Nightjet* from Vienna to Munich will set you back an additional 15€ for a simple reclining seat, or a further 150€ for a private cabin. At the cheaper end of the scale, additional charges for the night train from Split to Zagreb range from 10€ to 40€.

At the budget end of the price range a shorter loop might work best. You can do the 'Iberian loop' in five travel days and nights. An Interrail ticket (5 days within one month) for adults aged 28 to 59 would set you back 282€ in second class. Add to this around 250€ for the three sleeper trains, plus meals and additional accommodation when you are not travelling on a train, and you might end up just short of 1000€. Of course, with more money at your disposal, you can stretch out the journey as Interrail allows you a whole month to complete these five travel days.

But let us assume for once that you intend to do the whole circle in one go with hardly any breaks (good luck, we will be cheering you on all the way) That would lead you to the one-month ticket, costing 670€ in second and 893€ in first class for someone aged between 28 and 59. The prices for seniors are marginally lower at 603€ and 804€ respectively. But to those under 28, a real bargain reveals itself with charges of 503€/670€. In order to get a bed in a couchette, you might have to add approximately 90€ for every night train journey, plus one night ferry and 13 nights of 'standard' accommodation in the places that you come across. This could quickly add up to 3500€ or even 4000€ plus meals and catering. Then again, you would be travelling for one entire month.... Alternatively, you can always take your loved ones on that 2 week, all-inclusive package to Ayia Napa, which I doubt you would seriously consider since you read this post all the way to the end.

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