

## DOING THE EUROPEAN CIRCLE BY TRAIN

### 60 DAYS

### STARTING POINT. HELSINKI, FINLAND

### FINISH: TALLINN, ESTONIA

Criss-crossing Europe by rail is a rite of passage, and over the years, millions of people have done it, most of them using the wonderful Interrail service which has been linking national rail networks since 1972. But this tour might not be on many people's bucket list: riding around the perimeter of Europe (excluding the islands of Iceland, Ireland, the UK, Malta, and Cyprus) by hugging coastlines for as long and as close as possible. The journey takes you across 24 countries, although you would bypass the likes of Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, the Czech Republic, Montenegro, Albania, Kosovo, as well as Bosnia & Herzegovina. Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus also do not feature, as is Russia. Still, this is a monumental journey, requiring stamina, time, a considerable budget, and therefore might best be split it up into several stages taken at different times. But if you are the retired and/or affluent type with sufficient funds, why not embark on a trip that will take several months to complete.

Three essential websites and apps will help you plan your journey. There is the impressive [www.bahn.de](http://www.bahn.de) offered by the German state railway, which offers precise connections across the whole of Europe. It is an invaluable journey planner. The same can also be said of [www.rome2rio.com](http://www.rome2rio.com) which also provides you with detailed bus schedules should you get stuck at a railway station. There is also an interactive railway map on [www.openrailwaymap.org](http://www.openrailwaymap.org). It allows you to look at the more prominent transnational lines, but also offers the chance to zoom in on smaller regional and local lines.

The journey starts in the Finnish capital of Helsinki and finishes 60 travel days later in Estonia's main city Tallin. Of course, given that this is a circular route, you can access the loop at any point. In order to enjoy the hardly-ever setting sun in northern Scandinavia, you might want to make sure to travel through Finland, Sweden, and Norway during the months of June and July. Likewise, travelling through southern Italy and Greece at the height of summer might not be the most pleasant experience.

There are some wonderful stretches which deserve a separate journey altogether. A Scandinavian loop springs to mind, which takes you from Kristinehamn in southern Sweden via the so-called *Inlandsbanan* (just a glorified tram really) to Lapland, from where you can catch a train to Narvik in Norway before travelling back south via Oslo. In northern Spain, you can travel on the small-gauge FEVE railway along the northern coast between Bilbao and Ferrol. The Glacier Express in Switzerland is a strong contender for Europe's most scenic rail trip, while in the Balkans, rather more bygone trains cut their way through steep mountain passes (for instance the trip from the Serbian capital Belgrade to the Montenegrin port of Bar on the Adriatic coast). Night trains are an altogether different proposition, and a separate article provides more detailed information.

Where would we be without rules (a question to which seasoned travellers might want to reply with 'the Balkans'), so the following parameters are underlining this trip. Islands are excluded. Taking ferries would just be too cumbersome, and in any case some islands (such as Malta or Cyprus) do not even possess rail networks. Stay as close to the coast as possible. For instance, travelling from Lille in northern France to Bordeaux in the south could easily be done by taking a fast connection via Paris. But there are more coastal connections (via Brest and Nantes in this instance) which should be taken instead. Also, why it is possible to just zoom non-stop across the continent, I have broken down the journey into hopefully manageable day trips of no more than 7 hours on the train (with the occasional longer journey listed as a night train option), in the hope that travellers can at least spend a little time at the respective stop overs. And if all this non-stop travelling is just too much to bear (and I am sure at some stage it will be), you can always prolong the journey by taking a well-deserved rest on some beach. This is not a race against the clock. Or is it ....



Marstrand, near Gothenburg/Sweden

### **Scandinavia: Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. 9 days**

A couple of days into our journey and we are already facing a challenge: Although there is a train track between northern Finland and Sweden, it is used exclusively for freight and there aren't any passenger services connecting the two countries at this point. Instead, travellers have to take a bus from Kemi in Finland to Haparanda (also in Finland), and then another bus on to Luleå in Sweden. The whole trip covers 150 km. Narvik on the Norwegian coast marks the end of the spectacular Iron Ore line, and in order to travel south, you could go back to Kiruna in Sweden from where there is a connection to the capital Stockholm, with links to Copenhagen in Denmark. But more dramatic, however, is the journey through Norway, which requires you to take a bus from Narvik to Bodø, from where you can start to tackle the 1000km journey to the Norwegian capital Oslo.

Day 1: Helsinki (Finland) – Kemi: 7 hours

Day 2: Kemi – Haparanda – Luleå (Sweden): 3 hours (bus)

Day 3: Luleå – Narvik (Norway): 6 hours

Day 4: Narvik – Bodo: 6 hours (bus)

Day 5: Bodø to Trondheim: 10 hours (night train)

Day 6: Trondheim to Oslo. 7 ½ hours (night train)

Day 7: Oslo – Gothenburg (Sweden): 4 ½ hours

Day 8: Gothenburg – Copenhagen (Denmark): 4 hours

Day 9: Copenhagen – Kolding (2 hours) and Kolding to Hamburg/Germany (3 hours)



Amsterdam

**Along the North Sea and the Atlantic Coast: Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, and France. 8 days**

Day 10: Hamburg – Amsterdam (Netherlands): 6 hours

Day 11: Amsterdam – Lille (France): 4 ½ hours

Day 12: Lille – Rouen (3 hours) and Rouen – Caen (2 hours)

Day 13: Caen – Rennes (3 hours) and Rennes – Brest (2 hours)

Day 14: Brest – Rennes (2 hours) and Rennes – Nantes (1 ½ hours)

Day 15: Nantes – La Rochelle: 3 hours

Day 16: La Rochelle – Bordeaux: 3 hours

Day 17: Bordeaux – Hendaye: 2 ½ hours



Asturias, Northern Spain

**The Iberian Peninsula: Spain and Portugal. 10 days**

The journey reaches the south-western tip of France. From Hendaye, you can walk or take a quick local train (10 minutes) to Irun in Spain on the other side of the river. From there, you can catch a local train to San Sebastian and a further one into Bilbao. In Bilbao, you can board the FEVE small gage train which runs all the way along the northern Spanish coast to Ferrol.

Day 18: Irun – San Sebastian – Bilbao: approx. 4 hours

Day 19: Bilbao – Santander: 3 hours

Day 20: Santander – Oviedo: 4 ½ hours

Day 21: Oviedo – Ferrol: 6 ½ hours

Day 22: Ferrol – Porto (Portugal): 7 hours

Day 23: Porto – Lisbon: 3 hours

Day 24: Lisbon – Albufeira: 4 hours

Day 25: Albufeira – Huelva/Spain (bus: 2 ½ hours) and Huelva – Cordoba (2 hours)

Day 26: Cordoba – Alicante: 6 hours

Day 27: Alicante – Barcelona: 4 ½ hours



Rome

**Into Southern Europe: France and Italy. 9 days**

This is a straightforward leg, taking advantage of the highly developed rail networks of both countries, although some smaller journeys are required on the 'heel' of Italy.

Day 28: Barcelona – Marseille (France): 5 ½ hours

Day 29: Marseille – Imperia (Italy): 4 hours

Day 30: Imperia – Livorno: 5 hours

Day 31: Livorno – Rome – Naples: 5 ½ hours

Day 32: Naples – Reggio Calabria: 5 hours

Day 33: Reggio Calabria – Crotona: 4 hours

Day 34: Crotona – Taranto (3 hours) and Taranto – Lecce (2 hours)

Day 35: Lecce – Ancona: 5 hours

Day 36: Ancona – Bologna – Trieste: 6 hours



Skopje, North Macedonia

### **Across the Balkans: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, North Macedonia. 5 days**

This is a tricky one: From Trieste, travellers can enjoy a beautiful link to the Croatian capital Zagreb and onto marvellous Split on the Adriatic coast. But this is where the tracks stop, necessitating a bus journey to Bar in Montenegro. A train to Podgorica allows you to connect with Tirana in Albania and onto the southern town of Vlorë. But once again, a bus journey is required to reach Kalabaka in Greece with a rail connection to Athens. While hugging the coast and thereby meeting one of the journey's objectives, it is also quite cumbersome. It therefore might be best to follow a straighter route from Trieste to Belgrade, and then onto Athens.

Day 37: Trieste – Ljubljana (Slovenia): 2 ½ hours

Day 38: Ljubljana – Zagreb (Croatia): 2 ½ hours

Day 39: Zagreb – Belgrade (Serbia): 7 hours (option of night train)

Day 40: Belgrade – Skopje (North Macedonia): 10 hours (night train)

Day 41: Skopje – Thessaloniki (Greece): 5 hours



Bucharest

### **Through Eastern Europe: Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia. 10 days**

Back and forth between Greece's two big cities. It can't be helped. The trip from the Romanian capital Bucharest to Cluj can be broken up with a stopover in Braşov, but I have listed the direct night train option.

Day 42: Thessaloniki – Athens: 4 hours

Day 43: Athens – Thessaloniki: 4 hours

Day 44: Thessaloniki – Alexandroupoli: 7 hours

Day 45: Alexandroupoli – Svilengrad/Bulgaria (2 ½ hours) and Svilengrad – Stara Zagora (2 hours)

Day 46: Stara Zagora to Pyce/Ruse (5 ½ hours)

Day 47: Pyce/Ruse to Bucharest (Romania): 3 hours

Day 48: Bucharest – Cluj: 10 hours (night train option)

Day 49: Cluj – Debrecen (Hungary): 5 ½ hours

Day 50: Debrecen – Košice (Slovakia): 4 hours

Day 51: Košice – Medzilaborce (3 hours)



Riga, Latvia

**The Last Leg: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. 9 days**

Nearly there and a pretty straight forward final furlough, apart from a bus journey linking northern Poland with southern Lithuania.

Day 52 Medzilaborce- Jaslo (Poland): 3 hours

Day 53: Jaslo – Lublin: 4 hours

Day 54: Lublin – Sidlce – Bialystock: 5 hours

Day 55: Bialystock – Suwalki (2 hours) and Suwalki – Marijampole/Lithuania (1 hour; bus)

Day 56: Marijampole – Kaunas (1 hour) and Kaunas to Vilnius (1 hour)

Day 57: Vilnius – Daugavpils (Latvia): 3 hours

Day 58: Daugavpils – Riga: 3 ½ hours

Day 59: Riga – Valga (Estonia): 2 ½ hours

Day 60: Valga - Tallinn: 3 ½ hours

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