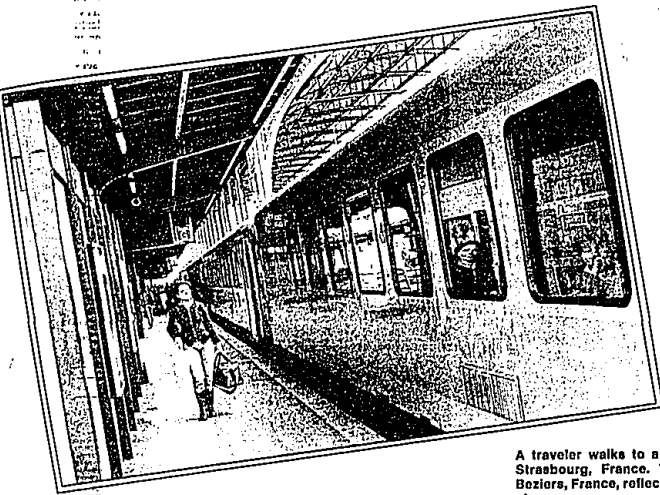


Travel



Thursday, November 27, 1986 O&E

(WB-12D,T,R-1C,8B*)#110



A traveler walks to a train at the station in Strasbourg, France. The bulletin board in Beziers, France, reflects the busy train schedule.

Traveling by train

Sidetracked in U.S., it's still big with Europeans

OUR TRAIN to Paris leaves the St. Jean station in Bordeaux at 9:27 a.m. and arrives at Austerlitz station in Paris at 1:46 p.m.

There are 19 daily Bordeaux-to-Paris trains listed on the small paper train schedule I hold in my hand. Several more trains operate five or six days a week, so there is a lot of train service on this one leg of the extensive rail network in Europe. Those numbers tell you many things, primarily that Europeans still use trains.

The quality of the equipment and service reflects that regular use.

IN THE U.S., there are only a few places where trains are part of daily life — New York to Washington, for example — but European countries still conduct their daily business and vacation life by train.

A society that lives by its trains gives you train service you can live with. Instead of reducing its train network year by year as we have done, the Europeans are building bigger and better trains every day. Good trains cover more than 100,000 miles of track throughout the continent. Special TEE and Intercity trains run between major cities.

In Germany, an Airport Express hurtles along the Rhine, carrying passengers from Frankfurt Airport to Bonn and Cologne. In France, the TGV, fastest train in the world, has been breaking all records between Paris and southeastern France since 1981; a network of TGV trains will criss-cross France before the turn of the 21st century.

I AM traveling on a Eurailpass, which allows me unlimited travel on first or second class in 16 European countries.

At the moment, I am sitting in a spacious, well-lit first-class coach with new blue carpeting and wide red seats reminiscent of first class airline seats, two seats on one side of the aisle and one on the other. The front half of the car, behind the glass wall, is for smoking, the back half is non-smoking. Most of my fellow travelers are businessmen reading their morning papers.

A second style of first class car has compartments, with seats facing one another; you have seen them in all those Agatha Christie movies.

Second class cars also come either compartment-style or four abreast like economy seats on a plane. I am traveling with a friend who sometimes travels first, and sometimes second, so I have had a good opportunity to see the difference. The main difference is in the luxury level of the cars.

FAR MORE people travel second class. On the seven or eight trains I have taken so far on this trip, most of them in France, the second class cars have been quite clean and comfortable, and more crowded than first. In most cases we are talking about relatively short runs of three to four hours.

If you buy your tickets as you go, instead of using a Eurailpass, first class costs 50 percent more than second class.



one-of-a-kind traveler

Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

ond class. From Bordeaux to Paris, a one-way first class ticket costs 388 francs and a second class ticket 259 francs; at 6.5 francs to a U.S. dollar that's \$60 versus \$40.

Whether the difference is worth it depends on your priorities how far you travel and how many trains you may be taking. In summer or on weekends it may be worth the extra; during less busy times it may not.

BUY A Eurailpass and you can travel either way. The Eurailpass is available only to people who live outside of Europe, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, so you must buy it before you leave home, however, unless you are traveling only between major cities listed on the schedule that comes with your pass.

There are a lot of interesting little details to learn but the most important is that you will be carrying your own bags so travel light.

Even with a taxi to the door of the station you must haul your bag to the platform, up and down long flights of stairs to other platforms, up and down flights of stairs to other platforms and up the steps into the train.

Once aboard you will probably hoist your luggage up to an overhead rack. First class cars have floor and waist-level racks at the ends of the car. You can check your bag but most people don't because it may not arrive on the same train that you do.

MY ITINERARY took me by plane to Frankfurt Airport, by train to Cologne, up the Rhine River by boat, by car to Stuttgart, by train to Montpellier, France, down the Canal du Midi on a hotel barge, by train to Bordeaux and by train again to Paris, where I took a plane home. A Eurailpass is well worth while when you are wandering around the continent like that.

The fast train out of Frankfurt airport sped on swift silent rails to Mainz and down the Rhine River to Cologne. Signs in German and English led me from my Pan Am flight to the baggage area. Railway schedules were posted there and throughout the airport.

Eurailpass tickets must be signed and validated at the railway counter before boarding a train for the first time. From then on, you just climb aboard while other people line up for tickets. The ticket for that run cost 67 marks (\$34) first class and 41 marks (\$21) second class, with an extra five mark (\$2.50) surcharge for the fast train.

WE TOOK the airport escalator down two levels to track three, where a diagram showed exactly where trains stop and where to stand to board either first or second class cars. The express to Cologne leaves at one minute before the hour, and at exactly 10:59 it glided into the station.

There was no clackety-clack of train wheels as we raced up the river. That is an electric train and it

rides more smoothly than the cushiest Cadillac.

It isn't always that easy. The first rule of train travel in Europe is to leave yourself enough time to get the information you need to go from one place to another. The railway network system in Europe is very large, with trains going to every village and town on the continent. You would need two large books the size of telephone books to have all the information you need.

A small schedule of main trains to main cities comes with your Eurailpass. If you are going from Paris to Frankfurt, and then on to Madrid, you have the schedule in your pocket. I knew before I left home that one of my trips was from Stuttgart or Mannheim to Montpellier.

THE CHICAGO Eurail office told me that I had several choices, none of them wonderful. It looked like I had to either stay overnight somewhere or backtrack to Paris to meet

my 2 p.m. Sunday appointment in Montpellier. "Check the information desk when you get to Europe."

I tried the information desk again in Heilbronn, where a young woman found me a slightly better route through Lyon, but I still had to overnight in Montpellier to meet my mid-afternoon appointment the following day.

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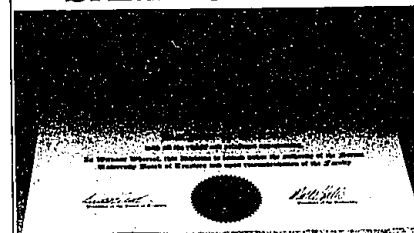
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