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Travel

Europe's railway stations serve many of traveler's needs

This is the second in a two-part series on traveling through Europe by train.

A European railway station in a large city is a sight to behold. In Stuttgart, Germany, for example, it spreads across three levels of a huge building and under a long block of the street in front of the station.

We were driving a rental car so we had to brave the heavy traffic and find public parking areas before we could do anything else. We were turning the car in Stuttgart and staying overnight for an early morning train to Montpellier, France, so we needed a nearby hotel.

The railway station was a great complex of ticket booths, travel information offices, post office, lockers, news stand, flower shop, food and wine areas, one of those facilities in any European station is a city travel office where you can reserve a hotel room in town.

They will give you a city map, a list of available rooms, information about the cost of the room and whether the room comes with or without an in-room bath.

We had been told that the best hotel in town was the Schlossgarten, but the agent confirmed what we suspected, that it was very expensive, 200 to 500 Deutschmarks (\$100 to \$250) not what we wanted to pay for a place that we did not have time to enjoy.

WE ASKED for a hotel that cost 100-150 DM (\$50 to \$75), something clean, with good beds, near the station, and we were given a room at the Hotel Mark, two blocks from the station.

The hotel was plain and the room was small but it had two single beds and was clean and comfortable enough so we took it. We paid the 10 DM deposit at the station and it was deducted from the room rate at the hotel.

The railway station, a city in itself, has other services. In Europe, international telephone calls are traditionally made from the post office; we needed to make such a call and there was a post office in the station.

A telephone operator gave us a card for a specific booth, we dialed the call and paid her when we came out. To give you an idea of rates, it cost three DM's about \$1.50, for a three-minute call to Amsterdam.

THE RAILWAY station also has a travel office where you can get travel information, buy tickets, make reservations, etc. I had a first class Eurailpass, which must be bought before you leave home, so I didn't have to make a decision about which class to travel; if you buy the ticket in Europe you do have to decide. That's exactly what my travel companion did so we had a chance to see it both ways.

The difference in price between



1-of-a-kind traveler
Iris Jones
contributing travel editor

Stuttgart, Germany, and Montpellier, France, was 211 DM First Class versus 144 DM second class, a difference of about \$30. My companion bought a second class ticket and upgraded it on any leg of the trip that pleased him. With my first class ticket I could travel in either class, so it gave us a good taste of both.

The matter of a seat reservation also is a decision that must be made in the railway station. For 3.5 DM, about \$2, I reserved a seat No. 56 on car 93 in first class between Stuttgart and Strasbourg, which was where we would change trains for the first time on our day-long journey.

This saved me a seat in a compartment for six. I had the only reserved seat in the compartment, and had all six seats to myself, so obviously I didn't need a reservation on that leg.

As for the difference between first and second class, you must decide by train if you buy your tickets in Europe instead of buying an Eurailpass before you leave home. I highly recommend the Eurailpass if you are going on several train trips, as we did. I travel spring and fall; midsummer would be much busier.

ON THAT first leg, my car was half-first and half-second class. The only difference in the car itself was that the second class seats were plastic and the first were velvet with clean cotton-covered headrests. The main difference however, was that second class was full and first class was empty.

I suspect that is the main issue anytime; many more people travel second so you have more elbow room and fewer companions in first. The choice might also be first with no reservations or second with reservations.

Some of the trains we traveled, like the airport express from Frankfurt to Cologne, have full dining

cars. All have a man with a rolling cart selling tea, coffee, sandwiches, sausage, beer and pop. You can also buy fresh rolls with meat and cheese, and fresh fruit, as I did, in the station.

European trains leave on time so if you must change trains don't sit around like you do on a plane after the train stops; get your bag and get off because the train may not be there long.

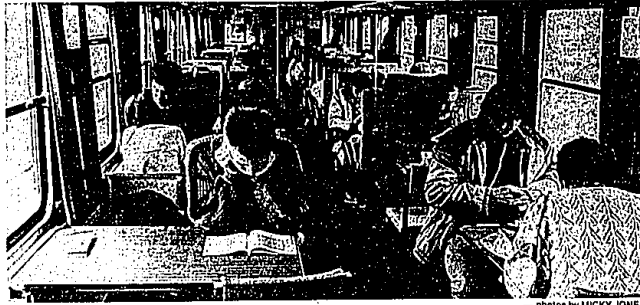
The trip from Germany into France was uneventful. Customs and immigration officers boarded at the last stop before the border, just before we crossed the Rhine River into Strasbourg.

THERE ARE MANY different kinds of trains on the European network. From Strasbourg to Lyon we rode the 11:58 TGV train. Here the difference between first and second class was more dramatic. There were three seats across in an open car, newly carpeted and upholstered, with wide scenic windows.

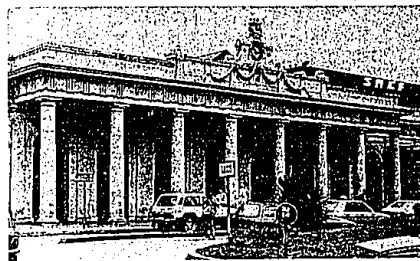
The schedule carries the crossed fork and knife that indicates a dining car but what I saw was that half of the second class car behind me had plastic tables and a small bar, not the beautiful dining car illustrated in the literature.

I asked the conductor in my high school French and he said that in some trains you can be served in your seat; in others you go to the dining car.

I sat down at one of the plastic tables. A young French student sat on the other side of the table, reading his book, enjoying a sandwich and drinking a beer. A full hot meal of the day was available, as were several smaller hot foods; pizza, ham-



Half of a second-class dining car (top) on the French National Railways has plastic tables for sit-down dining, but riders can also be served in their seats. Cabs line up (bottom) in front of the train station in Montpellier, France.



burger, etc. You also could choose cold sandwiches, fresh rolls and cheese, along with half bottles of red or white wine.

THE LANDSCAPE in Alsace was quite different than it was on the other side of the Rhine. To the west, fertile fields spread across the landscape to the mountains. There were castle towers high on those foothills, but beyond the mountains rose to snow, with villages tucked into high narrow valleys.

From Lyon to Montpellier, the train cars were in yet another style. In first class, the seats were wide, red on a blue carpet, with tables in back of the seats ahead. There were two seats on one side of the aisle and

one on the other, reminiscent of first class plane travel.

At Lyon, the TGV was parked beside us, ready like a race horse to leap from the station for her race to Paris. The TGV is the fastest train in the world. It was introduced five years ago from Paris to Lyon and now serves much of southeast France. On Sept. 23, 1986, it hit 222 miles per hour.

The TGV will link Paris to Brittany by 1989 and Paris to Bordeaux and Spain by 1990. Also under consideration are a high-speed link toward Brussels, Cologne and Amsterdam, probably tied to a TGV connection from Paris or Brussels to London. A new stop will be added to the southeast run when Disneyland

opens its first European park in France.

WE WERE traveling to Montpellier to meet a tour group. They took the TGV from Paris and loved it. It is not the only high-speed train in France however; the TEE and the Intercity trains are also fast and fine.

Contact your travel agent for more information on French trains or on the Eurailpass. I used my pass only in France and Germany, but I have no reason to believe it wouldn't be just as useful in any of the 16 countries covered by the pass. I also have traveled with a British pass in England and been pleased with the results.

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Observer & Eccentric
NEWSPAPERS

Vacation Planner

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☐ TENNESSEE: Great Smoky Mountains, Gatlinburg
☐ SOUTH CAROLINA: A Plantation, A Coastal Island
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☐ KAUAI: Waialeale River Boat Cruise, Fern Grotto
☐ KONA & HILO: Black Sand Beach, Mauna Loa and Kilauea Volcanoes, Thurston's Lava Tube, Giant Fern Tree Forest, Famous Volcano House, Banyan Tree Drive, Hale's Dole, Garden of the Gods, Beach Party Luau
☐ MAUI: Mysterious Valley Excursion, Old Whaling Capital of Lahaina, Fabled Hana Forest

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