

All aboard the SKI TRAIN



Most skiers fly to the Alps nowadays. But, door-to-door, the train can easily rival the airplane for speed — and beat it for comfort and convenience. Are we finally on the brink of a revival of rail travel to the liveliest European ski resorts?

WORDS: Daniel Elkan

Somehow, flying to the Alps always looks quick on paper. When I first started skiing, knowing no better, I envisaged a quick hop from my home in north London to the resort. After all, the flight time for popular routes such as Gatwick to Geneva is a mere 95 minutes. Arriving at the airport at 5am as instructed, I witnessed a sea of sleep-deprived skiers, shuffling about in slow-moving queues. From their grumpy faces you'd never guess they were about to go skiing. A cramped flight followed, then more queuing before a tedious coach transfer — the final stage in a conveyor belt of boredom. It's baffling how a short flight translates into an 8-10 hour door-to-door journey — frequently even longer. No wonder skiers are always on the lookout for more comfortable alternatives to flying.

Some drive instead, particularly families who are happy to bring along the kitchen sink. But it's a long old road trip, beset with traffic bottlenecks near the resorts, not to mention the problem of navigating unfamiliar winding mountain roads in potentially adverse conditions.

And what about the train? Like many skiers, I'd always imagined that rail travel would take too long to be viable. But in 1998, en route from the airport to the Italian resort of Sauze d'Oulx, I spotted a railway station only minutes from the village. Curiosity and a battered old copy of a Thomas Cook European rail timetable led me to the realisation that we could have got there as quickly from the UK by train.

As I was to discover, there are hundreds of resorts that can be reached conveniently by train — the French ski resorts are most easily accessible from the UK. The direct Eurostar Ski Train gets you to the Tarentaise region in seven hours, and Eurostar's new Lyon service means that you only need change platform to reach a host of resorts in other parts of France. Changing stations in Paris (easy by taxi) gives you even more options to the French Alps — you can zip down to the Piedmont region in Italy, or the many mountain ranges of Switzerland, and take a scenic lakeside

trip past Zurich, to the Arlberg region of Austria. Instead of the constant stop-start of airports, you get longer blocks of quality time where you can sit and relax as the scenery glides by: acres of fields, rolling hills, glistening lakes, majestic castles and quaint villages — with the mountains drawing ever closer. I've lost count of the number of times that skiers have told me that the train journey was very much a part of their holiday — or for their children, the part they looked forward to the most.

Most of the trains going into and across Europe have cafe bars and some have restaurant carriages, too. There's an undeniable frisson about being catered for at 160mph, even if it isn't quite the Orient Express. Plus, there are overnight options as well as daytime ones. Admittedly, Eurostar's direct overnight ski train only has sit-up seats, which doesn't make for the most comfortable night's sleep, but you can take an ordinary Eurostar to Paris and then a sleeper train, with proper couchette beds, bound for the Alps. There's nothing quite like falling asleep knowing that in the morning you'll arrive to a full extra day's skiing, when most of the ski world is still queuing their way through the airport.

Transfers are shorter too. Many ski resorts in Switzerland and Austria have train stations right in the villages, while in France and the Piedmont region of Italy most resorts are located 20-60 minutes from the station — far closer than any international airport.

Tell fellow skiers that you've travelled by train and they'll often assume you mean from the nearest airport. When you clarify that you haven't taken a flight at all, their eyebrows raise, as if you've undertaken some epic, multi-day overland expedition. Skiers always assume that flying must be so much faster — and it simply isn't. I remember leaving one couple open-jawed when they learned how quick the train journey could be. There was a pause and then the wife turned and addressed her husband, slightly crossly: "Darling, we should do that next year!" ➤



Bernina Express passing through the snow-covered woods around Filisur, Canton of Grisons, Switzerland

IMAGE: GETTY

Booking by rail: The inside track

1. Don't rely on the web

Check prices and options rail companies can find for you on the phone. You'll benefit from staff knowledge and more flexible booking.

2. Use booking experts

Companies like Switzerland Travel Centre have a specialist rail-booking service.

3. Get a decent rail map

The new European Rail Map — £10.99 + P&P from europeanrailtimetable.eu

— gives a useful overview of the European rail network, so you won't be left in the dark.

4. Change station in Paris

There's no need to schlep luggage on the metro. The taxi rank is 50m from the Eurostar platform. A four-seater costs €18-20 (£14-16).

5. Book a private couchette

On French sleeper trains, book an 'Espace privatif' — the entire couchette for your party (minimum of four people in a six-berth or one person in a four-berth). Telephone bookings only.

6. Make stopovers

Depart the afternoon before and stop off en route in cities such as Paris, and find an even wider range of rail options.

EASY SKI TRAIN ROUTES FROM THE UK

LES ARCS FRANCE

The 264-mile Paradiski area includes four villages and plenty of intermediate terrain overlooking Mont Blanc. Arc 1950 is literally built on the slopes.

Take a 9.45am Eurostar from London St Pancras to Bourg St Maurice (6.50pm), for a short funicular ride to Arc 1600.



LA CLUSAZ FRANCE

The village accesses 80 miles of ski terrain in the stunning Aravis mountains — 124 miles including neighbouring Le Grand Bornand.

Depart St Pancras on the 7.19am Eurostar to Lyon, change there and take a local train to Annecy, arriving at 4.07pm. From there it's 35 minutes by bus or taxi.



SAUZE D'OULX ITALY

Intermediates are well catered for in Sauze, whose slopes link up with Montgenevre and Sestriere as part of the 248-mile Milky Way.

Depart St Pancras on the 9.32am Eurostar to Paris-Nord, then take the 2.41pm TGV from Paris-Lyon to Oulx, arriving at 7.21pm. It's then 15 minutes by bus or taxi.

Hidden costs

Another prevalent myth is that rail travel must cost an arm and a leg. It's not true. Indeed, for independent travel, if you factor in the whole journey — including airline baggage charges and airport transfers — train travel often saves you money. In September, I researched EasyJet and Eurostar prices (plus transfers) for journeys to a range of ski resorts in France. I was surprised to find that more often than not, train travel came out cheaper. For example, a family of four with two children (aged between 4 and 11) would pay a total of £1,956 for return air travel and transfers to La Plagne at Easter, without skis. Travelling on the direct Eurostar Ski Train instead, they'd pay £1,132 — a saving of £824. Travelling via Lyon, meanwhile, would cost them only £756 in total.

There's certainly enthusiasm for train travel within the ski industry. Chalet companies that welcome skiers from both the airport and the train station see first hand the difference the journey makes. "Guests who arrive by train tend to be far more relaxed than those who have flown," says Clare Truphet, operations manager at independent chalet operator Fish & Pips. "They've had a nicer journey and a 30-minute transfer instead of a three-hour one. And because there are fewer delays, guests by train are easier for us to manage, too."

No accurate figure exists for the number of skiers who travel to the Alps by train, but the Ski Club of Great Britain's Snowsports Analysis estimates it ranging from 5-8% from 2004-2012, with a growth of around 0.5-1% year-on-year. The new train route via Lyon, which according to Eurostar has sold well, will have added significant numbers. Demand is always high for peak dates: for February half-term 2016, Eurostar Ski Train sold all 700 seats within four hours of going on sale, while tour operator Crystal Ski has seen a big increase in the demand for rail travel this season on non-peak dates. But what's stopping a greater mass migration from plane to train?

Part of the problem for skiers is finding the information they need. Research can be difficult and time-consuming, with essential information only available from disparate sources. If you're the person organising a ski holiday for friends and family, the last thing you want is to make an expensive mistake. Booking an unfamiliar rail journey can be daunting.

The ticketing system is overcomplicated, too. Let's say you want to go from London to the resort of Les Arcs, a short hop from Bourg St Maurice station. You want to travel out on the direct daytime Eurostar Ski Train and return overnight on the couchette sleeper train via Paris, in order to get an extra day's skiing. A fairly straightforward journey to book, you might think. But on many rail company websites, the mere act of selecting the direct Ski Train on the outbound precludes the options of an indirect return. Although the entire journey is bookable, you can't book it as a return journey online — and you aren't informed that viable travel options are not shown.

It's problems like this that rail-booking website Loco2 has set out to solve. "Often, rail company websites only show trains with compatible fares, so viable journeys become absent from search results," says co-founder Kate Andrews. "The perceived lack of options could put travellers off, since it could appear that there are just one or two trains available all day and not at suitable times. This system of compatible fares adds unwelcome complexity to multi-operator journeys, but can be circumvented. Users can try one-way searches to get their desired results and add a via/stopover to find alternatives."

You would've thought that the national train companies would put their heads together and solve these kinds of issues but so far, well, not so good. "Although international travel has huge potential for growth, for each national carrier it still represents a far smaller proportion of their market than domestic rail travel," says Mark Smith, founder of website The Man in Seat Sixty-One, a guide to international rail travel. ►



ALPE D'HUEZ
FRANCE

Ideal for beginners, with its central network of interlacing blue and green runs, Alpe d'Huez is also home to the Sarenne, Europe's longest black piste.



LA PLAGNE
FRANCE

The 11 resort villages vary in character, and many offer ski-in/ski-out accommodation, with dedicated beginner zones at Bellecôte and Plagne 1800.



ST ANTON
AUSTRIA

The rail journey through the Arlberg Valley to St Anton is terrifically scenic. The train station is located in the village itself, which has a car-free centre.



ST GERVAIS
FRANCE

Great for families, steeped in history and home to natural thermal baths. St Gervais shares 264 miles of intermediate pistes with neighbouring Megeve.

Depart London on the 7.19am Eurostar to Lyon, change for a 3.49pm train to Grenoble. Then 55 minutes by bus or taxi.

Depart St Pancras on the 9.45am Eurostar Ski Train to Aime la Plagne (6.30pm). Then it's 35 minutes by bus or taxi.

Depart 6.01pm London to Paris. Stop over for the 7.23am from Paris-Lyon to Zurich, then the 12.40pm to St Anton.

Depart 7.19am via Eurostar from London to Lyon, change for St Gervais, arriving 4.53pm. Then it's 10 minutes by taxi.

"As a result, the train companies don't give it the attention it deserves and don't solve the ticketing issues that prevent more people travelling by train. It's a catch-22 situation."

Heads together

There's another reason for the slow growth of rail in the ski market. Around 60% of ski holidays from the UK are booked with a ski tour operator, according to the 2013-2014 Crystal Industry report, and yet rail companies' trade policies make it difficult for tour operators to create ski packages with rail travel included. By rarely giving tour operators fixed prices on which to base their packages, the train companies create uncertainty and force tour operators to book ad hoc, with little way of accurately predicting what the price will be.

Ski tour operator Peak Retreats, which specialises in high-quality self-catered accommodation in France, has seen a steady growth in demand for rail travel over the past five years. "We're seeing an increasing number of enquiries from skiers looking for rail options, but without a fixed price we can only be relatively reactive," says managing director Xavier Schouller. "Like many tour operators, we'd like to do far more to promote rail as a way to make the journey part of the holiday. If we were able to work in a different way with the train companies, this could help transform the way that skiers travel and enable many more to switch to rail."

New rail options are needed to service the market too, says James Box, head of ski product and commercial analyst at Iglu Ski. "Traditionally, ski holiday departures were on Saturdays, but in recent years many ski tour operators and accommodation providers have moved to Sunday-Sunday schedules to avoid transport congestion on Saturdays. Sunday-Sunday now accounts for about 40% of the market, which would suggest great potential for a new Eurostar Ski Train departure on Sundays, too."

The capacity for many more trains to run on HS1 — the high-speed track between the UK and Europe — certainly exists. "There's huge potential for more trains," says David Briginshaw, editor-in-chief at *International Railway Journal*. "HS1 is not a very busy railway, which is crazy. In a normal world, St Pancras station would have trains departing for destinations such as Lyon, Grenoble, Cologne and Amsterdam — fanning out into Europe — with multiple departures per hour. Plus, barely any services stop at Ashford, which is ridiculous."

"Eurostar is run on the French-network business model, with long trains running infrequently. There's so much more that could be done with the existing infrastructure. But Eurostar has very rigid ideas and an inflexible model that doesn't make use of the facilities as they could or should be. The lack of traffic on the line is very frustrating — and a huge missed opportunity — for skiers and other travellers."

Clearly things need to change in order to enable larger numbers of skiers to switch from air to rail. While it's surely a question of 'when, not if', the sooner things get moving, the sooner more skiers can really start to make their journey to the Alps an integral part of the holiday. □

More info

Loco2: loco2.com

The Man in Seat Sixty-One: seat61.com

Voyages SNCF: uk.voyages-sncf.com

Eurostar: eurostar.com

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Train times correct at time of publishing.