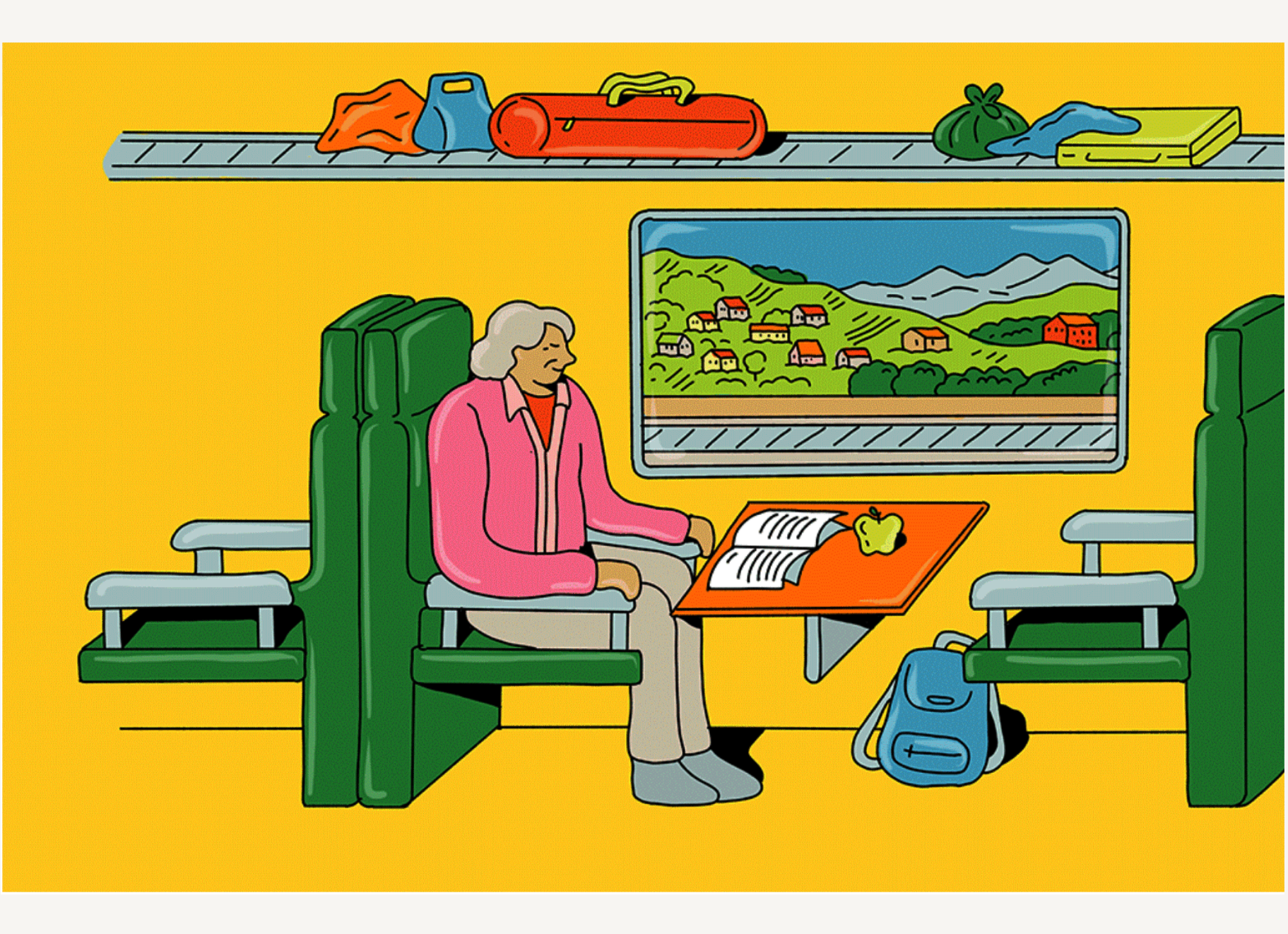
MEMBERS ONLY TRAVEL

25 Great Ways to Travel by Train in Europe



Traveling by train in Europe offers a scenic, convenient, and often stress-free way to explore diverse destinations.
KATHLEEN FU

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Traveling by train in Europe is a scenic and relaxing way to go from city to city and country to country, and to explore lesser-known towns and byways in between. Train travel has plenty of perks: less stress, more comfort, watching the world go by from your seat. You take in panoramic views as the scenery shifts from urban landscapes to rural areas, mountain passes to coastlines.

I've experienced strikes, delays, and even missed a train because I wasn't on the right platform. Despite the misadventures, I opt for rail travel whenever I can, and have taken local, regional, long-distance and high-speed trains in Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, Slovenia, Hungary, Germany, Switzerland, England and Scotland.

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Unlike the airport, there's no need to arrive several hours early before a train departure. Arriving 30 minutes to an hour in advance is usually sufficient. And only a few places require a quick security check, typically for high-speed trains or international travel, such as the Eurostar or departures from a few Spanish train stations, such as Barcelona, Madrid or Zaragoza.

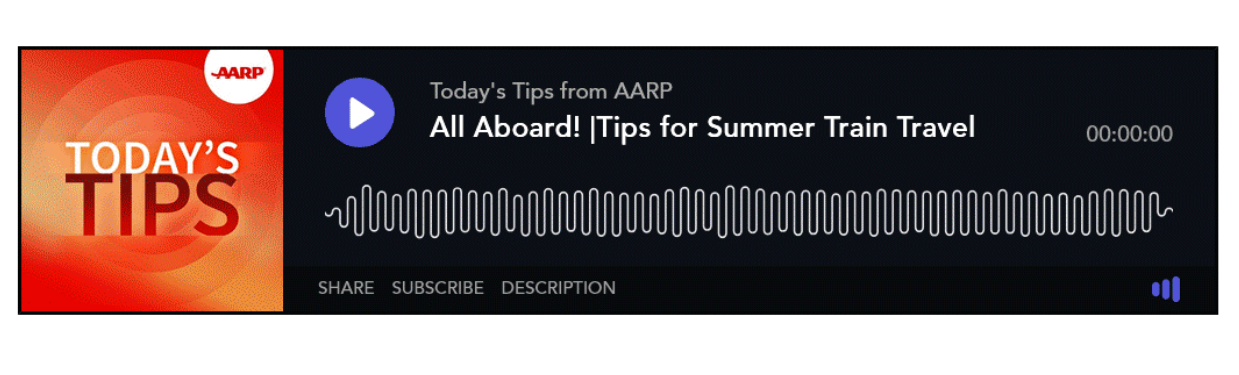
Seventy percent of Americans 50-plus plan to travel this year, and 33 percent of those travelers are either likely or somewhat likely to travel by train, according to AARP's 2025 Travel Trends survey.

Here are 25 tips for taking trains in Europe, based on my personal experience and that of three experts on European train travel.

RESEARCH AND PLANNING

1. Combine slow and fast routes

Hopping on a train isn't only about getting to your destination as quickly as possible; it's about enjoying the scenery, too. "The beauty often lies in the side tracks and in the slower connections," says Bart Giepmans, author and Eurail public relations consultant, who's been taking trains in the Netherlands since the age of 10 when his dad purchased a Dutch rail card. While you can travel from Paris to Barcelona in about six hours, Giepmans recommends considering a not-so-direct route. "If you take a slow train from Perpignan [France] along the coast ... the Mediterranean splashes onto the train windows, and these things you often miss on fast trains."



Giepmans recommends taking fast connections between main cities, then scenic and rural routes to experience the best of Europe. "I personally always like Paris or Munich as a base, and ... [take] local scenic trains to smaller destinations," he says. He was recently in Rome and took a regional train to a relaxing lake made by a volcanic crater. "You discover so much more when you look further than your main destination."

2. Book in advance

Booking in advance will guarantee you a seat and may save you money. If you plan to travel in high season (June, July or August), booking tickets a minimum of six weeks in advance is essential for travel to popular destinations such as Barcelona, Amsterdam, Paris and London, says Giepmans.

And reserving ahead of time not only ensures you have a ticket; you're also likely to save cash. "If you book ahead, especially on longer-distance trains, you can save quite a lot of money," says Jasper Verlaan, a train aficionado and head of global sales at Macs Adventure, which offers self-guided hiking and biking tours. Do your research and start looking at tickets a minimum of six months in advance. Verlaan notes that London to Amsterdam on the Eurostar usually gets a better ticket price when you book in advance. "If you wait till the last minute, you typically just pay more," he says.

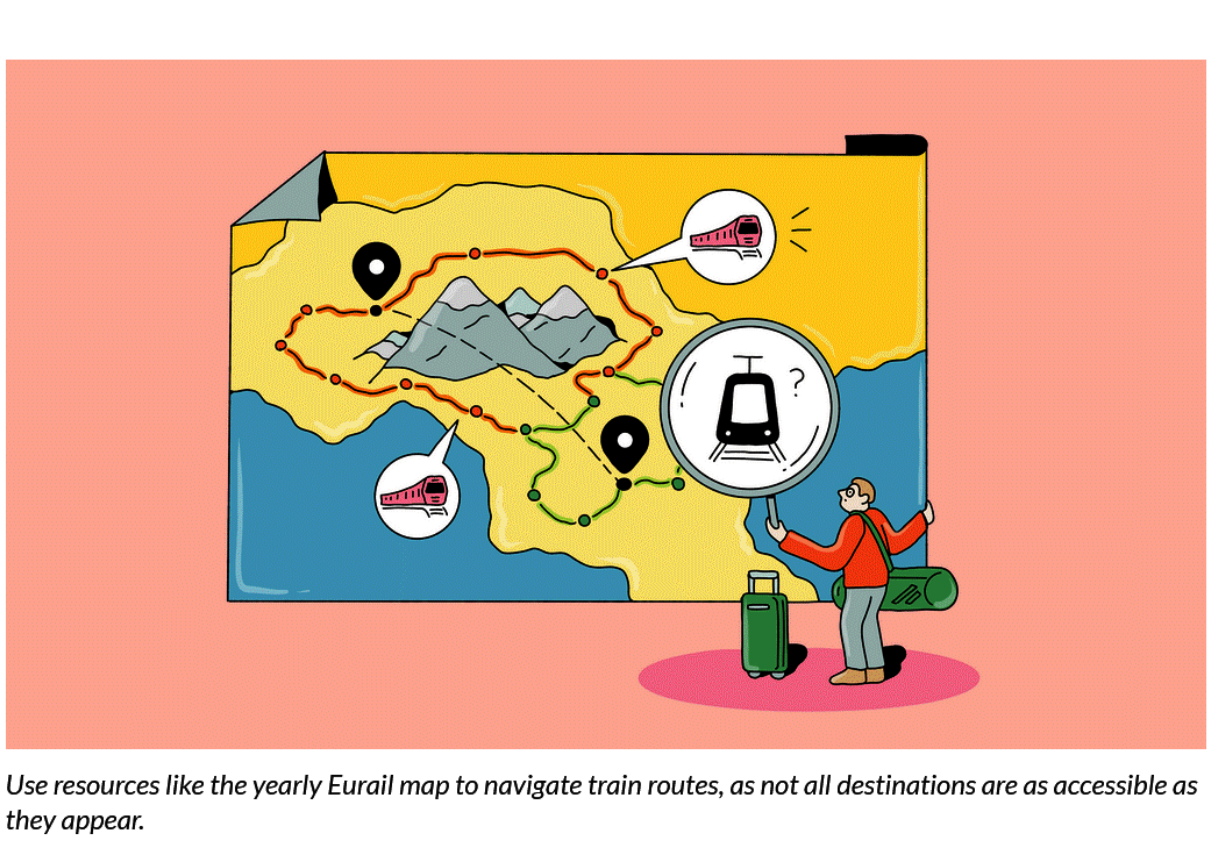
3. Consider a rail pass

If you're planning to travel by rail for several days or even a month or two, a rail pass may be worth it. The Swiss Federal Railway offers a rail pass for three to 15 consecutive days for travel in Switzerland; if you're traveling throughout England, Scotland and Wales, you can purchase a BritRail pass. Consider a Eurail pass if you plan on taking several rail journeys in multiple European countries. A Eurail pass allows for a specific number of travel days in a set time frame, and you can take multiple trains per travel day. High-speed trains often incur additional costs and require a reservation.

Eurail doesn't have its own trains. "It is a corporation of 35 railway and ferry companies. With a Eurail pass, you can ride the trains of the national railway companies," explains Giepmans. It's also worth researching whether a rail pass or individual tickets are better for your travel plans, according to Katie Stewart, senior travel adviser for Ciao Bambino!, which specializes in luxury family travel.

4. Make a seat selection

When you book long-distance trains, you can often choose where to sit. However, it depends on the country and the route. Stewart recommends booking a seat reservation, if it's available, for peace of mind, but notes that choosing your seat may sometimes cost more. On regional or local trains you'll often sit wherever space is available, since seats aren't usually assigned.



Use resources like the yearly Eurail map to navigate train routes, as not all destinations are as accessible as they appear.
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5. Know your rail routes

Planning a European rail journey across different countries can be tricky and hard to navigate. Some countries are better connected by train than others. "If you're doing a multicountry trip ... make sure that those countries really connect thoughtfully by train," Stewart says. Also note that what you see on paper doesn't always tell the whole story. Travelers to northern Italy often also want to visit a destination in Switzerland by rail when they see how close it is on a map, she says. However, going through the Alps may take longer than expected.

This is why Stewart relies on the Eurail map, which is published every year, to see all the train routes and possibilities. Routes are color-coded: Green is high-speed trains; purple is main lines; red is seasonal or other lines. Having a visual tool is helpful for planning, Stewart says. Rail Europe and European Rail Timetable also offer maps; the latter charges a fee.

6. Plan your train and accommodations simultaneously

Research and plan where you'll stay if you're planning a multicity rail journey. "Make sure you understand where the train station is in comparison to your accommodation," advises Stewart. Some cities, such as Paris, have several train stations. If you don't plan your hotel and train tickets simultaneously, you could be outside a city in an area that isn't as safe, she says.

7. Consider first class for more comfortable trains

The most economical tickets are standard fare or second class. Upgrading to first class can be worth the splurge if you want a larger, more comfortable seat and a quieter ride. Stewart often books first-class tickets when she travels by train within Germany (where she lives) because she prefers a quieter train ride, though she acknowledges that first class can be a lot more expensive.

When she books tickets for clients, she checks the time of day they're traveling. If someone is staying at a hotel that includes breakfast and is traveling late in the morning, Stewart won't book a first-class ticket on the Eurostar, because the clients likely won't be hungry when the train meal is served, and it's not worth the extra cost. She factors in where the client is staying, the time of day and whether the amenities are worth the price.

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AT THE STATION

8. For most journeys, arrive at least 30 minutes before train departure

Train stations are easier to navigate than the airport but can still be confusing. Arrive 30 minutes in advance, or more, to give yourself time to reach the platform. "I usually arrive at least half an hour in advance," Giepmans says. "Sometimes you have to walk 10 to 15 minutes to the right platform, or you have a last-minute platform change." For example, taking the train from Copenhagen to Stockholm requires crossing an entire platform and going outside, and Giepmans says it's complicated.

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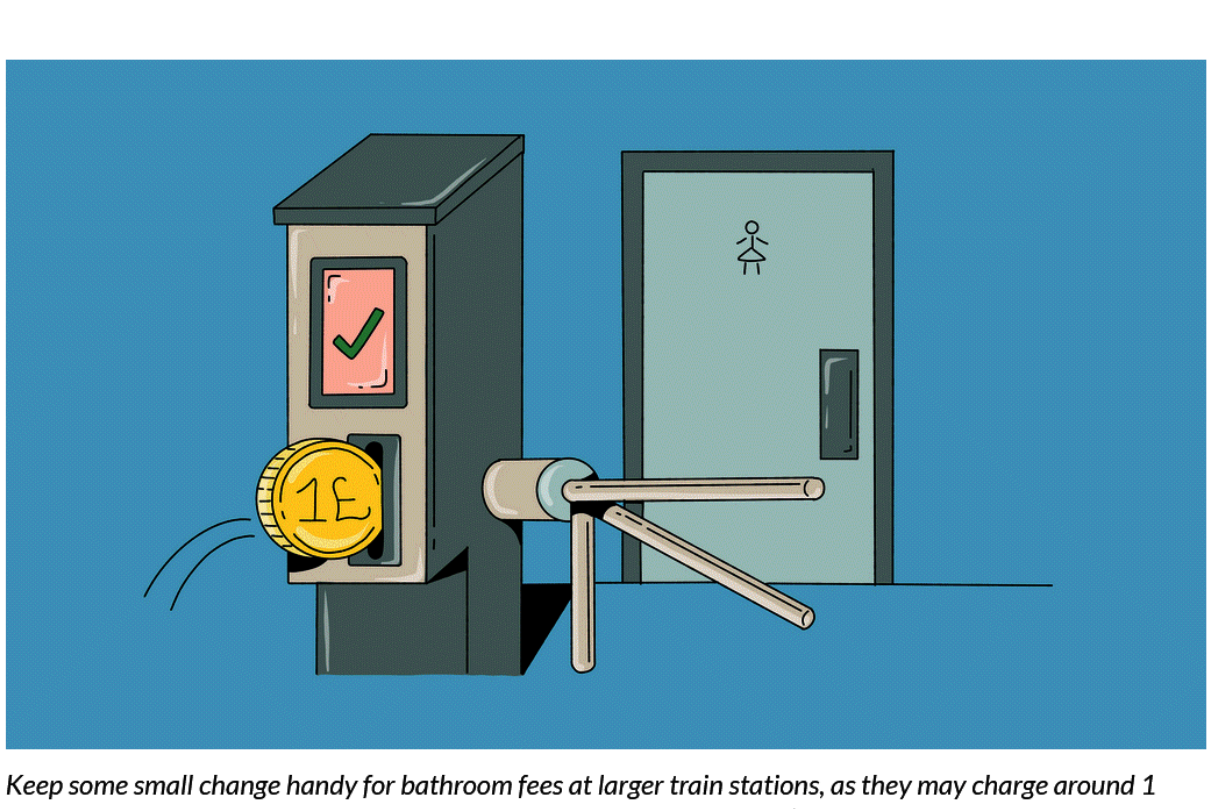
And don't expect to hear any changes over the loudspeaker, or receive a text message that the platform has changed, Stewart adds. Eurostar trains require arriving a minimum of 45 to 90 minutes before train departure, depending on your route and ticket class, according to its website. For smaller stations with a couple of platforms, I might arrive 15 minutes before departure instead of 30 minutes or more.

9. Download train apps

Many train operators have an app that provides helpful, up-to-date information. "I always recommend downloading the local train operator app so you can check ... before you head [to the station] if the train is on time," Verlaan says. On a recent trip to Germany, he downloaded the Deutsche Bahn app and checked for delays before leaving his hotel.

Another benefit of using an app is receiving updates on when the train is coming, says Stewart. Some apps will even tell you where you need to be on the platform. She recommends downloading the train app in each country you're traveling in, even if it's cumbersome.



Keep some small change handy for bathroom fees at larger train stations, as they may charge around 1 euro or 1 pound to use the facilities, though smaller stations often don't.
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10. Have small coins for bathrooms

Most train stations have bathrooms, and in bigger stations you may be charged a nominal fee to enter one. Having small change in local currency is helpful, as some will charge around 1 euro (approximately $1.17) or 1 pound (approximately $1.36). You either pay an attendant or put in a coin to open a gate or turnstile, according to Verlaan. I've found that in smaller stations, bathrooms don't incur a charge.

11. Some stations have security screenings

Most train travel doesn't require security screenings like airports do. However, in some Spanish train stations, such as Sants in Barcelona, you have to put all your bags through security before heading to the train platforms. The line moves quickly; I've always passed through in less than 10 minutes in Barcelona. If you take the Eurostar, whether it's from London to Paris or Brussels to London, you'll go through security, says Giepmans, adding that for most trains "you can just board without any hassle, which is still a very big advantage, of course, over flying."

12. Bring drinks and snacks

I always pack drinks and snacks such as fruit, carrot sticks and hummus for journeys longer than two hours. If I'm traveling during a mealtime, I'll bring a sandwich or salad, too, or pick something up near or at the train station. Though many trains have a snack car, I don't like to rely on it. Sometimes a snack car may not have items available or may not be open, says Giepmans, adding that he always brings water and "would never leave without a small backpack of snacks." Most train stations have places to purchase food, but if you go to smaller stations you may have fewer options, according to Verlaan.

Long-distance and high-speed trains typically have a snack car so you can enjoy a cold or hot beverage such as coffee or tea, and purchase snacks, premade sandwiches or salads. "If you order a beer on a German train, you get a freshly poured beer ... in a real beer glass," Giepmans says, adding that some trains have a dining car and people are often surprised they can have meals with real cutlery and plates.

13. Travel light

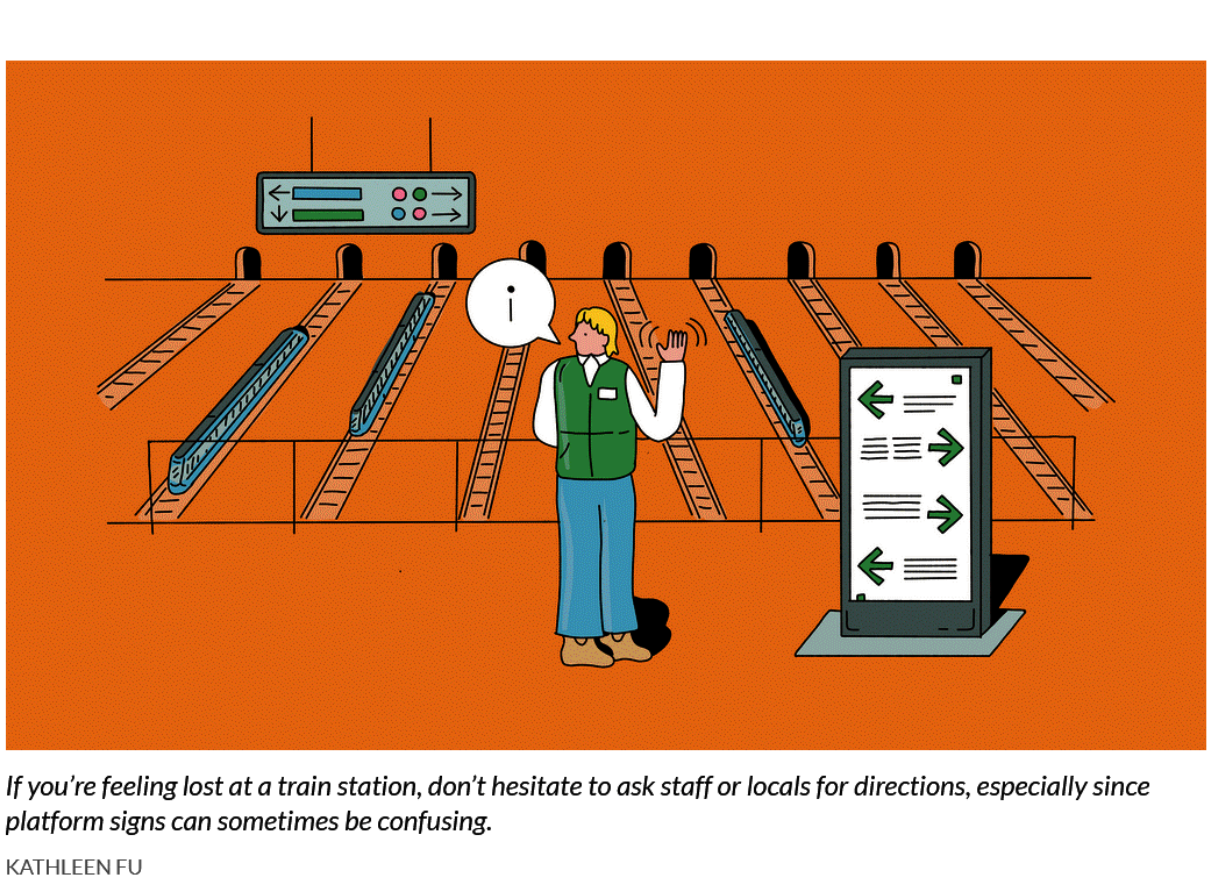
Packing light is key to an enjoyable rail journey experience. Be prepared to carry everything through the station and onto and off the trains. Oftentimes there are no escalators or elevators to the platform — or they're broken — so you have to haul your luggage up and down the stairs and onto the trains. "I travel with a backpack that also fits in the plane," says Giepmans. "It's better to take less, and every now and then do some laundry somewhere." For a pleasant experience, you'll want to be able to comfortably lift your bags, and sometimes you'll have to store them in the overhead racks above the seats.

I always make sure I can easily lift my bags, as I've had to lug a carry-on suitcase and backpack up and down stairs in numerous train stations. It's a workout, and you might feel sore after a lot of lifting. "Do not pack heavy, big suitcases," Verlaan urges.

14. Find your train number

Check your ticket for your train number. Train stations will often post the destination and the train number on a screen, but may not list all the stops. Smaller destinations are often not mentioned, Giepmans says.

In my experience, knowing the train's final destination and number reduces anxiety and stress when I'm figuring out the platform and where I need to go. I once missed a train because I couldn't figure out which platform the train was arriving on. I ran up and down the escalators to different platforms. Now, if I'm not sure where to go or want to confirm for peace of mind, I'll ask a train station attendant.



If you're feeling lost at a train station, don't hesitate to ask staff or locals for directions, especially since platform signs can sometimes be confusing.
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15. Ask for help

Ask staff or fellow passengers in the station if you're unsure how to navigate the train station or where to go to reach your platform. "Most train stations have people who can help you," Verlaan says. "Even if there's no staff around, there's always local people who are willing to point [you] in the right direction."

Sometimes where you need to go isn't obvious. In Italy, the sign posted on the platform shows where the train is coming from but not the direction it's going in, and it can be easy to get on the wrong train, explains Verlaan. "So it's always good to double-check and ask somebody on the platform: 'Is this the right train? Is this where it's going?'"

16. Know your coach number

Once you're on the train platform, you may need to walk five to 10 minutes to reach your train car. Knowing the coach number gives an idea of where you need to stand on the platform to board the train. Some trains can be 10 to 15 carriages long, so having a sense of where it will stop minimizes having to rush last-minute to board with all your luggage. Some stations have screens showing where your coach will stop so you know exactly where to stand when the train arrives to board, says Stewart.

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17. Be prepared for minimal to no luggage space

People are often surprised that passengers are already on the train when they board, and the luggage racks are already full, says Stewart. Be mentally prepared that there may not be space for your big suitcases.

I've boarded busy trains where the suitcase racks were full and the only available space was the narrow rack above the seats, which only fits a backpack or carry-on-sized suitcase.

ALL ABOARD

18. Bring activities

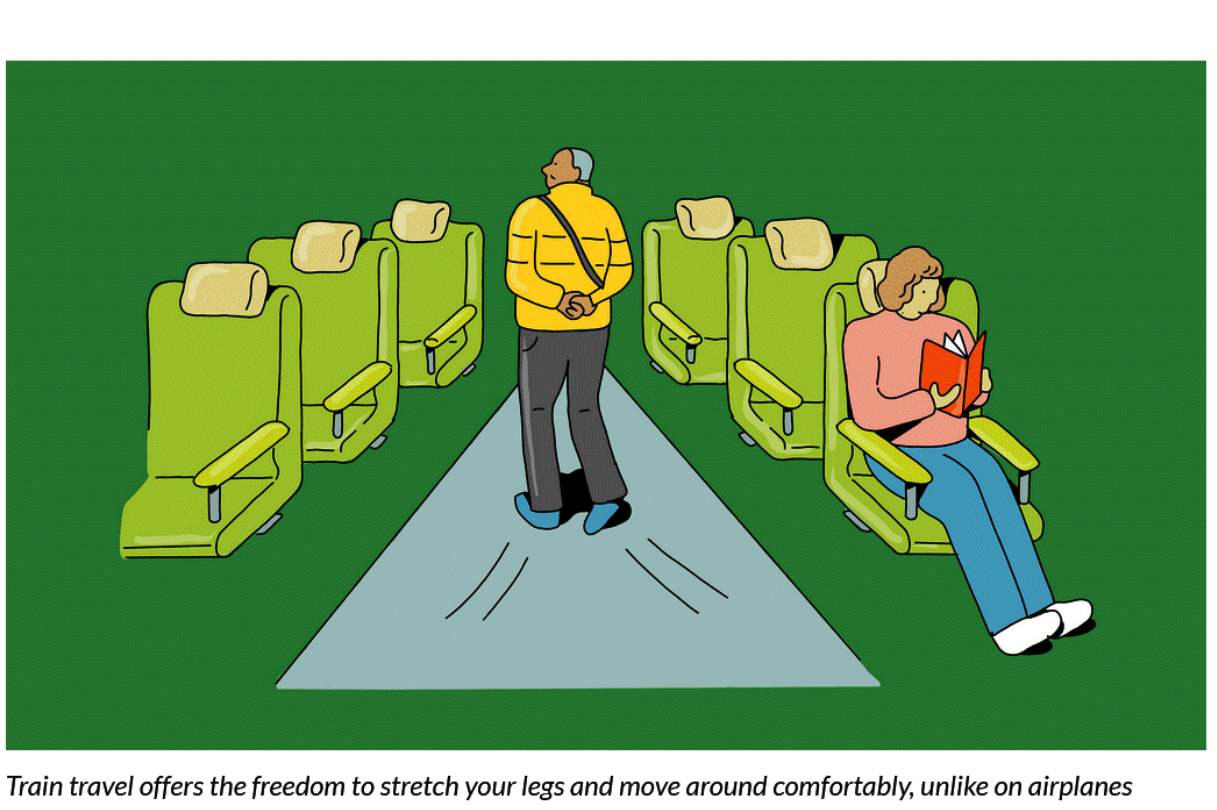
For longer journeys, having some activities on hand can be a fun way to pass the time. I usually pack a tote bag with my journal and a pen, a book and a few podcasts downloaded on my phone. (Note, however, that Wi-Fi can be spotty even when it's available onboard.) But most of the time I end up staring out the window and relaxing. I also have my phone and laptop chargers easily accessible, since most trains have outlets. Just make sure to pack an adapter for the countries you're visiting.

Giepmans packs a book and likes to listen to classical music. For him, rail travel is relaxing and almost meditative. Verlaan loves seeing the landscape, the little towns and the unexpected views.

19. Most train stations are central

European train stations are usually in the city center. "The nice thing about train-traveling in Europe is you depart and arrive right in the heart of cities," Verlaan says, adding that there's more flexibility and no need to rely on taxis or buses to get into the center of town as you do when you fly.

If you have a stopover or several hours before your next journey, walk around and see some of the sights. When I have a connection in less than an hour, I'll go outside the station to get some fresh air.



Train travel offers the freedom to stretch your legs and move around comfortably, unlike on airplanes where you have to wait for the seat belt sign to be turned off.
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20. Stretch your legs

Another advantage of train travel is that you can get up, walk around and move from car to car. "It's easy to walk around a little bit and stretch your legs," Verlaan says. At 6-foot-4, he says train travel is more comfortable compared to planes.

I love the freedom to walk around when I want, whether it's to go to the bathroom, head to the snack car or walk from car to car to move my legs, without having to wait for the seat belt sign to be turned off, as we do on an airplane.

21. Set an alarm if you take naps

The hum of a train can lull you to sleep, especially if you're someone who easily snoozes in a moving vehicle. Check your ticket to get an idea of the time you're due to arrive. Stewart recommends setting an alarm so you don't miss your stop. "I have had clients who have overslept or slept through one of their stops more than a few times," she says. Missing your stop can be expensive, time-consuming and difficult if there may not be another train coming for a while.

22. Know when to deboard

Knowing the name and stop of your final destination may seem obvious. But some cities, such as Munich and Venice, have multiple stops with similar names, making it confusing if you're not paying attention. "So many people get off at the wrong stop in Venice," Stewart says. You can't assume that the first stop is where you need to get off, even if it reads "Venice." So know the time your train is scheduled to reach your stop.

23. Be ready to get off

Unless your train stop is at the end of the line, be prepared to get off quickly. Begin gathering your personal belongings and luggage five to 10 minutes before reaching your destination. "You may only have 30 to 60 seconds, maybe two minutes, to retrieve your luggage and exit the train before it leaves," Stewart says.

On some trains you'll have to press a button for the door to open. I was visiting a friend in southern Spain and couldn't tell if I'd arrived at the station because it was dark outside and stops weren't announced. I kept waiting for the doors to open. Luckily the train conductor knew there was a passenger (me) who had to deboard (it was a local train stopping in small towns and only goes once a day), so it didn't continue until I got off.

24. Be self-aware at the station

Arriving at your destination is exciting, but you need to figure out how to reach your accommodations or where you're headed next. Stay aware of your surroundings. Do your best not to stand out too

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25. Anticipate delays when connecting

Train delays happen, so allow extra time for connections, especially if you're heading to an airport. Sometimes there are strikes or other events that delay the train, says Verlaan, adding that some networks are more reliable than others. Stewart says the train from Stuttgart to Frankfurt airport is around an hour and 20 minutes, but Germany is renovating many of its train lines, so it can now take up to three hours with train transfers. I've had stressful experiences taking a train to the Barcelona airport because the train kept stopping without any explanation. Luckily I had allotted an hour and a half for the hourlong journey.

Lauren David is a contributing writer who writes about travel food, gardening and health. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post, National Geographic, Sierra, Martha Stewart, Southern Living *and other outlets.*