

OVERSEAS

France by train: where to buy a bolt hole near a rail station

All aboard for Paris, Provence — and beyond. Prices start at €296,000



A Eurostar train and a field of sunflowers in Provence

Cathy Hawker | Sunday May 15 2022, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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Whoever said “It’s not the destination that matters, it’s the journey” had clearly never faced a spirit-crushing summer Saturday at Gatwick airport. The glamour of air travel had unquestionably departed long before Covid added a further cycle of hell. Liquids confiscated, baffling hand luggage rules: air travellers today face a baffling range of rules before they’ve even taken off.

How much better to travel by train, with wide windows to max out the view, more space, less waiting around and even the possibility of old-school glamour. Trains are the civilised alternative to flying, says Mark Smith, the man behind the award-winning rail website the Man in Seat 61.

“The pandemic aside, I’ve seen a lot more interest in train travel as flying becomes more stressful and awareness of climate change grows,” Smith says. “Once people try it trains become their preferred mode of travel and only an emergency or lack of cheap tickets sees them choose to fly.”

The French mountains, coast and countryside are ideal places to discover the joys of train travel. “If you don’t mind changing stations in Paris you can go pretty much anywhere,” Smith says. “My favourite strategy for changing in Paris is to allow at least two hours, not the minimum one, and enjoy lunch in a favourite restaurant, perhaps the Train Bleu inside Gare de Lyon.”

He adds: “Changing at Lille is easier than crossing Paris, though onward connections are less frequent and there are fewer cheap ticket options. Direct TGVs [high-speed trains] link Lille with Lyons, Bordeaux, Avignon, Aix-en-Provence, Marseilles, Nimes and Montpellier. And don’t forget the night train option, Intercités de Nuit, linking Paris with Toulouse, Lourdes, Tarbes, Toulon, Cannes, Nice and Briançon.”



Two and three-bedroom houses at Domaine & Demeure's three wine estates start from €455,000, at Château St Pierre de Serjac, north of Béziers

Languedoc

Fastest train times from Paris: Béziers, 4hr 8min; Narbonne, 4hr 25min

The wine-producing region of Languedoc offers a less neat option to the south of France. Trains stop at Montpellier on the way to Béziers and Narbonne and are an increasingly popular option for owners and guests at the three wine estates, with hotels and rental villas operated by Domaine & Demeure.

“Our Château Capitoul property is eight minutes from Narbonne station,” says Darren Kennedy, director of marketing at Domaine & Demeure. “Some guests hire a car there, or the environmentally friendly option is to hire an electric Fiat 100 through the tourist office at Gruissan. Over the past few years we’ve seen more guests opt for the train, with the additional advantage of an opportunity to stop over in Paris or Montpellier. The high-speed line is open to Barcelona, with more improvements planned, including a TGV station on the outskirts of Béziers.”

Kennedy’s wife, Emma, 50, plans and runs up to 17 weddings at the châteaux. Despite living in France for 25 years, she only started using the train last year when her parents’ ill-health meant she was frequently travelling between the UK and France.

“It was a stressful and angst-ridden year; my mum sadly passed away in November and as I really fear flying, opting to take the Eurostar from St Pancreas to Béziers, 20 minutes from home, seemed a good option,” she says. “On one journey I booked a first-class ticket, which was totally worth it. Dig around on the website to find a good deal and book a seat on the top level, facing forward for maximum viewing potential. From Lyons onwards you can see the Alps and past Valence you feel the light change and start to really head south and, for me, home.”

Need to know

- For regular travellers a €49 Carte Avantage, the French railway company SNCF's discount card for leisure travel, can't be used on Eurostar but soon pays for itself on French trains; seat61.com
- Club Eurostar is a loyalty scheme for frequent travellers. Sign up to Eurostar's newsletter for all the latest sale information; eurostar.com
- Ouigo is a no-frills service operating low-cost high-speed trains on key French routes, with fares from €10; ouigo.com
- In April this year the French government introduced a law banning all short-haul flights where a train or bus journey of less than two and a half hours exists, affecting flights from Paris to Bordeaux and Lyons
- Dogs are permitted on the TGV but not on Eurostar (unless they are guide or assistance dogs)

The Man in Seat 61's three favourite rail journeys

I'm a huge fan of the line from Toulon to Nice along the Côte d'Azur, seen from the upper deck of a Paris to Nice TGV or after waking on the recently reinstated Paris to Nice sleeper. Rocky headlands, millionaires' villas, yachts out on the bay: it's all there.

Or the westward Mediterranean line from Nîmes to Perpignan, passing Béziers cathedral, across the *étangs* around Narbonne with flamingos feeding in the shallows either side of the train, and then right past the 15th-century Catalan Fort de Salses.

The local line from Toulouse to Latour-de-Carol on the Spanish border in the Pyrénées. The first part is over the plains, with the Pyrénées getting ever closer before the climb starts, passing the former Cathar castle Château de Foix.

Mark Smith, seat61.com

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