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Fast track to Europe

Six high-speed rail holidays you could do in a week, from Lake Geneva's vineyards to beach-hopping in Sicily
By Nicky Gardner



Rail holidays are becoming more popular. The number of people taking flight-free trips with travel firm Byway grew by 66 per cent in 2024, while Italian tour operator Citalia's rail holiday bookings increased by 405 per cent in the year to February 2025.

The trend is underpinned by the renaissance of sleeper trains, demand for transport with a lower carbon cost and the growth of fast services. Europe's high-speed rail network – designed for speeds of 250km per hour – grew by 47 per cent between 2013 and 2023.

Among the recent additions is a direct InterCity Express train that links Paris and Berlin in less than eight hours, a new high-speed daytime link from Amsterdam to Stuttgart and Munich, and the resumption of the high-speed services between Paris and Milan, and Paris and Turin after a two-year hiatus to the route following a landslide.

There is, of course, an extra hurdle for no-fly holidays to Europe when beginning in the UK, where Eurostar has the cross-Channel monopoly. But at least three operators are vying to rival the incumbent, teasing the idea of direct services to destinations as far flung as Geneva, Milan and Zurich.

Those launches may be years in the making. Yet travelling between

European destinations by rail is already faster than you might expect. For those who fancy a no-fly break that goes beyond Eurostar hubs, we've found six options that include at least one other high-speed service. Each trip below could feasibly be completed in a week, including return travel from the UK and time to enjoy the destinations.

Vineyards and markets, Lake Geneva, Switzerland

With just one change of train in Paris,

Enjoy café culture in Strasbourg's Petite France (above) or take in stunning scenery from the Arlberg Railway in the Austrian Alps

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it is easy to speed to the shores of Lake Geneva in a day. Lyria (the Franco-Swiss high-speed rail operator) has trains from Paris direct to the Olympic city of Lausanne, which is a fine base, but take our tip and make for one of the secluded villages in the Lavaux vineyards. These communities nudge up to the eastern boundary of Lausanne.

A favourite is Grandvaux (10 minutes from Lausanne on the S-Bahn). Three-star hotel Auberge de la Gare is right by the station with doubles from SFr215

(£195) per night. Its Michelin-listed restaurant includes a terrace that looks out to Lake Geneva. Expect simple, well-made dishes such as perch with French fries. This base in the Unesco-listed Lavaux vineyards is ideal for following marked trails through the terraces.

The hotel offers free passes for use on public transport in the area, allowing day trips to Lausanne and Montreux. Wednesday and Saturdays bring the town centre market to Lausanne, which has more than 100 stalls stocked with produce from the area. They include cheese-on-wheels outfit Les Petit Fromagères, selling more than 80 varieties, and freshly baked bread or pain au chocolat from Cave à Levain.

Montreux's attractions include a two-week jazz festival in July, a cog railway that offers views of the Swiss and French alps (£35pp) and nearby turreted Château Chillon, dating to the 12th century. Lord Byron's visit to the castle in 1816 inspired his poem "The Prisoner of Chillon".

Town and country, Aix-en-Provence, France

The southern city of Aix-en-Provence, where market squares crowded by tall, ochre buildings fan out to chic shopping streets, is a convenient base from which to see the region's lavender

