


Ticket to ride

A rail journey could offer nervous clients an attractive alternative to flying and make them rethink that post-Covid trip, says **Ben Lerwill**



In Switzerland, it pays not to rush. I'm nosing through the south of the country in a smart red train, travelling at the speed of something stuck behind a tractor. This is a good thing. Alpine peaks and valleys are sliding past in slow-motion, their proportions almost laughably gigantic.

Here an icy-blue river frothing through a forest scene straight from *Heidi*, there a green mountainside that seems to stretch up to heaven itself. It's hard, in all honesty, to find viable adjectives to describe the view. For now, let's just stick with Swiss.

The *Glacier Express* is one of Europe's greatest rail journeys. On its seven-and-a-half-hour trundle between St Moritz and Zermatt, it passes through 91 tunnels, crosses 291 bridges, and leaves you staring in every direction at once. At breakfast,

I'm having a coffee near the station in St Moritz and feeling the morning sun on my face. By early evening, having spent the day being fed and watered in a plush window seat, I'm outside staring up at the pyramidal perfection of the Matterhorn and savouring the high-altitude chill.

Slow and steady

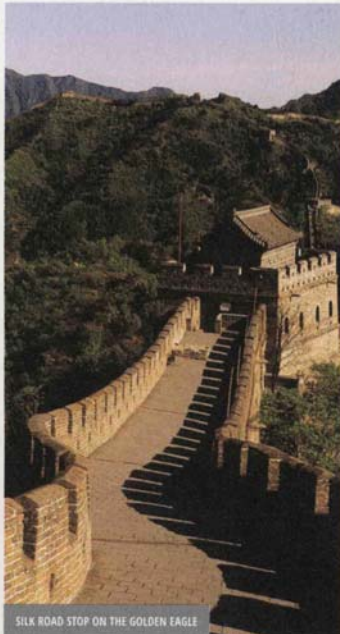
I'm far from the first to enjoy this spectacular A-to-B through the country's mighty mountainscapes. It's now more than nine decades since the *Glacier Express*' inaugural journey in 1930, but as Covid restrictions hopefully continue to loosen, it's the sort of travel experience that looks set to gain fresh popularity.

Numerous headlines have suggested the pandemic could accelerate a shift of passengers from air to rail. Indeed, ▶

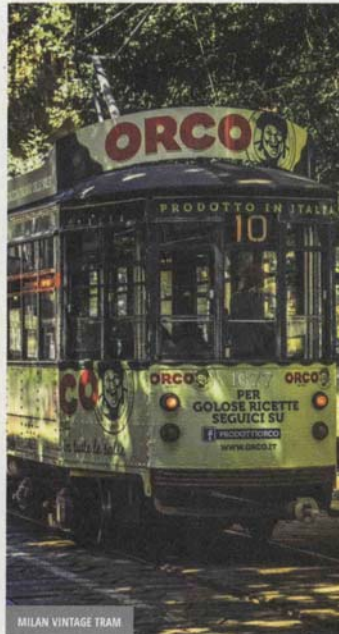
THE GLACIER EXPRESS PASSING THROUGH OBERALPPASS

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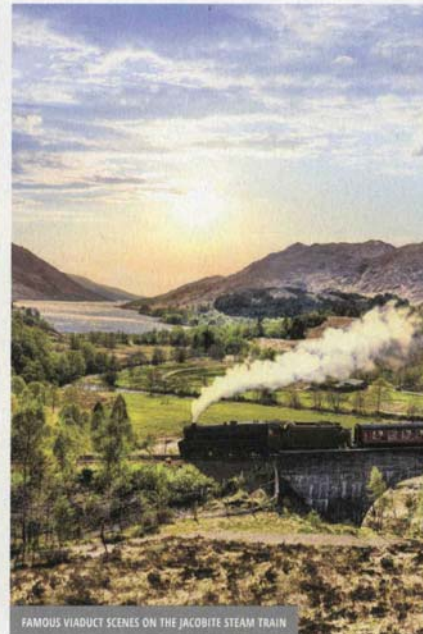




SILK ROAD STOP ON THE GOLDEN EAGLE



MILAN VINTAGE TRAM



FAMOUS VIADUCT SCENES ON THE JACOBITE STEAM TRAIN

► investment firm UBS estimates that there will be 800 more high-speed trains operating in Europe within a decade.

Tourist-focused rail itineraries will hold appeal not only in terms of slow travel and sustainability, but also because they make it relatively easy to stay socially distanced while enjoying good food, shifting views and the all-important escapism that travel brings. And many such holidays, of course, have the added benefit of embarkation here in the UK.

Julian Appleyard, Commercial Director at Great Rail Journeys, says some travellers are definitely showing "airport apathy" and seeking out flight-free holidays.

"Rail journeys typically offer more space, fewer travellers and the distance between you and other passengers is greater, allowing people to remain as socially distanced as possible," he says.

"It also offers a relaxing, stress-free way to explore the world, providing views and landscapes simply not possible by air."

These points are echoed by Simon Hodge, Founder and Managing Director at Tailor Made Rail, who makes a further observation: "For peace of mind, all UK and other European operators use rigorous safety protocols, including regular disinfecting of touch points on trains and social distancing," he explains.

It's worth pointing out, too, that rail-centred holidays can often incorporate any number of other traditional travel elements, from city tours and hotel breaks to off-train excursions, and can even combine river cruises.

Predicting how our long-term travel habits might have been altered by the events of the past 12 months is a tricky business. However, it seems likely that rail holidays – which chime with the more reflective, unrushed type of travel that could become more prominent – are on track for success.

What's new?

Tour operators: 2021 is being officially marketed as the European Year of Rail and Great Rail Journeys has tapped into the occasion by launching four new continental tours, including one which combines a trip on the *Glacier Express* with a cruise along the River Danube.

Another rail specialist, Ffestiniog Travel, recently released its 2022 tour programme, with 23 tours already confirmed. They include a new 'Trams & Trains' itinerary in Italy, and a new tour in New Zealand.

Railbookers will imminently be launching new e-brochures for the UK market, with three additional titles in response to

demand: *Luxury Rail Journeys*, *UK Holidays and Cruise Extensions*. The company has also launched a 'Pick Your Perk' campaign to encourage upgrades.

Over in North America, Rocky Mountaineer is broadening its scope by adding a new luxury rail trip in the southwest US. Beginning in August, the 'Rockies to the Red Rocks' route will be a two-day trip across Colorado and Utah.

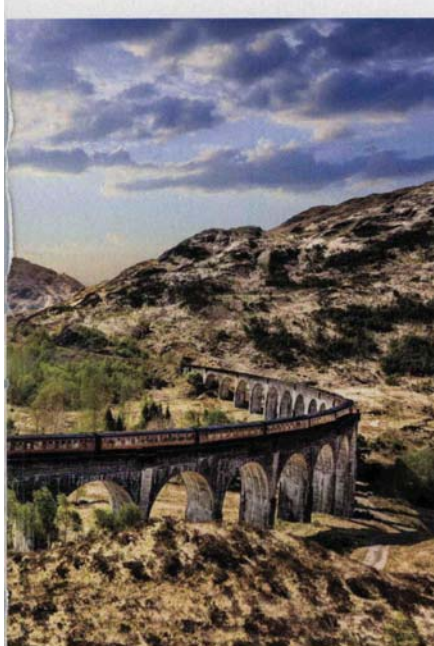
In Russia, Golden Eagle Luxury Trains is bringing in four new tours for 2022, with two operated by steam. This summer the company will be celebrating its 250th Trans-Siberian departure.

In July 2022, Rovos Rail will introduce a 15-day expedition traversing Zimbabwe, Zambia, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Angola. The journey incorporates a three-day safari.

Where to book it

 **GREAT RAIL JOURNEYS**
01904 527180

Lakes and Mountains of Switzerland & Italy, a new-for-2021 tour, combines a journey on the *Bernina Express* with a train through Lake Geneva's UNESCO-listed vineyards, as well as a scenic boat trip. The 12-day holiday is priced from £2,895pp, based on a departure in June. greatrail.com



“Rail journeys typically offer more space, fewer travellers and the distance between you and other passengers is greater, allowing people to remain as socially distanced as possible”



THE ROCKY MOUNTAINEER, CANADA



RAIL TRIPS TO REMEMBER



THE WINDING SHORES OF LAKE BAIKAL ON THE TRANS SIBERIAN EXPRESS



Venice-Simplon Orient Express:

The *grande dame* of luxury rail travel still has serious cachet. With a wide range of European journeys planned for 2021 and 2022, it makes a fine option for clients looking to celebrate a special occasion. The London-Venice route is the classic choice, but there are numerous alternatives, including the new Venice Simplon-Orient-Express Grand Tour routes cross Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, and The Netherlands.



Jacobite Steam Train:

Travelling along the most scenic stretch of Scotland's glorious West Highland Line – and crossing the Harry Potter viaduct – the Jacobite Steam Train can be a heavenly ride on a fine day. Journey times between Fort William and the fishing port of Mallaig are around two hours each way, so it's best seen as a day out rather than a holiday in itself.



California Zephyr:

This deeply enjoyable three-day jaunt across the U.S. will take clients from Chicago right across to the outskirts of San Francisco, crossing some of the country's most impressive landscapes along the way. Utah, Nevada and California all pass by. It's not a luxury

service, but it has an observation car, onboard dining and sleeper cabins.



Bernina Express:

Vying with the *Glacier Express* for the title of the Alps' greatest train journey, the *Bernina Express* runs between the Swiss towns of Chur and Lugano, culminating close to the Italian border. The journey takes around four hours and panoramic cars allow for unrestricted mountain views from the highest railway in the Alps.



Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian Express:

To most minds, this epic crossing of Siberia is the greatest train journey on the planet, stretching more than 9,000km from Moscow to Vladivostok. There are cheaper options out there, but the fully escorted private rail tours offered by Golden Eagle pride themselves on first-class service.



The Indian-Pacific:

Australia is a big, big country, and this upmarket train highlights the fact. Named for the two oceans that bookend the route, the *Indian Pacific* travels from Perth on the west coast to Sydney on the east. Clients can expect three nights on board and some memorable off-train excursions, including a stop off in Adelaide, South Australia.