

The world's greatest train journeys...

Slow travel, social distancing and an appetite for once-in-a-lifetime trips could see a golden age of train travel return as the we emerge from Covid, writes *Jillian Bolger*

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There's something utterly romantic about rail travel — boarding a train, sitting back, comfortably, as you glide through the countryside almost immune to the vagaries of weather or traffic. There's something reassuringly reliable about it, too — the rhythm of tracks laid by hand decades earlier, often in hostile terrain, yet as solid today as when they were first placed. The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express set the standard in glamour, but there are many more luxury journeys around the world, as well as short, spectacular trips. So is it a surprise that some tip train journeys for a resurgence after the pandemic?

"As lockdowns around Europe are eased, rail use will steadily increase," predicts Andy Brabin (@AndyBTravels), a trip designer and travel adviser at DiscoverByRail. He has travelled by train in 75 countries and believes that rail travel may be ripe for another golden era. "Train operators and governments are actively looking to ensure that it is perceived as a safe way to travel, which, in my experience, it already is."

With more personal space than planes, and the freedom to move around, he argues that social distancing is far easier. "Compulsory reservations with restricted seat sales help too, while digital innovation allows travellers to see how busy a train is and make informed choices."

From €3 escapes to 22-day adventures, here's our selection of memorable and magical journeys by train.

1 GOLDEN EAGLE TRANS-SIBERIAN STEAM EXPRESS IV, RUSSIA

The Trans-Siberian is one of the world's most celebrated train routes, and in 2022, you can experience it aboard the luxurious Golden Eagle Trans-Siberian Express on a spectacular 22-day steam tour. Hauled by 20 different steam locomotives, from Vladivostok in the east to Moscow, this unique hotel-on-wheels will pass through eight different time zones while crossing 10,000km of mountains, lakes and steppes. Glide through Siberian winter landscapes while cocooned in five-star comfort, with exquisite interiors, fine dining, a personal cabin attendant and private en-suite cabin all part of the deal. A comprehensive Covid plan includes social-bubble systems, revised dining options and a doctor on board.

Details: From £14,495pp (€16,848) all-inclusive, including 17 nights on board in Heritage Class (shared facilities), and four nights in hotels. [goldeneagleluxurytrains.com](#)

2 THE BERNINA EXPRESS FROM CHUR TO TIRANO, SWITZERLAND & ITALY

The most spectacular way to cross the Alps, the Bernina Express, linking Switzerland to Italy, will take your breath away. Andy Brabin singles it out as his favourite route. "I've travelled this line so many times at different times of year and it is still my number-one ride. 'Express' is somewhat ironic, as it takes just over four hours to cover 150km — slow travel at its best!" The gentle pace sees the train climb past Alpine glaciers before descending to Tirano in Italy. Negotiating 55 tunnels and 196 bridges, panoramic carriages allow for impressive views. Masks, cashless payments and new cleaning regimes are all part of the Covid-19 protection.

Details: From CHF79 (€72) one-way; [rhh.ch](#)

3 THE PRIDE OF AFRICA, FROM CAPE TOWN TO PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA

This three-day trip offers a mesmerising introduction to South Africa, taking guests across 1,600km while billeted in extreme comfort. You'll glide through the wine-lands, across the remote Great Karoo and windswept grasslands of the Highveld on what is billed as the world's most luxurious train. Stops include a frozen-in-time Victorian village and Kimberley's Diamond Mine Museum. Opulent wood-panelled suites, first-class service and exceptional cuisine set the scene with an open-air balcony to connect you to nature. An impressive Covid-19 policy includes luggage sanitation, staggered mealtimes and 24-hour room service, too.

Details: From €1,502pp. Trips from 2-14 days; [rovos.com](#)

4 EUROPE'S LAST FORESTRY RAILWAY, ROMANIA

Fewer tourists, incredible scenery and wide open spaces are some of the reasons to put a Romanian holiday at the top of your list. Ffestiniog Travel specialises in escorted rail holidays, and its 'Rural Romania' trip includes three steam train journeys through remote and beautiful countryside. Guests will enjoy Saxon villages and a medi-



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eval fortress along the way, before travelling alongside the Vaser River following 60km of narrow-gauge track to a wild valley, high in the Carpathian Mountains. Pulled by a wood-burning locomotive, Europe's last remaining forestry railway, built in 1932, gives access to this under-explored beauty spot. A comprehensive Covid-19 strategy has been put in place.

Details: Flights and rail trip, all-inclusive, from £2,520pp (€2,933); [ffestiniogtravel.com](#)

5 ROCKY MOUNTAINEER, ROCKIES TO THE RED ROCKS, USA

Synonymous with Canada, the Rocky Mountaineer is winding its way to Colorado from August 2021, on its first route through the USA. The handsome train is known for its glass-domed coaches, which allow for exceptional viewing (splurge on GoldLeaf and you get a glass roof too, separate dining car and viewing platform). Unlike other luxury trains, there are no sleepers here: trains only travel in daylight with guests overnighting in luxury hotels along the way. Knowledgeable hosts and quality cuisine seal the deal on this new two-day rail journey between Denver, Colorado, and Moab, Utah, which includes overnighting in Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Enhanced booking flexibility, pre-travel screening and air filtration systems are all part of the Covid-19 policies.

Details: \$1,250pp (approximately £1,040pp); [rockymountaineer.com](#)

6 36+3, KYUSHU, JAPAN

When it comes to impressive rail experiences, Japan has form. The recently launched 36+3 luxury sight-seeing train at Kyushu — '36' refers to the 36th largest island in the world, with '3' representing the railway company — is a sleek, black, electric train that's been beautifully renovated. Style lovers will fall for interiors decorated with shoji screen doors, tatami mat floors and lattice-

work. Offering day trips on five scenic routes on Japan's southernmost main island, guests can choose from gourmet lunch and dinner menus featuring the best of local cuisine, with private compartments available to book.

Details: Trips from ¥12,000 (€93); [jrkyushu-36plus3.jp](#)

7 BELMOND ROYAL SCOTSMAN, SCOTLAND

Belmond recently withdrew its Grand Hibernian train from Ireland, citing a review of global operations in response to the pandemic. Happily, the Belmond Royal Scotsman is still within easy reach, offering a wish-list adventure through Scotland's magnificent valleys. Gliding northwards from Edinburgh, the intimate train hosts just 24 guests in superb style, with trips lasting from two to seven days. Mahogany panelling, rich upholstery, exceptional dining, evening entertainment and first-class service set this ultra-exclusive train apart. With an open-air veranda to connect with nature and the Bamford Haybarn Spa — Belmond's first pamper carriage for a facial with epic views — this is luxury travel at its best.

Details: From £3,195 (€3,715pp); [belmond.com](#)

8 WHITE PASS & YUKON ROUTE RAILWAY, CANADA & USA

Celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Yukon Gold Rush, the Canadian province's wide open spaces are perfect for post-Covid exploration. Experience Dawson City, the Gold Rush town that feels like an old movie set, and the Chilkoot Trail, the prospectors' path from Alaska. Built in 1898, during the Klondike Gold Rush, this narrow-gauge railroad unlocks the region's Wild West vibes. The vintage railway — a feat of engineering itself — passes glaciers and gorges on a number of unforgettable excursions between Canada and Alaska.

Details: Canadian Sky has a future 16-night 'Glaciers and

Gold Rush Bonanza' tour from €5,829pp, with the option of adding on a WPYR train journey; [canadiansky.ie; wpyr.com](#)

9 THE MUSEUM TRAIN, SLOVENIA & ITALY

Connecting Slovenia and Italy, the Bohinj Railway stretches across the Julian Alps to the Adriatic Sea, crossing Solkan Bridge along the way — the largest stone railway bridge in the world. Damaged during WWI, the impressive structure was restored as part of the Path of Peace from the Alps to the Adriatic, earning a place on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Immerse yourself in history with a two-hour trip aboard the Museum Train, a steam locomotive that affords spectacular views. Listen to guides while passing through rolling wine lands, past pristine Lake Bled and Lake Bohinj. The breathtaking views from the Solkan Bridge will take you over the turquoise flowing waters of River Soča.

Details: Tickets €45; see [bohinj.si](#) for an updated timetable.

10 THE TOY TRAIN, KALKA TO SHIMLA, INDIA

A journey on one of India's railways is an essential part of any visit to the subcontinent. The lifeblood of the country, they run with impressive precision and offer an affordable way to travel and explore. One of the shortest and most picturesque routes is the Kalka to Shimla Railway, built during British rule to escape the summer heat in the Himalayan foothills. Opened in 1903, the 96km route, called the Toy Train, passes through 102 tunnels, over 864 bridges, and around 919 stunning curves. Expect to pass verdant mountains, lush forest, countless tunnels and misty views before reaching the famous hill station.

Details: Five-hour trip; tickets from Rs260 (€3); [irctc.co.in](#)

NB: All prices and timetables subject to change. Always read T&Cs carefully, especially around cancellation, when considering a future booking