



Final stop on the adventure in the city of Bern

All aboard

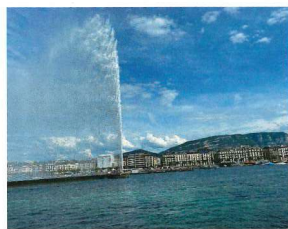
Flight-free holidays offer a slice of sustainable heaven

WORDS: Mark Cummings

It's hard to beat the intoxicating thrill of a road trip packed with everchanging locations but I think I have just managed it. Gazing out of a train rather than a car window enjoying the contrast of breathtaking Alpine scenery, dreamy Italian lakes and the buzz of iconic European cities is a new kind of heaven. We were swimming in the cooling waters of Lake Como when my wife, Jo, and I had the sort of conversation that you could only have on an adventure like this: 'Where were we last night?'

In Geneva's old town – you overdosed on the Raclette. You've never had a good relationship with Emmental. Hang on, oh no, sorry – that was two nights ago. Last night we were in Milan, remember you left your filming kit on the top of the Duomo?

We went with Byway Travel, specialists in sustainable 100 per cent flight-free rail trips, on their Better than the Bernina Express excursion through France, Switzerland, Italy, back to Switzerland over the magical Bernina Pass and home via France. It felt like taking



A trip on Lake Geneva

part in an episode of *Race Across the World* mixed with long-lost teenage memories of interrailing through Europe and the thrill of cross-crossing America aboard those trusty old Amtrak trains

DAY ONE

The trip started and ended at my local Kemble Station in the company of my friend Deirdre

who runs the Off the Rails Café and kindly sent us on our way with her award-winning bacon bap and the promise of a lift home on our return. I was still wiping the flour from Deirdre's bun off my five-o'clock shadow as we arrived in Paris in time for a late lunch. This is a city we know well and we spent a relaxed few hours reacquainting ourselves with Saint-Germain, Le Marais, Canal Saint-Martin and checking out Notre-Dame's new facelift.

DAY TWO

We caught the 10.18am from Gare De Lyon and after three hours of rolling French countryside we stepped off the train and took a long, deep gulp of fresh, clean Swiss air.

We took a boat trip on Lake Geneva. Charlie Chaplin, David Bowie, Noël Coward and many more decided to live on its shores. Even Phil Collins spent several years there but please don't let that put you off. The early June heatwave made me long to dive into the clear choppy waters but we needed time to explore the staggeringly beautiful Botanical Gardens.

That evening, in the charming Old Town, I did get to practise my double somersault, launching myself headlong into a vat of the aforementioned gooey cheese which I came to regret later that night.

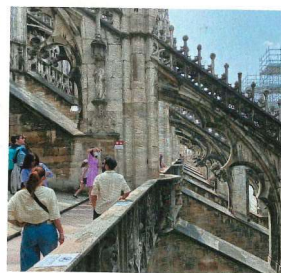
DAYS THREE AND FOUR

Next morning's route offered tempting flashes of the deep blue lake, the curving contours of the Rhône Valley coupled with excellent vistas of the flourishing hillside vineyards. All photography was halted as the darkness of The Mont-Blanc Tunnel swept us nearer to our next destination. The gorgeous architecture at Milan's station, Milano Centrale, gave us a clue on arrival of this city's fashion status. I was already running out of clothes so I visited the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in the heart of the city. I popped into Armani, Gucci, Prada and Versace but none of the staff would tell me where the nearest Primark was located.

We watched the sunset behind the Duomo di Milano then the next day deepened our relationship with this masterful building with a visit inside and up onto the roof terraces. As I discovered to my cost, it is always good to check you have your belongings before making the long journey back down. We spent the evening in the bohemian canal side district of Navigli devouring sumptuous pizza, fresh lasagna and creamy chocolate gelato washed down with cold Italian beer.

DAYS FIVE AND SIX

It only takes 40 minutes to reach Lecco on the banks of Lake Como and we fell in love with this friendly, spacious, gentle lakeside town. Our first experience with the locals was at a café called Inbarcadere where the smiley staff served us a coffee, tea, orange juice and large almond croissant for just nine euros. Next door was the ferry ticket office. The helpful staff suggested a 20-minute trip to a quiet beach for an afternoon dip. On our return we enjoyed the happy hour offer of any drink plus a plate of focaccia, hams, cheeses, pickles and slaw for 13 euros. This became our regular haunt during two days of lakeside adventures visiting Belagio and Varenna.



On top of the Duomo in Milan



Crossing the Alps on the Bernina Pass

'It felt like taking part in an episode of Race Around the World mixed with long-lost memories of interrailing'

DAY SEVEN

Today we experienced one of the most spectacular train journeys in the world. We headed back into Switzerland via the Bernina Pass sweeping through the Alps and we were treated to 90 miles of shimmering glaciers, snow-covered peaks, precipitous gorges and magical mountain lakes. Much of the route is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site which includes the imposing Landwasser Viaduct and the corkscrew Brusio Viaduct. It was a breathtaking experience and we recovered that night in Chur, Switzerland's oldest city with a charming old town full of winding alleyways leading to a picturesque cathedral. We stayed at the Hotel ABC which was a 30-second walk from the station with a classic Alpine view from our bedroom – the perfect way to unwind after an unforgettable day.

DAYS EIGHT AND NINE

A three-hour ride through more stunning Swiss scenery took us to our final destination of Bern. Our last two days were made memorable by a lady called Annika. She runs the Stay Koook Bern City Hotel which offers really fun, cleverly designed hotel rooms and a huge communal lounge/kitchen area for visitors to cook, chat, enjoy free tea and coffee, use the games room or sample some of Annika's freshly baked bread.

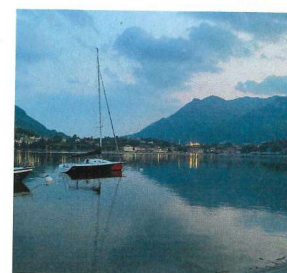
It was such a joyful environment to base ourselves in as we enjoyed the city's BearPark, Rose Garden, Aare River, historic Zytglogge Clock Tower and the house Einstein lived in.

I rose at 4.30am on our last day to watch the full moon handover the city's skyline to the blazing sun: that had been our constant companion throughout the trip.

From the Stay Koook hotel's roof terrace, I saw the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau mountains mysteriously appear on the horizon as the wispy haze dissolved into a stunning sunrise.

Later that day we were back at Kemble station. Our taxi driver Deirdre received a hug and some slightly melted Swiss chocolate and I watched the sunset from my treehouse as I processed the last glorious nine days. ● Byway Travel offers a huge variety of train routes or bespoke trips across the UK and Europe.

Byway are on a mission to make flight-free travel mainstream and reduce impact of travel. byway.travel



Lake Como