

## GET OUT OF TOWN

## Riding the Rails

Trains go beyond providing mere transportation

By BEKAH WRIGHT

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SECTION WRITER

There's a certain magic that comes with traveling by train. From the moment you stand on the platform and hear the horn announcing a train's approach, excitement takes hold.

Such was the case when I lined up two friends on a train bound for Italy's Cinque Terre from Milan. Happy that my first experience in this romantic country didn't require having to decipher a map written in Italian or drive an unfamiliar car, we relaxed in the lounge car. We soaked in the scenery (from rolling hills to views of seaside villages) — most of which wouldn't have even been visible from a car.

Later, we wandered into the lounge car for a bite to eat and got an impromptu lesson on speaking Italian from an elderly woman heading home after a fortnight of tangoing in the village of Ragella. As the Italian countryside rushed past the

window, the rhythm of the train kept beat with the lullaby vocabulary.

Lulled by the motion, I returned to the comfort of our compartment for a nap. As I drifted toward slumber, I sighed with contentment. With a start like this, our trip was bound to hold memories of a lifetime.

Listed below are some train journeys that go beyond mere transportation, by offering nose-to-window views of the world's treasures and bringing back the bygone romance of riding the rails.

## L.A. to Seattle

Closest to home is Amtrak's Coast Starlight running between Los Angeles and Seattle. There's no need for passenger to keep to their seats when they can visit the Sightseer Lounge Car for optimal views of the spectacular Pacific coastline. Those in sleeper cars also can opt to make their way to the Pacific Parlour Car for

wine-tastings and card games. In the dining car, travelers can get acquainted over regional wines and gourmet dishes.

As night falls and the scenery disappears, coach passengers can rest in their seats while sleeper car passengers bunk down in private compartments. In beds that are re-configured from the seats. Most of the cabins fit two people comfortably, but some can accommodate up to four.

Though the trip can be completed in 35 hours without disembarking, adventurers might want to stop along the way. Those choosing to do so

should arrange their stops in advance with Amtrak and make overnight accommodations as well because the Coast Starlight travels the route only once a day. One option is booking hotels, attractions and transportation through Key Holidays Amtrak Tours ([www.keyholidays.com](http://www.keyholidays.com)) or (800) 783-0783.

Another attraction about 45 minutes from the San Luis



Photo provided by AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL PACIFIC RAIL

On its transcontinental journey, The Ghan crosses desert terrain.

## Accommodations affect price

■ **Amtrak's Coast Starlight** (running between Los Angeles and Seattle): Fares change daily with the time. A basic one-way ticket ranges from \$93 to \$163. Those who want to book a sleeper would add from \$191 to \$427 for a deluxe bedroom (that sleeps two), \$427 to \$963 for a deluxe bedroom (that sleeps three) or \$341 to \$745 for a family bedroom (that sleeps three adults and two children). Visit [www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com) or call (800) 872-7245.

■ **Venice Simplon-Orient-Express**: The cost for the route's 2005 journey, which started Sept. 2, was \$6,595 and included three nights aboard the train as well as two nights in hotels, all sightseeing tours and meals. Other destinations to explore via Orient-Express Trains & Cruises include the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Scotland, Peru and Southeast Asia. Visit [www.orient-express.com](http://www.orient-express.com) or phone (800) 237-2365.

■ **The Ghan**: The price from Adelaide to Darwin to ride in a private cabin (sleeps the Gold Kangaroo level) starts at \$1,360. Visit [www.trainways.com.au](http://www.trainways.com.au) or call 011-61-8-8212-4592 or contact the South Australian Tourism Commission at [www.southoz.com.au](http://www.southoz.com.au) or (888) 768-8428.

■ **South Africa's Blue Train**: Fares on the Pretoria-Cape Town route and vice versa range from \$1,450 to \$2,200, depending on accommodations. Fares on the Cape Town to Port Elizabeth route and vice versa range from \$1,670 to \$2,500, depending on accommodations. For schedules and information, visit [www.bluetrain.co.za](http://www.bluetrain.co.za) or call (011) 27-12-323-8459.

—BEKAH WRIGHT

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## Paris to Istanbul

Though The Orient Express Trains & Cruises has expanded its routes, its most famous is the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express (so named because it travels through the Simplon Tunnel under the Swiss Alps).

Travelers board restored European carriages from the 1920s and '30s where they can luxuriate in sumptuous compartments, adorned with inlaid woods, marquetry and brass fittings, and be tended to by personal stewards.

Onboard, the custom of "dressing for dinner" is in full

force, with guests in black tie prepared for five-course dinners convening by French chefs in one of three dining cars. Live piano music can be heard over a nightclub in the Bar Car before retiring for the evening.

The Venice Simplon-Orient-Express makes an annual trek along the same route it first embarked upon in 1883. De-

parting from Paris, the train passes through the Austrian Alps and Switzerland before heading into Hungary and stopping in Budapest for an overnight hotel stay.

The next morning travelers meander along the Danube River, touring the city before rejoining the train and traveling into Romania. The next stop is the mountain town of Sinaia and a visit to Peles Castle, a masterpiece of German neo-Renaissance architecture. From there die train journeys to Bucharest, where more sightseeing awaits.

Once the train travels across the Danube and into Bulgaria, passengers disembark again to explore the countryside. The final leg of the five-night trip takes guests to Istanbul. Awaiting there are such sites as the Blue Mosque, with its six minarets built for Sultan Ahmet in the 17th century; Topkapı Palace, home to the Ottoman sultans for four centuries; the Grand Bazaar, a covered market selling everything from handmade kilim rugs to exotic spices.

Other destinations to explore via Orient-Express Trains & Cruises include the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Scotland, Peru and Southeast Asia.

■ **Allee Springs to Darwin**  
The legendary Ghan tourist train first hit the tracks in Allee Springs, Australia, in 1929. In March 2004 its route was expanded to cover 1,851 miles from Adelaide to Alice Springs, then on to Darwin.

The 47-hour train ride can be enjoyed from a coach car, a private sleeper cabin, or a plush private car. Two lounges offer exceptional views over which to linger with a cup of tea. Regional food and wines are served in several dining cars.

The transcontinental journey affords views of diverse terrain, starting in the lush countryside of Adelaide and then making its way through Australia's "Whet Belt" and along Flinders Ranges. Passing through the MacDonnell Ranges, the train stops in the frontier town of Alice Springs, the gateway to the country's Red Centre desert outback. Travelers can disembark during a four-hour stopover and visit Alice Springs Desert Park, home to more than 120 species of animals. Once travel resumes, the train crosses over the Tropic of

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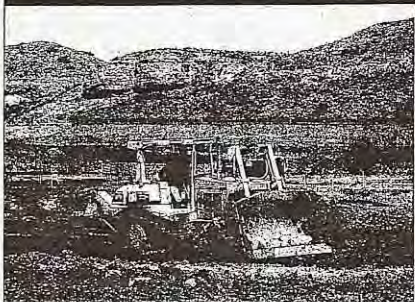
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# TRAINS: All aboard for fun

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Cancer and then past the Tanami Desert. Farther down the route, The Ghan makes its way through the gold-mining settlement of Tennant Creek, before its next four-hour stop in Katherine.

Numerous adventures await in Katherine, including a boat cruise or helicopter tour of the 25 million-year-old canyons of Katherine Gorge. Exploring Katherine River via a nature cruise, canoe or bus tour are other options. Back onboard, guests complete their journey when reaching the tropical city of Darwin.

## Pretoria to Capetown

Journeying through South Africa since 1946 is the opulent Blue Train. Two trains run the line's dual routes — one carrying 84 passengers and the other 76. Onboard are luxury and deluxe suites, equipped with double or single beds, writing tables and baths with showers, tubs and marble floors. In the suites' living areas are lounge chairs affording prime views of the changing landscape. Each suite comes with a professional butler.

Though one may be tempted to take in the sights from the lavishness of the suite, the rest of the train calls for exploration. Enjoy high tea in

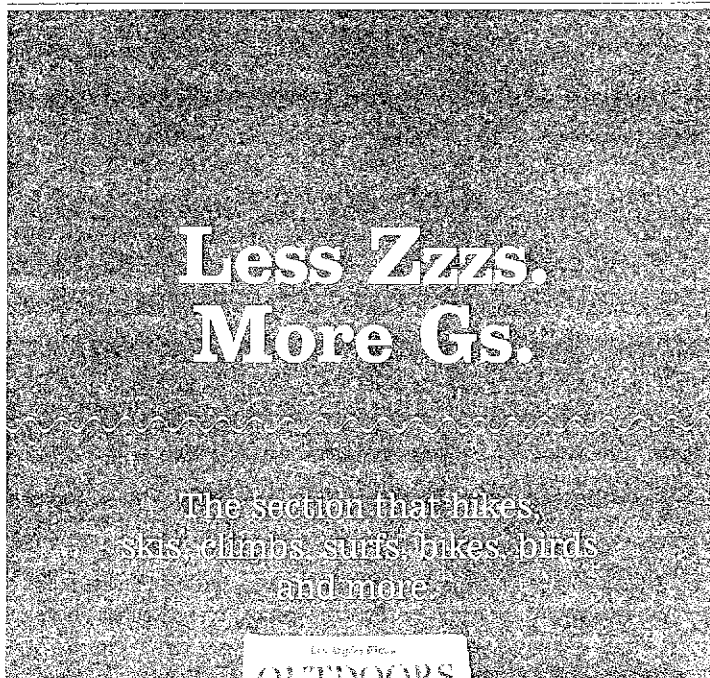
the lounge car, head to the club car for a game of cards, or browse through the library. Later, gussy up for a formal dinner of gourmet South African fare in the 42-seat dining car.

The Blue Train's routes are awe-inspiring. On the 25-hour Pretoria-Cape Town Route passengers see panoramas of the goldfields of Witwatersrand, the semi-desert of Karoo, the orchards and vineyards of the Hex River Valley, the mountains of Paarl and Cape Town's majestic Table Mountain.

On the train's 43-hour Cape Town-Port Elizabeth Garden Route, guests can revel in views of orchards, vineyards and the Indian Ocean. From the Outeniqua Pass, the train enters Little Karoo with its sandstone cliffs, passing the Kammansie and Grootrivier mountains along the way.

On arrival in Oudtshoorn, the center of South Africa's ostrich industry, guests disembark to visit an ostrich farm and the world-famous Cango Caves, nature-sculpted underground limestone formations that were discovered in 1780.

*Bekah Wright is a freelance writer based in Sherman Oaks.*



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