



TAKE THE SLOW TRAINS

Romantic lure of the tracks of beyond

BELMOND HIRAM BINGHAM, PERU

This luxurious version of a 1920s retro rattler travels between Cusco and Aguas Calientes, gateway to Machu Picchu in the Peruvian Andes. Formerly branded as Orient-Express, it comes with a touch of romance and Agatha Christie-style intrigue, particularly when passengers gather in the bar carriage for rounds of pisco sours. Is that a pearl-handled pistol poking out of the New York blonde's handbag or a trick moustache on the chap with the fake French accent?

The real drama, though, lies in the scenery as the Valley of the Incas unfolds, revealing vast, rocky landscapes, fields of corn and potatoes and squat adobe-brick villages. This is a day train but I recommend a night spent between journeys at Belmond Sanctuary Lodge, the only accommodation at the entry to the Machu Picchu site. In either direction, you'll dine well (brunch up; dinner down) on silver-service meals with a local flavour, and be sent off and greeted by platform performers, all swirling skirts, extravagant waistcoats and jolly hats. Who knows what Hiram Bingham, the scholarly US explorer who "rediscovered" Machu Picchu in 1911, would make of it all. His party travelled by mule and on foot.

■ belmond.com

SUSAN KUROSAWA

THE CANADIAN, CANADA

There's romance aplenty in train travel but VIA Rail adds a little more love with its artists on board program. Musicians can trade songs for passage on The Canadian, which takes four nights to trace a 4466km iron artery between Vancouver and Toronto. Passengers are treated to live gigs in the lounge, and there's plenty of time to soak up scenery that morphs from pancake-flat prairies to the jagged Rocky Mountains while keeping an eye out for the odd bear or moose.

During the westward journey, a morning break in Winnipeg is long enough to allow a poke around The Forks Market and a peek at the nearby Canadian Museum for Human Rights, which opened in 2014. For the ultimate experience, book Prestige Class and loll in a bed for two while taking in the panoramic views. Slow TV, indeed.

■ viarail.ca

KATRINA LOBLEY

FFESTINIOG AND WELSH HIGHLAND RAILWAYS, NORTH WALES

This destination is a mecca for railway buffs, not least for the restored narrow-gauge slate



Belmond Hiram Bingham, main, connects Cusco and Machu Picchu; Ecuador's Tren Crucero, centre, runs between Guayaquil and Quito; VIA Rail's The Canadian, above

trains originally built to transport the signature product of North Wales from quarry to quayside. Among these is Ffestiniog, the world's oldest railway company, which operates the 75-minute journey down to historic Porthmadog from Blaenau Ffestiniog, known as "the town that roofed the world", including parts of 19th-century Melbourne. At Porthmadog, the line connects with the Welsh Highland Railway service for a two-hour journey through the spectacular Snowdonia National Park to Caernarfon.

The train runs beneath the foot of Mount Snowdon and stops en route at beautiful villages such as Beddgelert. Lovingly maintained original steam locomotives draw the period-piece third-class carriages. For the best views of sea and mountains, woodlands and castles, travel first class in the newly built Pullman observation car.

■ festrail.co.uk

JEREMY SEAL

HIMALAYAN QUEEN TOY TRAIN, INDIA

The 96km line between Kalka on the plains and the storied hill station of Shimla is a narrow gauge track built by the British at the turn of the 20th century.

The UNESCO heritage-listed Himalayan Queen Toy Train is tiny with cosy blue-and-white carriages. Our trip is downwards and my husband and I board at Shimla, squeezing in with a group of English retirees, led by a flustered tour guide who turns out to be a mine of information on rug-buying, and an Indian family headed by a smartly dressed matron whose large suitcase blocks the aisle.

The seats are comfortable but narrow; passengers sit in the open doorways soaking in the mountain air as the train patters for five hours and 45 minutes past myriad villages and 18 brightly painted railway stations,

through 103 tunnels and across more than 800 bridges and viaducts, seemingly clinging to some of the most stunning landscapes in India.

■ irctc.co.in

■ luxury-train-travel-tours-india.com

CLAIRE MACDONALD

EL TRASCANTABRICO GRAN LUJO, NORTHERN SPAIN

A train journey that absolves the sins? It's not the key selling point of El Trascantabrico Gran Lujo (Great Luxury), a locomotive of glossily restored 1920s Pullman carriages that traverses northern Spain, but it's an option. With stops at Spain's oldest monastery — Santo Toribio de Liebana, famed for its remnant of the True Cross — and Santiago de Compostela, there's perpetual indulgence on offer alongside the gastronomic and touristic highlights of the Cantabrian coastline.

Graze on pintxos in San Sebastian's old town, tour the Guggenheim, admire Gaudi's El Capricho and other modernist villas in the seaside resort of Comillas, and delve into human prehistory at the (replica) Altamira cave. And then give thanks for all of the above on a visit to Santiago de Compostela, final resting place of St James. Week-long itineraries include coach transfers between San Sebastian and Bilbao's ornate La Concordia railway station, and between Ferrol and Santiago. The 14-suite train travels during daylight hours with most meals taken in authentically local restaurants en route.

■ renfe.com/trenesturisticos/eng

KENDALL HILL

ROCKY MOUNTAINEER, CANADA

I board in Jasper, Alberta, for the two-day journey to Vancouver, British Columbia. We cut through forest, skirt lakes and towering rock-faces, sometimes at eye-level with tree-tops where osprey and bald-eagles hunt or guard pole-top nests. We spot bears.

We occasionally slow to "Kodak speed", or make full-stops for passing freight trains. From domed windows and open-air platforms loom spruce-clad mountains, tumultuous rivers, waterfalls and gorges; announcements flag bridges renowned in Canada's pioneering history.

Overnights are passed in luxe whistlestop hotels, such as the Fairmont trio of Chateau Lake Louise, Banff Springs and Jasper Park Lodge. By day, Rocky Mountaineer is a light-filled glass capsule framing those majestic views. There are GoldLeaf and SilverLeaf classes on four routes between Vancouver and Jasper or Banff.

■ rockymountaineer.com

JUDITH ELEN



EMILY McAULIFFE

THE SAVANNAHLANDER, AUSTRALIA

At 6am on Wednesdays, the Savannahlander glides out of Cairns on its four-day 850km round-trip. Silver and sleek, the two carriage rail-motor heads southwest through rain-forest to the Atherton Tablelands, then onwards to Forsyth, outback red rock country. There are two knowledgeable, witty drivers, taking turns to drive and share stories through a good sound system.

The train, its pace already sedate, slows for a closer look at wildlife, mango farms, plantations and pubs. Passengers move around, taking an occasional turn next to the driver, watching the track unfold. Before stops, refreshments are ordered ahead and a driver runs past tall grass, dodging termite mounds, to a remote telephone to ring the orders through. Further outback, Brahman cattle wander in lonely towns on disused tracks. At each night's stop, there are optional tours but the Savannahlander, gleaming against the landscape, remains the star of the show.

■ savannahlander.com.au
JANE SANDILANDS



The Presidential, far left, offers culinary delights; while the Savannahlander, left, travels at a sedate pace

TREN CRUCERO, ECUADOR

The Andes unfolds in a patchwork of colour — pink quinoa flowers, purple lupins, green fava beans — as we rattle northwards. But the white mass floating on a cushion of mist really draws my attention. It's Chimborazo Volcano, the closest mountain peak to the sun. Set at its base is Ecuador's highest-altitude station, Urbina, where I meet the country's last ice merchant, Baltazar Uscha.

Twice a week he treks up Chimborazo and hacks slabs of ice from a glacier to sell down in the foothills. Such ancestral traditions have been shared with tourists since the reopening of the railway in 2013 after more than a century of disuse.

The journey begins in the tropical coastal city of Guayaquil, ascends through temperate zones and along hair-raising zigzag tracks before arriving in the Andean city of Quito. The three-night journey runs in reverse and can be taken in sections; accommodation is at estancias and traditional hotels.

■ trenecuador.com/en/cruise-train/
CATHERINE MARSHALL

THE PRESIDENTIAL, PORTUGAL

The 19th-century train that once transported the nation's royalty, along with dignitaries such as Queen Elizabeth II, Pope Paul VI and Portugal's heads of state, has been reborn as a gourmet experience on wheels.

The Presidential departs from Porto's extravagantly tiled Sao Bento station and takes passengers on a nine-hour return journey through the Douro Valley, famous for its steeply terraced vineyards on both sides of the Douro River.

The cobalt-blue train runs along tracks just metres from the waterway, while dapper wait staff present dishes prepared by a rotating stable of Michelin-star chefs. The day includes a tasting at the private estate Quinta do Vesuvio, which dates back to the 1820s, and quality Portuguese wine flows throughout the journey.

The Presidential will run 10 trips as part of its spring edition in April and May, and 10 as a harvest edition in September and October.

■ thepresidentialtrain.com
EMILY McAULIFFE

MORE TO THE STORY

Rail Plus's top five destinations for 2018:

INDIA Recording a 172 per cent increase in interest in 2017, India is Rail Plus's star pick this year. Particularly popular journeys on the subcontinent are aboard the Deccan Odyssey, which covers six destinations in its packages, and Maharajas' Express, with departures from Mumbai or Delhi of three to seven nights.

BRITISH COLUMBIA AND ALASKA In tune with big increases in Australian passengers taking Alaska cruises, Rail Plus recorded a 73 per cent rise in train bookings for the destination last year, with equally high interest in British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest.

AFRICA South Africa's Blue Train and Rovos Rail are well-known among train buffs but interest spiked last year with an 83 per cent increase in inquiries.

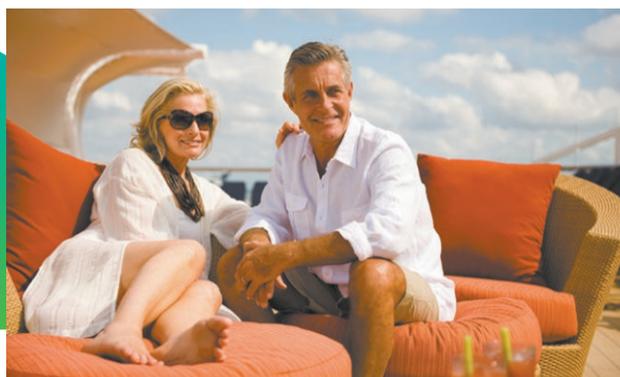
NORWAY Eurail's Scandinavia Pass has stirred much interest in the region and Rail Plus recorded a 41 per cent jump in 2017 but the Norway in a Nutshell scenic rail and tour package takes top billing.

PORTUGAL Portugal is firmly on travellers' radar, listed as a preferred destination in Eurail Select Pass bookings with a concurrent rise in point-to-point tickets within the country.
■ railplus.com.au

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