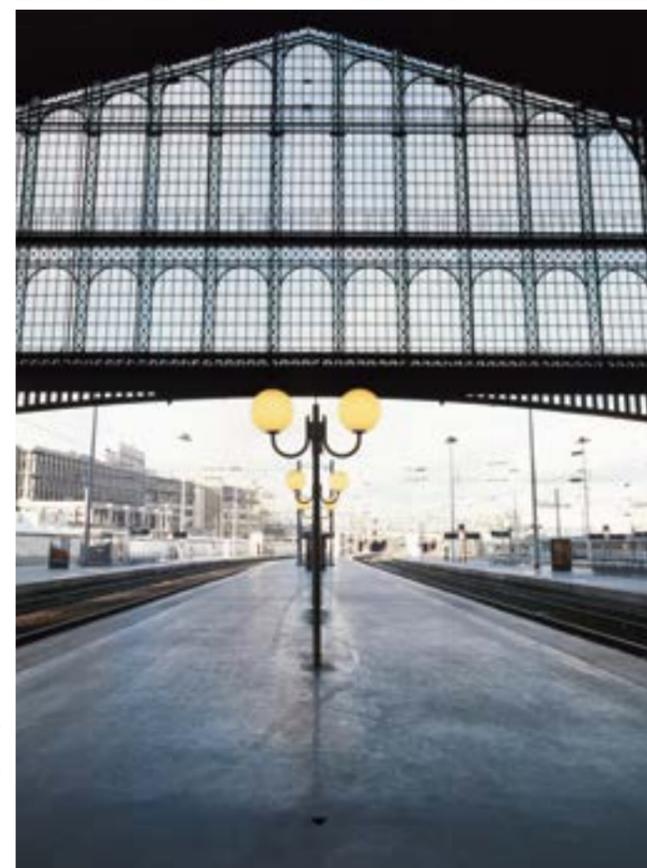
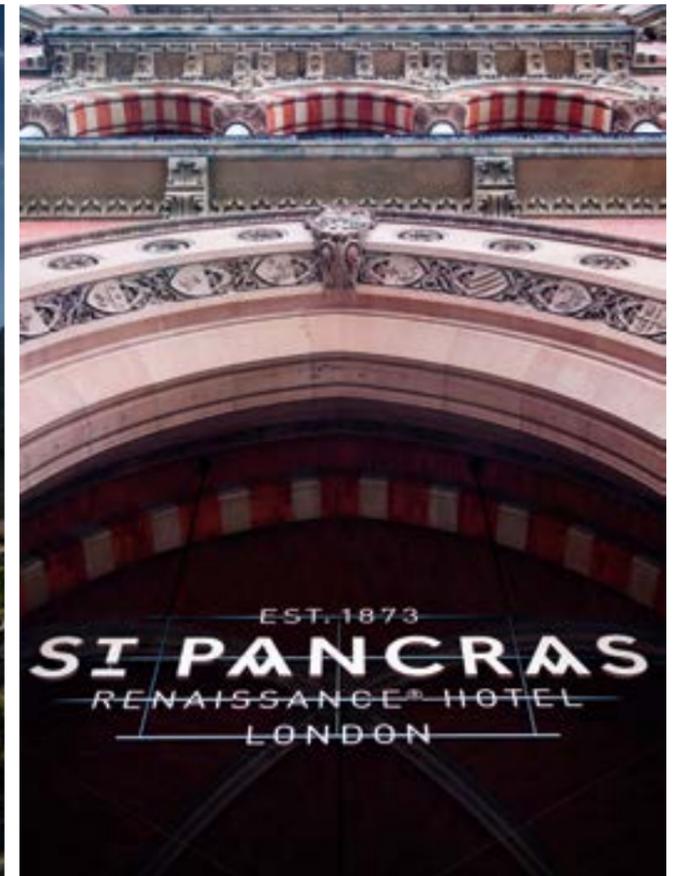




THE AGE OF THE TRAIN

With the introduction of high-speed rail between Paris and Barcelona, you can depart London St Pancras and arrive in the Catalan capital in just 10-and-a-half hours. And while the scenery can be breathtaking en route, it's the Mediterranean that's the star attraction

WORDS: Mark C. O'Flaherty



IMAGES: ALAMY; GETTY; PRAKTIK BAKERY HOTEL



hile the Eurostar turned Paris into a satellite town for residents of London (and vice versa), Spain

has still always felt just that little bit too far to reach by rail. With the introduction of the direct Paris to Barcelona TGV in 2013 — city to city in 6.5h at 200mph — things began to look a little different. You change trains in Paris, but apart from that it's a seamless experience. On New Year's Day last year I made a list of what I intended to do before the end of 2014, at the top of which was 'take the train to Paris and Barcelona'.

And it all kicks off at the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel. The reopening of this gothic fantasia was an early milestone in the regeneration of King's Cross. The most eye-catching piece of architecture in the area, the St Pancras Renaissance might be the most beautiful railway hotel in the world. The restoration was lavish, and of course it has *that* staircase. (One day, it will stop being 'the Spice Girls staircase', but today is not that day.) There's also, along the corridor, Marcus Wareing's restaurant, The Gilbert Scott, occupying one of the grandest spaces in the building. Last time I visited, the menu was doing something akin to Dinner by Heston Blumenthal — fancifying historic British recipes. Now it serves perfectly nice M&S gastropub-style food. It's not particularly fine dining, but it presents copious Instagram opportunities, isn't outlandishly expensive, and it hums with a good time being had by all.

The St Pancras is, essentially, a Marriot. The engine driving everything is the same everyday, upmarket chain hotel, but one that happens to be lavishly attired in an expensive costume. To best experience the period glamour, you have to stay in one of the Chambers Suites, all soaring ceilings, original window frame details and gargantuan mirrors. With a Chambers Suite you also have access to a private lounge with complimentary cocktails, a treatment at in-house barbershop Gentlemen's Tonic, next door, and a chap who whisks you and your luggage to the Eurostar the next morning.

Despite the anxiety-filled hours I've spent queuing for supersized lattes in the departure hall at the crack of dawn (an endeavour I always like to begin six minutes before my train is about to leave), the Eurostar is still one of my favourite ways to travel. There may not be wi-fi, but it's calm, civilised, and the seats have winged headrests for easy snoozing. It's largely marvellous — until you arrive into Gare du Nord. While London's international railway station gleams with Champagne bars, art installations and branches of Kiehl's, French stations aren't quite as *soigné*. Over at Paris-Gare de Lyon, where the train leaves for Barcelona, there's the palatial Le Train Bleu restaurant, which is as beautiful a room as anything you'll find in the city. It's up there with Le Grand Véfour for gilt and glass. But step outside the station and you're in a street adorned with urinals, attached to exterior walls — sans any kind of cubicle around them, and avec the aroma to match. This is a station best rushed through at speed.



Six-and-a-half hours, after the train pulled out of Paris, I was in Barcelona. The TGV doesn't, it must be said, compare well with the Eurostar. The whole thing smacks of rail travel in the UK pre-privatisation. The catering is lacking (don't expect anything in first class, apart from a trolley and a price list), and because the trains are double-decker, the platforms at each end are mobbed with the kind of crowds more commonly seen populating disaster movies. But there are power points on board, you can stroll around, and there are few of the indignities of no-frills aviation. I'd rather travel on the TGV for a whole day than spend a fraction of that time being sold scratch cards at 30,000ft. And the ground-level perspective is captivating: you pass through Montpellier and Girona and you have views of the Pyrenees; close to the Spanish border, I noted a dozen kites zigzagging through the sky to my left, while the sun hit the sea, low and dazzling, to my right. The further south we went, the more terracotta and Spanish the buildings became. There's a lot to be said for crossing countries this way.

The journey is relatively painless, comfortable and a good opportunity to relax or work. Couples played games on their iPads, some with the sound unmuted, until I stepped in with my curmudgeonly Spanglish. Solo businessmen tackled Excel spreadsheets and third-quarter sales figures, becoming increasingly demented due to the patchy phone signal. Children slept. Families enjoyed that Prolonged Moving Picnic I'm so keen on myself, with bottles of wine, baguettes from Paul and slabs of chocolate.

With the advent of the new, speedier Paris-Barcelona links, the sleepers were put out to pasture in December ➤

Previous pages, clockwise from left: Gare du Nord; Vignemale, Pyrenees; St Pancras Renaissance Hotel; Praktik Bakery Hotel; Gard du Nord.

From left: St Pancras Renaissance Hotel; Park Güell, Barcelona



2013, but for those determined to experience overnight rail travel, you can travel from Barcelona to La Tour de Carol, and then on to Paris in the overnight couchette — preferably in a four-berth first class cabin, with three very close friends who don't snore. The only overnight trains I've ever taken were the Orient-Express from Venice to Paris, which was so ludicrously glamorous that I couldn't sleep a wink, and The Ghan in Australia, which rolled through dramatic Red Centre bush fires, and kept me awake with a mixture of fascination and terror. By all accounts, the Barcelona to Paris overnight options these days aren't particularly plush in comparison, but the scenery through the Pyrenees on the daylight leg of the full journey is said to be truly exceptional.

On my daytime journey to Barcelona, I sat upstairs, which gives a better view across the landscape. If you aren't absorbed in a paperback or movie, there's plenty to catch the eye in the way of pretty little Rhone villages and castles, as well as the 15th-century Fort de Salses, east of Perpignan. The first sight of the Med brings an instant frisson of excitement, and as we coast across causeways over a variety of lakes at close to 200mph, with the distinctive pink silhouettes of flocks of flamingos visible in the near distance, we feel far removed from the City of Light. This isn't anything we could ever have seen from the sky.

CULINARY ATTRACTION

I'd originally hoped to find equivalents to the St Pancras Renaissance in Barcelona and Paris, but none exists. The area surrounding Barcelona Sants Station is as charmless as Elephant & Castle. Instead, I head to the district just south of Avenue Diagonal, to Hotel Praktik Bakery — a new, low-priced boutique hotel with an interior by superstar local designer Lázaro Rosa-Violán. The lobby is all bare brick and wooden furniture with industrial touches, while the rooms are stark and white, with black light fittings and beautiful tiling. There's also — as the name suggests — a bakery in the lobby, an offshoot of the beloved Baluard Bakery mothership in Barceloneta. There are now four Praktik hotels in the city, all demonstrating that budget doesn't have to mean no style.

Much of my time in Barcelona is spent on the predictable Gaudí trail. If there's one thing you have to do in the city, it's see the Sagrada Família. It's not scheduled to be finished until 2026 — and I'll believe that when I see it — but the main interior of the cathedral, with its organic, futuristic columns and arrestingly modern stained glass, is all there right now. Gaudí would, one imagines, have found a kindred spirit in surrealist artist H R Giger — the science fiction elements of the cathedral are weird and almost macabre. There's nothing else like it on Earth. And to recall that this avant-garde vision was first formed in 1882 — less than 20 years after the very first Spanish steam train made it as far as the French border — is incredible.

After a tour of some other visually radical sites — the Olympic Park and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion — the rest of my time in the city is largely spent at a variety of dining tables. For breakfast, I return each morning to Café-Bar Restaurante Reñé, in Eixample, which has one of the most ornate facades in town. Reñé was originally a confectionary factory in the late 19th century, ▶

Clockwise from top left: Bar tapas and drinks; Praktik Bakery Hotel; Sagrada Família; Paris Gare de Lyon railway station; Mimosa Garden restaurant, Mandarin Oriental, Barcelona





AROUND PARALLEL, THE ADRIÀ BROTHERS ARE FAST CREATING THE MOST DYNAMIC DINING DISTRICT IN ANY CITY ON EARTH

then a bakery. Now it's a grand cafe with splendid marbles, mahogany, and fancy ceilings. The coffee is very good, and the croissants — particularly the filled ones — are the best I've had in Europe.

Pastries are one thing, but the real foodie action in Barcelona right now is around Parallel — where the Adrià brothers are fast creating the most dynamic dining district in any city on Earth. Tickets is the big draw, of course. If elBulli had partnered with the art directors behind Planet Hollywood, this might be the result — an all-singing, all-dancing tapas bar, with exceptionally inventive food. You'll find it near-impossible to get a reservation — but try. Or brave a walk-in... even when the website insists the place is fully booked, sometimes there's space.

Just around the corner, the brothers have an experimental seafood restaurant, mainly serving raw dishes, *Espai Kru*, and a new Mexican restaurant *Hoja Santa*. In addition, there's the one I enjoyed most, *Pakta*, which serves Nikkei cuisine (a fusion of Peruvian and Japanese), in a room decorated with elaborately stretched lengths of brightly coloured cord. The motif extends to the braiding on staff uniforms and to the brightly wrapped wands used to point out the components of each dish. Dinner at *Pakta* is one of the 20 best meals I've ever had — the ingredients are fresh

and inventive (right down to the weird, amazing, hot ceviche), taking Japanese standards into uncharted territory.

Another mecca for contemporary food is the Mandarin Oriental, Barcelona, which also happens to be the most beautiful five-star hotel in the city. Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola has created something that feels forward-thinking but plush and sophisticated. A basement lounge and restaurant has been housed in what looks like a celestial white Moorish butterfly house, while the bathrooms in the suites, with their distinctive Catalan-style patterned tiling, are the stuff of interior design wet dreams. So many hotels fumble with 'contemporary', but the Mandarin Oriental is worth every penny of an overnight stay. And if you aren't staying, you should visit the two Michelin-starred restaurant *Moments*, a playground for chef Carme Ruscalleda's alchemical cuisine. Carme's son Raül runs the kitchen here, and it's a must for foodies visiting BCN right now.

I knew what to expect from the catering trolley on the train journey back to Paris, so the morning after feasting on squid, Iberico pork and veal cheeks at *Moments*, I stroll to the *Praktik Bakery* at opening time, loading up with freshly baked baguettes and pastries, and head to the station. I kill a couple of hours of the journey to Paris watching *Snowpiercer* on my laptop — it's a risible sci-fi movie in which Earth's last few survivors circle the planet in a train with 1,001 carriages (and its highlight is Tilda Swinton as a scenery-chewing archvillain with a Yorkshire accent). Like most films set on trains, it's a thriller: the train is, variously, a vehicle for intrigue, romance and mystery. Planes, in comparison, are about white-knuckle, imminent disaster.

A fortnight's worth of carbs and a couple of movies later, I'm in Paris, on the fashion world's main artery: ►

Above: Pastry shop on La Rambla

RAIL

Rue Saint-Honoré. This Parisian thoroughfare — taking in two rues with Saint-Honoré in their name — may be where people gravitate to bask in the City of Light in the most indulgent and classic way possible, but it also has a tradition of looking to the future. Over the road from Le Bristol Paris is the Pierre Cardin store, whose fabulous Emma Peel leathers, futurist silhouettes and fuchsias, emerald greens and canary yellows are a reminder that Cardin — still very much with us — was more radical in the 1960s than any Paris-based designer today. He's just opened a new museum, at 5 rue Saint-Merri in the Marais. Cardin is, quite rightly, a national treasure, and Paris is still a city that enjoys daydreaming about the future.

Now, if only their railways stations could get a Cardin, Jouin Manku or Rem Koolhaas makeover to bring them in line with London... Maybe Barcelona could get Patricia Urquiola on board to redesign Sants too. Railway stations were once as grand as palaces or cathedrals. As we turn, more and more, from air to rail — enjoying stress-free moving picnics with great eye-level scenery across the Continent — they may well be again.



Tickets



ESSENTIALS

Rail

GETTING THERE

The Eurostar runs from St Pancras International in London to Gare du Nord in Paris. The TGV runs from Paris Gare de Lyon to Barcelona Sants. Single tickets from London-Barcelona, from £98. eurostar.com uk.voyages-sncf.com

Average journey time: 10h25m.

GETTING AROUND

Gare de Lyon is 20 minutes by taxi from Gare du Nord. Eurostar passengers in Business or Premier can prebook a taxi on the train. Passengers can also connect between stations easily via the Metro, taking the M4 to Chatelet, then the M1 to Gare de Lyon.

WHEN TO GO

Spring is the best time of year to visit all three cities. Paris and Barcelona are best avoided in August — when everyone leaves town, everything closes, and the heat is often impossible.

NEED TO KNOW

Currency: Euro (€). £1 = €1.27.
Time difference (Paris and Barcelona): GMT +1.

International dial code: +33 (France); +34 (Spain).

PLACES MENTIONED

Hotel Praktik Bakery. hotelpraktikbakery.com
Le Bristol Paris. lebristolparis.com
Mandarin Oriental, Barcelona. mandarinoriental.com/Barcelona
Pierre Cardin. pierrecardin.com
Pakta, Tickets and Hoja Santa. en.bcn50.org
Sagrada Família. sagradafamilia.cat
St Pancras Renaissance Hotel. stpancrasrenaissance.co.uk

MORE INFO

kingscross.co.uk
en.parisinfo.com
turismedebarcelona.eu

HOW TO DO IT

Railbookers has a five-night London-Barcelona rail trip, stopping at Paris and Montpellier en route, from £889 per person, including standard-class return train travel and five nights' B&B in a four-star hotel. railbookers.com □