





Tickets to

ride

Escaping to the sunnier landscapes of Europe doesn't have to mean flying. Ben Searle looks at how to get your bike abroad by train, ferry or coach

When you're heading abroad with your bike, the low cost and fast journey times of flying look hard to beat. But not everyone wants to fly, and when you're staying within Europe you don't have to.

Flying is the most polluting way to travel. Actual costs are ramped up by airport taxes and surcharges. It's not as fast as it might seem either, due to check-in times, transfers from non-central airports, and the zombie-like fatigue that loses you a day either side because that £21.50 flight was in the middle of the night. Plus, you run the baggage-handler gauntlet with your bike.

Driving is considerably greener, especially if you take a few passengers. However, it's tiring to drive long distances and your cycling freedom at the other end is limited by where you left your car.

From an environmental and cyclist's perspective, the ideal combination would seem to be bike, train and/or ferry. The majority of Europe is accessible by train, and since we live on an island ferries leave in all directions.

TRANS-EURO EXPRESS

Rail is undergoing something of a renaissance. Eurostar trains will leave from St Pancras by the time you read this, and journey times to Paris and Brussels are as low

BIKES ABROAD

as 2hr 15min and 1 hr 51 min respectively, while Lille – easier to change trains at with a bagged bike – is from 80 minutes away. You can even reach Marseille in under 7 hours from London! It's thanks to a growing high-speed train network (see www.railteam.eu).

You'll need at least 12 hours to get beyond the Alps and Pyrenees. However, you may have the chance to break the journey and visit different places. Alternatively, much of Europe has wonderful sleeper trains. These, like a ferry cabin, allow you to wake up refreshed at your destination.

Just like the airways, there can be a wide range of offers and prices. Train and ferry tickets are often more flexible. Booking and reservation systems are gradually becoming rationalised, making trans-European journeys simpler. It's not all good news, though. Developing EU legislation to carry cycles on all international trains (which had overwhelming MEP support) has recently been eroded by an ineffectual compromise – see www.etra-eu.com/newsitem.asp?type=1&id=5274012.

If you book ahead – particularly if you book via the internet where, as with flights, bigger discounts may be available – tickets aren't always more expensive than flying. However, there are a few hurdles to get through. You need to find out which trains carry bikes. You may need to make a reservation for the bike. And you may

"Thanks to the growing high-speed train network, Lille in northern France is just 80 minutes from London, while Marseille can be reached in under 7 hours."

be limited as to how many people can travel together on the same service. For all these reasons, it's easier to put a partially dismantled bike in a bike bag for long journeys.

If you are taking the bike unbagged, a reservation is usually required on international and faster trains that allow this. Fees tend to vary between £3 and £10 one-way. Most local and many regional trains carry bikes – often for free and not reservable. Very few services carry tandems or trikes (except in Germany) and the information can be hard to come by.

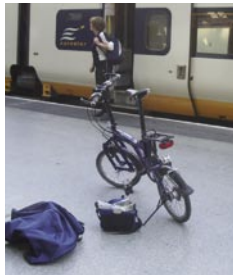
If the bike travels with you, bagged or not, it is your responsibility. If it's handled by others then the railway or ferry company may accept some limited liability for loss or damage. It's well worth considering full-insurance cover (see p78 or www.cyclecover.co.uk).

BOOKING YOUR TRIP

If you haven't got the time or patience to piece together the journey yourself you can use an agency. In most cases it's the easiest way to book cross-border journeys and those where you will need bike reservations, as these cannot be made on the internet. Not all agents are aware of all possibilities – if one agent does not provide what you need, try another. Agents will not always be able to obtain the cheapest fares (found on the internet) and most charge a fee of around £6-£20.

The best starting points are:

www.seat61.com: Not an agent but a mine of information summarising surface travel arrangements (including booking instructions) to reach every European country. There's some cycle carriage information and a list of agencies, including those offering specialist help, their merits and limitations.



Bagged folding bikes are easiest, but conventional bikes in bags can be carried on too (see below) – so long as they're small enough

Bag your bike and get to Europe from your local station. It needn't be dear. CTC's Tim Jackson (not pictured) did Darlington-Geneva for £125 return!

Rail Europe (www.raileurope.co.uk, tel: 0870 837 1371, or visit 179 Piccadilly, London). Best for journeys to France, Switzerland, Italy and Spain.

Deutsche Bahn (www.bahn.co.uk, tel: 08718 80 80 66). Best for journeys to Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, central and eastern Europe.

Eurostar (www.eurostar.com, tel: 0870 5 186 186). As of 14th November, Eurostar will be offering through tickets from all regions of the UK to over 100 destinations across France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Return fares to Lille, Paris and Brussels from £55 return. Lille has convenient connections, avoiding the need to cross Paris. If these deals don't suit, you can get a 'Euro Saver' or similar ticket at any station, which will connect to a Eurostar service. See www.seat61.com.

With Eurostar, you can walk on with your bike in a bag (max size 120 x 90cm, but see 'Bagging your bike') for free, as part of your luggage allowance. Or you can send it on as registered baggage with Eurodespatch (£20 each way, max

bike length 200cm). CTC are negotiating with Eurostar for bike spaces to be bookable on the train you travel on. For now, checking in 1 hour before departure should see the bike on the next available service, with a guarantee that it should be available for collection within 24hrs.

If you're travelling around Europe, particularly with a folding bike, Interrail tickets can be very attractive. For example, you can get a ticket that lets you travel any 10 days in 22 over most of Europe for £263 (£175 for those 25 and younger). See www.interrailnet.com.

TAILORING YOUR TRAIN TRIPS

To research the possibilities yourself and pay the cheapest fares use [seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) and the sources below.

The Thomas Cook Rail Map of Europe (£8.99) and European Rail Timetable – Independent Traveller's Edition (£15.99): Includes international and main national ferry services. See at a glance if the train or ferry goes where you want but there is no bike carriage info. Available from www.thomascookpublishing.com,



tel: 01733 416477.

www.bahn.co.uk: The German Railways UK portal. The best trip planner for the entire European rail network. On the second page select 'carriage of bicycles required' to filter for services where this is possible, then 'details' for further information – this will usually tell you whether a reservation is required and the type of train, which can be helpful; see individual country advice below. Not all bike carriage services will be shown outside Germany, including the UK, so also check each relevant national rail site (see below).

www.railpassenger.info: Links to European rail operators' websites, cycle carriage info (some in English) and trip planners. You can use <http://babelfish.altavista.com> or Google to translate. As with the German site look for 'advanced search' and 'details' which may provide cycle info. Also look for a bike icon within general results and on printed timetables.

CTC information sheets: CTC members can obtain (from www.ctc.org.uk, or by sending an A4 stamped SAE to CTC) various helpful information sheets on taking your cycle (and sometimes tandem etc.) by public transport. Some individual country sheets include bikes-on-public-transport information too.

UK trains: Refer to National Rail (www.nationalrail.co.uk, 08457 48 49 50) and links to the railway operators' cycle carriage terms. Any station booking office will also provide the information and reservations you need. See CTC sheet inf10.

However you book, allow ample time for connections. You will need to deal with your bike, cross unfamiliar cities, etc, and not miss your train with reserved bike space. During holiday periods, trains and bike spaces can be fully booked well in advance and luggage space can also be very limited.

SAIL AWAY

On many ferry services you can roll on with just about any kind of cycle. The cost to take a bike is modest or free and space pretty much unlimited. We still have a good selection of ferries to choose from (do check; some forbid bikes) and rail services to UK ferry terminals are generally bike-friendly providing you book ahead.

Usually it is best to contact the ferry company directly to book. Many operate an 'airline' system so prices can vary considerably. To avoid confusion say you need to take a *bicycle*, not (motor)bike – most websites enable cycle bookings, although may not allow you to book more than one cycle per booking. Sea France and P&O (TBC for 2008) offer CTC members a discount; refer to CTC sheet inf13.

COACH (WITH) CLASS

European Bike Express (www.bike-express.co.uk, tel 01430 422111) is a popular, dedicated luxury coach service for cyclists, run in association with CTC. Two main routes run from northern England via east London and Dover, through much of France to Catalonia and within reach of Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. It carries all types of bike in a special trailer. See 'I did it'.

TRAVELLING TO...

Here are just some of the possibilities...

FRANCE and BELGIUM

Eurostar: See above

Eurotunnel: Operates Folkstone-Calais (www.



Photographs by Ben Searle except left (Kevin Mayne) and opposite (Tim Jackson)

BAGGING YOUR BIKE

You can take a bagged bicycle with you as carry-on luggage, free of charge, on just about any train, provided it is packaged to regulation size. If bikes are not officially accepted, use discretion and keep the package as small as possible. Be considerate of other passengers and you will be unlikely to have a problem.

For a full-size touring bike you'll need to remove: wheels, pedals, seat post and handlebars, mudguards and racks. You should have a practice run at home, ensure you have all the tools required and that fittings are not seized etc. Packing is much easier with a folding or demountable cycle, such as a Birdy, Airnimal or Moulton, or a full size cycle with S&S couplings (which make a tandem possible).

It can be hard to find a bike bag within the regulation sizes and that's also easy to carry with you – the 'Ultralite 210D' from SJSC (£29.99) is one of the more suitable but still heavy at 1.8kg. You can make your own from lightweight rip-stop nylon (large off-cuts £16 inc p&p from Cameron Balloons, tel 0117 9637216) reinforced where necessary; mine weighs 400g. Pack with cardboard to protect as required.

Regulation sizes which are officially accepted are: France, inc Eurostar, TGV and most of Europe – 120 x 90cm (120 x 80 x 50cm fits racks better); Italy – 110 x 80 x 40cm; Spain – 70 x 50 x 25cm.





Arrival in Spain. The tandem is in two bags, as it's equipped with S&S couplings to make packing easier

eurotunnel.com, tel: 01303 282201). The cycle service (including tandems), based on a minibus and trailer, operates twice a day, seven days a week. A standard single or day trip is £16 and a return £32.

Ferry: Dover-Calais with SeaFrance (**www.seafrance.com**, tel: 0871 663 2546) can cost as little as £10 each way, with the bike free. Bikes are carried free on trains from Calais to Boulogne, and from there to Paris. The further west you go the more expensive the ferries become – Brittany Ferries (**www.brittany-ferries.co.uk**, tel: 08705 360360) has a pricing structure that favours car travel. LD Lines (**www.ldlines.co.uk**, tel: 0870 428 4335) Portsmouth-Le Havre is a cheap alternative. The P&O Hull-Zeebrugge (**www.poferries.com**, tel: 08705 980 333) and Rosyth-Zeebrugge (**www.superfast.com**, tel: 0870 234 2222) ferries are popular with cyclists from the north of the UK. See **www.voiesvertes.com** for 'Sustrans' style routes from some ports.

French trains: Most French local/regional trains carry bikes. Some TGV (high-speed) trains carry four bikes. Corail TéoZ trains operate long-distance routes and these and some night and international services carry six bikes. You can also send a complete bike as unaccompanied baggage between over 1,000 stations (£26) or to an address (£33) but it can take two days. See **www.velo.sncf.com**, **www.mdb-idf.org/dossiers/viepratiqu/train_velo.html** and CTC info sheet frinf1 for details. If crossing Paris by bike, download a bike map from **www.paris.fr** (search 'velo carte').

Belgian trains: Bikes carried on most internal services.

THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch Flyer (**www.dutchflyer.co.uk**, tel: 08705 70 70 70), is a 'rail and sail' deal from East Anglia and London to anywhere in Holland via the Harwich-Hoek of Holland ferry (six hours, from around £25 single, plus

CARBON COSTS

Aircraft emissions are a potent blend of greenhouse gases, which have a greater impact than just the carbon dioxide alone. The UN's climate change body, the IPCC, recommend that CO2 emissions from flying should be multiplied by between 2 and 4 to cover this full impact – known as 'radiative forcing'.

According to Government figures, air travel currently accounting for 13% of UK total greenhouse gas emissions, and forecasts suggest that emissions from aviation could make up our entire CO2 allowance by 2050. Scientists fear that we're going to have to choose between flying and everything else.

You can 'offset' your emissions by paying someone else to reduce theirs, although there is still a lot of scepticism over whether this has any effect. Offsetting one tonne costs about £9 – you can calculate journey emissions and offset them at **www.co2balance.uk.com**, tel: 0845 094 262.

However it's always better to not pollute in the first place. By cutting your personal carbon emissions you can be sure you are having a direct and immediate effect – meeting the urgency of addressing climate change. For more, see **www.lowflyzone.org**.

These are the estimated carbon emissions per passenger for someone travelling from London to Edinburgh, one way.

PLANE: 96.4kg

CAR: 71kg

– based on one person in a medium-sized petrol car.

TRAIN: 11.9kg

COACH: 9.2kg

You can't go by ferry. Its carbon costs are approx 5.5kg per person per 100 miles.



BIKES ABROAD

bike reservation fees). P&O ferries sail Hull-Rotterdam overnight (for trains to Amsterdam, Brussels or Cologne) and DFDS (www.dfds.co.uk, tel: 0870 5333 000) sail Newcastle-Amsterdam overnight – a hub of the night-train network. Bikes are carried on InterCity trains.

GERMANY and SWITZERLAND

Deutsche Bahn run a widespread network going well beyond Germany. Bikes carried on many services except Thalys and ICE high-speed trains (except unofficially in bike bags). CityNightLine (www.citynightline.ch) are a Swiss rail company operating night trains that carry bikes, tandems, trailers etc. Deutsche Bahn night trains are being incorporated under this brand, and various changes are imminent. One-way 'SparNight' tickets that extend to neighbouring countries start from £21.

SPAIN

The Brittany Ferries Plymouth-Santander ferry and P&O Portsmouth-Bilbao ferries are the most relaxing way to reach Spain (see 'I did it'). Bagged bikes are accepted on the night Paris-Madrid and Paris-Barcelona trainhotels if your group occupies the whole compartment. Slow local and 'Regionales' trains carry bikes without a reservation. The independent FEVE line (www.feve.es) is recommended (see 'I did it'). Most bus operators carry bikes if booked beforehand and bagged. See www.viasverdes-ffe.com/ven_entren.htm for 'Sustrans' style routes and public transport info, and CTC sheet spinf2.

SCANDINAVIA and the BALTIC

The DFDS Newcastle-Stavanger-Bergen (Norway) ferry takes 24 hours (from £120 return), and the Harwich-Esbjerg (Denmark) service takes 19 hours (from £90 return). Most Norwegian, Danish, and Finnish trains and some in southern Sweden carry bikes. The Denmark-Sweden rail link accept bikes, no reservation required. From Sweden there are ferries to Finland and all the Baltic countries. Most rural buses in Norway also carry bikes.

"On most ferry services you can roll on with just about any kind of cycle. The cost to take a bike is modest or free and space pretty much unlimited."

ICELAND and FAROE ISLES

The Smyril Line ferry (www.smyril-line.com) operates Scrabster-Tórshavn (Faroes)-Seyðisfjörður (Iceland) via Shetland (TBC), and also connects Denmark and Norway. Returns to Iceland from £185 including bike and couchette. Agent: Dick Phillips (tel: 01434 381 440), Iceland and cycling expert. Iceland has no trains but buses carry bikes if there's room.

IRELAND

Great value walk-on 'rail and sail' (www.sailrail.co.uk, tel: 08450 755755) deals from all parts of the UK and Ireland via Rosslare-Fishguard, Holyhead-Dublin and Stranraer-Belfast. Typical return £50 plus bike fees. Bikes carried on Intercity trains and many buses. For suggestions on getting to CTC's 2008 AGM in Belfast, see the links from www.ctc.org.uk/agm.

Special thanks to all the CTC members who provided information for this article (via the message board).



Many Norwegian trains have a full-size baggage van, in which a tandem will fit easily

I DID IT!

NORTH WEST SPAIN BY FERRY AND TRAIN

COLIN FRENCH

I travelled to Galicia via the Brittany Ferries Plymouth-Santander service, taking 20 hours. It cost £234 return with a berth in a 4-berth cabin. I continued on by the FEVE railway that connects most of the towns from Bilbao to Ferrol in Galicia. The train is very bike- and tandem-friendly with a roomy luggage van, no reservations required. We broke our train journey several times, riding various sections. It's a slow train, taking two 6-8 hour days if you go the whole way (£47 return). In all a very smooth and relaxing trip.

GERMANY AND SWITZERLAND BY TRAIN

BRIGITTE KNOCHÉ

This year I travelled from London to Paris by Eurostar and then on to Strasbourg by TGV train so that I could start a two-week tour. All my reservations were made very efficiently by Rail Europe in London. The total cost including cycle fees was about £200. It took about 8 hours each way including check-in time and allowing 90 min in Paris which was ample. I sent my bike ahead through the Eurostar baggage system. This service was great. I dropped my bike off 24 hours before I left and it was there when I got to Paris. As the weather was poor in Switzerland I used the trains frequently and they were fantastic – always space for a bike and easy to get on and off. In Germany in the Black Forest area you can take your bike by train, free, after 9.30am. With planning, the whole trip was quite an easy operation.

FRANCE BY EUROPEAN BIKE EXPRESS

SHARON CLIFFORD

I've made a few trips with European Bike Express and like them because of the very helpful and friendly staff, and bikes and tandems are taken excellent care of. The cost of a trip to Montpellier in 2007 was £202, including a £10 discount for CTC members, and took about 20 hours. The downside is travelling for a long time on a coach, though there are stops and obviously the ferry crossing to break it up. It has been late just twice. Some stops/pick-ups are in the middle of the night but located near credit card swipe-entry hotels, which can be pre-booked. On the whole, a very good service.

