





# Making tracks to Verbier

For the long downhills of real mountains, British mountain bikers fly south to the Pyrenees or Alps. **Clive Andrews** did it differently – and went by train

**T**wo taxis pulled up at the hectic international departures area. We paid the drivers and hauled five bike bags and five holdalls onto luggage trolleys. Beside me were the same four friends I've been meeting every summer of the past few years for our annual mountain biking holiday.

Like many British mountain bikers, we love riding the hills, forests and valleys of the UK, but we relish the occasional trip to somewhere with real mountain singletrack – the kind of trails where a full-suspension bike, with five or more inches of travel, feels at home. This particular trip was no different, except in one major detail. Our starting point was not Gatwick or Heathrow but London St Pancras International. The travel documents in our hands were train tickets.

## Trains of thought

We had decided that travelling overland to the Alps or Pyrenees could make for an

interesting and greener alternative to our usual habit of flying. And maybe it would be a more civilised change from the chaos of airports and excess baggage wrangles. But could it be done? Could we continue our habit of riding the world's finest mountain biking locations without flying?

The Swiss resort of Verbier was an ideal destination. As well as enjoying a superb reputation for challenging singletrack and useful ski lifts, it is close to major rail routes. A Eurostar to Paris, a TGV south through France, and then Swiss regional trains could take us from London to the mountains.

We made enquiries with Rail Europe early, before our required tickets were available. Eurostar tickets were being released for sale four months before travel and tickets for French and Swiss trains were set to become available a month later. Buying tickets in advance would save money.

After some research and some constructive help from Rail Europe staff, we secured a route for the very reasonable return price **»**

## ALPINE MOUNTAIN BIKING



(Top) Waiting for an underground train at Gare de Lyon  
(Above) Geneva station, changing trains on the Swiss border. 'Si's not convinced we need the Milan train,' notes Clive  
(Right) With time to kill in Paris, the group hired Velibs to go exploring



of £130 per person – competitive with some of the low-cost European airfares, once everything was factored in. (Since our trip, prices have increased – this fare would now be priced from £189.)

To get the most affordable route, we chose an itinerary that meant changing not only at Paris, but at Geneva, Lausanne and Martigny before its arrival at La Châble, at the foot of Verbier's ski area. And for our return route, the best-priced tickets involved breaking our journey in Paris and spending a night in the French capital, then catching the following day's Eurostar back to London.

### French window

So it was that we found ourselves at the beautifully restored St Pancras station, checking in and wheeling our trolleys through a stunning architectural space that beats Gatwick, Heathrow or any other airport I've known. We located the train's storage space for our bike bags, found our reserved seats and settled aboard.

Bang on time, we silently pulled out of the impressive terminal and made our way through London's eastern suburbs and then Kentish countryside. Before long, Kent disappeared, the train slowed and

we were rumbling beneath the English Channel. We soon re-emerged into daylight and French green fields whooshed by. Our train reached Paris around two-and-a-half hours after having left London. So far, so good.

Our challenge had only just begun, however. We had around two hours to get from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon in order to catch our TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse) connection to Geneva. Studying a map, the best plan seemed to be to travel not on the Métro itself but one of the 'RER' lines – a double-decked train connecting Paris with its suburbs, running below street level.

All escalators were out of order, so we bundled our unwieldy bike bags down stationary steps onto the platforms of the RER 'D' line (known locally as the 'RER poubelle'). Our train was crammed with sweating passengers. We squeezed aboard, splitting into two groups in order to find space in two separate crowded vestibules.

At Gare de Lyon we hauled our bikes up another stationary escalator, wrestled our way through the crowded ticket barriers and emerged onto the busy station. Gare de Lyon is the major gateway for France's warm and sunny



(Left) Arrival in Martigny. There was supposed to be a train to Le Châble – but it was replaced with a bus  
(Below left) Having a breather before starting down the trail



south. High-speed TGV trains were lined up ready to speed their passengers to Nice, Marseille or even Spain. We climbed aboard our Geneva-bound train, secured our bike bags and unwrapped hastily purchased sandwiches and bottles of Orangina, moments before our carriage filled with a noisy group of French schoolchildren.

Au revoir, Paris. We settled into books and iPods as the view of the suburbs gave way to meadows, then green hills and, after a few hours, distant mountains.

All escalators were out of order, so we bundled our bike bags down stationary steps to the platform

Travelling this way revealed just how much the countryside of France changes as you journey south. I wondered idly if rather than watching the landscape from the window of an 180mph train, I wouldn't rather be cycling through it. It looked beautiful out there. The open fields, winding rivers and quiet lanes looked a cycle tourist's paradise. But for the time being our eyes lay on a different prize – the

mountains that were beginning to loom into view.

Three hours and 45 minutes after leaving Paris we pulled alongside Geneva station's international platform, disembarked and displayed our passports to French and Swiss 'douanes'.

## Into the Alps

A train to Lausanne was next. The contrast between the TGV and smaller Swiss regional train was conspicuous. With limited storage space, we ended up piling our

bike bags into an awkwardly shaped corner in the end of a carriage. We rattled along with dust, sunshine and the smells of summer drifting in through the open windows

of the warm train – a welcome change from the air-conditioned environment of the TGV. We played cards on the train floor, sipped on a shared hipflask – the first tittle of the holiday – and felt like real travellers. In the best traditions of cyclists' rail travel, we were adjacent to the toilet – a toilet through whose cavity you could actually see the tracks whooshing beneath. As I say, this was no TGV.

## ALL ABOARD!

When you're travelling by train and cycling at your destination you've got three options: wheel the bike aboard, bag it as luggage, or hire a bike when you get there.

An assembled bike is easy to wheel around and can be ridden between connecting stations. But on many rail services, carriage of non-folding bikes is limited. Connections by underground train, bus or taxi will be more difficult or even impossible.

**Eurostar:** Complete bikes may be booked aboard, costing £20 each way. Bagged bikes may be transported free as regular baggage.

**TGV:** Trains and routes vary greatly with regard to bikes. Check carefully at time of booking, or assume an assembled bike will not be permitted.

**UK rail:** Unless your journey begins in London itself, don't let an oversight at this vital stage spoil the first or last leg of your journey.

**Other regional rail in Europe:** This will depend on the service you intend to take, and should be checked in advance when booking. Expect more tolerance, and less cost, when dealing with bagged bikes rather than complete machines.

## In the bag

You can get a decent padded bike bag for under £100. Wheels at one corner make platform dashes easier. Packing a bike for rail travel is less nerve-wracking than readying one for flying. Nevertheless, consider vulnerable areas like dropouts (which can be braced with spare hubs, bolt-through axles or stubs of wood) and rear mechs (which can easily be removed). If a bag is required solely for admission to a train, a DIY cloth bag or CTC Plastic Bike Bag may be enough – see [ctcshop.org.uk](http://ctcshop.org.uk).

Any bagged bike is bulky to carry, so even though you don't have the weight limitations imposed by airlines, it's important not to overload yourself. You'll need to get yourself plus bike plus other luggage along platforms and maybe up and down stairs.

## Hire at your destination

Depending on your destination, local shops may be able to provide the equipment you need for your riding. In the case of Verbier, quality bikes can indeed be hired from several shops, though the cost is not insignificant. Consider also the benefit of familiarity with your own bike, and don't overlook the issue of brakes – which will be set up so the front brake is on the left. Check with any resort-based hire shop before you travel to avoid a nasty surprise at the first corner!

## ALPINE MOUNTAIN BIKING

At Martigny, low wide platforms and elderly trains rested between hillsides. Snowy peaks were visible through the sunny haze. By now well-practised at the routine of helping each other to marshal our luggage, we made an enormous pile beside a bench and revelled in the mountain view. Then we found that our final train – to Le Châble – had been replaced with a bus... There was just space aboard for us and our baggage pile.

Forty minutes later we arrived at a railway station sitting at the end of a rural branch line, with a ski lift rising by one of its platforms. A resort bus took us up the many winding switchbacks to Verbier. Our rented chalet, booked in advance, was only around 200 metres from the bus stop. Having spent over ten hours dragging my heavy bike bag halfway across Europe, it felt much further.

Our chalet was a comfortable but basic rented affair, booked online, with vintage ski paraphernalia tacked onto the walls. Our small group filled every bed, including the fold-down bunks frequently found in rented ski accommodation.

One option we could have considered would be a package of accommodation and guiding from an established operator like Bike Verbier. For mostly budgetary reasons, we had opted for a more independent style of biking holiday, based around self-catering, local maps and our own sense of direction.

Following a well-earned cup of tea, we began a vital ritual of these holidays – the assembly of the bikes. On previous trips, this process has involved nervously examining air-freighted bikes for bent derailleur hangers and other signs of damage. No such worries this time as our bikes had not left our sides all day. No forklift, conveyor belt or over-enthusiastic baggage handler had been near our machines.

### Time to hit the trails

Our chalet was a short ride from the bustling centre of Verbier. The village sits within a bowl-shaped landscape, with 'gondola' ski lifts running above and below

the resort. From Verbier, one can choose to negotiate the trails that wind down toward Le Châble before catching the gondola back to the village, or to be lifted high into the mountains. Bikers can descend back to Verbier's centre, traverse the hillside, or drop into another of the valleys that make up the lift area, like La Tzoumaz.

Of course, to access all of this, one needs to purchase a lift pass. A mountain biking holiday in a resort like Verbier could be endured without one, but to get more than just a taste of the fabulous winding singletrack that brings riders like us to the Alps, not to buy a lift pass would represent a false economy.

We bought week-long passes – electronically enabled cards identical to those used during winter ski holidays. (Currently 112 Swiss francs.) Our first lift of the holiday was to the Les Ruinettes lift station, at 2,200m, via a gondola lift. The first time you board a ski lift with a mountain bike feels like a clumsy operation, flipping your bike onto its rear wheel before lifting it and hooking the front wheel onto a hook above the gondola door. This quickly becomes easier with practice. After securing the bike, you hop into the slowly moving gondola, take a seat and the doors automatically shake closed behind you. The gondola

We jumped out of the gondola, unhooked our bikes, and pushed out into the Alpine daylight

then engages with the high-speed cable and is whisked suddenly from the shady noisy environment of the lift station and out into bright sunshine.

In a few minutes, the Ruinettes lift station approached, the gondola slowed and then plunged back into a shady hall of whirring machines and clattering doors. We jumped out, unhooked our bikes and pushed out into the daylight.

There's something special about the first moment you tighten your



kneepads, clip together your helmet straps and begin the first downhill run of a holiday like this. After the hassle of the journey, the moment when you're actually rolling, your gears are clicking into place, your front wheel is pointing down the first section of singletrack is the moment an enormous smile spreads across your face. You're glad you made the effort.

### Alpine highs

The riding above Verbier is a mix of marked 'bike park' runs and more established trails shared diplomatically with walkers. The best singletrack of Verbier's bowl makes the most of its elevation not by plummeting straight back to the resort centre but by winding and criss-crossing its way through forested areas and Alpine meadows.

We enjoyed a fabulous week. Days of riding often began with a 'warm-up' run from Verbier down to Le Châble, twisting through between streams and chalets before catching a gondola back up through Verbier to the more challenging routes above the resort. We sometimes traversed the high-altitude trails before dropping down deserted trails into other villages. To sample the true scale of our surroundings we caught the 'Jumbo' cable car high up beyond the treeline to Col des Gentianes,



(Left) Almost back in Le Châble. The group took the DIY approach instead of a package deal, so picked their own routes each day

at nearly 3,000m. Singletrack was in short supply at such heights, but we marvelled at our snowy surroundings before haring down the switchback trail returning us to the green valleys below.

Contented evenings were generally spent self-catering and supping cool beers on our chalet terrace. Eating and drinking in the restaurants and bars of Verbier was expensive, so became an occasional treat.

After a week of accumulated thrills, exhaustion, minor injuries and mild sunburn, the time came to begin our return journey. We repackaged the dusty bikes, caught the bus down to Le Châble and, after a cup of tea with an ex-pat friend living in the valley, boarded the first train to Martigny, and then onto Lausanne. There was no stop in Geneva this time, and our TGV took us across the French border on our way to Paris. Immigration officials boarded the train and checked passports in the manner of ticket inspectors as we sped along.

### Mountain bikers on roadsters

The major difference between our outbound and inbound journeys was that having arrived in Paris, our Eurostar back to London was not due until the following day. We'd pre-booked a bargain hotel near Gare du Nord, so once we had

endured the cross-town RER we checked in, locked the bikes in the hotel's store room and headed out into the warm Paris evening for beer and food.

Next morning a ride around Paris beckoned, but our bikes remained awkwardly packed away. Paris's Vélib rental bikes allowed us a way of seeing the city without having to unpack our off-roaders. We used credit cards to set up temporary accounts and checked out our first Vélib bikes – well documented as the functional grey-brown precursors to the two-tone blue machines now scattered around central London.

Our day as tourists took us to Centre Pompidou, Montmartre and Notre Dame. We rode the Champs Elysées and tackled the formidable Arc de Triomphe roundabout aboard our Vélib bicycles – a daunting experience for even the most confident urban cyclist. We happily ate crêpes and drank fizzy lager in the warm sunshine.

This was the perfect way to end our adventure. After our action-packed week of rocky Alpine fun, it was wonderful to laze around Paris as regular cyclists and sightseers. Our overland trip to the mountains had brought its own challenges, but gave us experiences and opportunities that would have been lost if we'd begun our mountain journey at Gatwick Airport.

### WISH YOU WERE THERE?

European rail bookings can be made through several providers. Most have access to tickets across all of Europe. Online booking is straightforward, but a phone call to a knowledgeable reservations consultant can be a helpful way to compare options and routes for more complicated plans.

### Booking your trains

**Rail Europe:** raileurope.co.uk 08448 484 064

**Deutsche Bahn:** bahn.com 08718 80 80 66 (8p/min)

**SNCF:** sncf.com

**TGV-Europe:** tgv-europe.com

### Useful information

**seat61.com** – the definitive guide to world travel by train

**mayq.com** – a basic but handy source of advice for cycling in Europe

**verbinet.com** – a wealth of information about Verbier, including accommodation, lifts and weather

**sbb.ch** – Swiss railways

### Holiday ideas

With the ideas below, you can travel independently or arrange your accommodation and bike guiding with a specialist like Saddle Skedaddle, Basque MTB or CTC.

### Biking holidays

#### • Mountain biking in the Basque country

Eurostar to Paris Gare du Nord. Métro to Paris Gare Montparnasse. TGV to Biarritz or Hendaye. Journey: 7hr 15m. Price: from £140 return. More information from Basque MTB: [basquemtb.com/travel-mountain-bikes-and-the-train-to-the-basque-country/](http://basquemtb.com/travel-mountain-bikes-and-the-train-to-the-basque-country/)

• **Finale Ligure** – stunning coastal rocky singletrack. Eurostar to Paris. Sleeper to Milan. Journey: 11 hours. Price: from £169 return.

### And if mountain biking isn't for you...

#### • The Bavarian Lakes

London to Brussels by Eurostar, then Brussels to Cologne (via Thalys or ICE trains). Or London to Paris, then City Night Line to Munich. Journey: from 8 hours. Price: from £289 via Brussels/Cologne or £269/£229 via Paris (couchette/seats).

#### • Roubaix, Flanders and Classics country

Eurostar to Lille. Journey: 1hr 30m. Price: from £65 return. Explore the area around Roubaix, Bruges and Flanders country that hosts the classic Ronde van Vlaanderen.