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DESTINATIONS

Six European Train Tales Train Sprint, Part 1

By Ethan Gelber, GORP Editor

Venice, the heat of 1991. I was working as a bicycle tour guide, and the summer so far had been a good one: The weather was working steadily in our favor — not a drop of rain seen for weeks — group dynamics were self-propelling, and the horizon was clear of logistical sink holes. Clear, that is, except for the threat of war in what was then Yugoslavia. Oh, there had been skirmishes, shots fired, politicians postured and all, but outright war still seemed unlikely. So unlikely, in fact, that notoriously skittish American tourists were still flocking to Venice, a city nowhere near the noise of rebellion and nascent nationalism, but to the geographically imploded American mindset, close enough to think second thoughts about.



Swiss train speeds . . . as fast as I had hoped to go

Then, true to the nature of unexpected things, real fighting did begin. And the clear trip-organization horizon grew cloudy. The overnight train my clients would be taking from Venice to Munich (but which began somewhere deep in Yugoslavia) was cancelled. The timing was doubly bad since I was due to be relieved by one of my colleagues so I could scamper off across Europe to a wedding in central England.

Thus the great train sprint began. Hold on tight.

Before I could go anywhere, I had to find alternative on-board sleeping accommodations for my clients leaving Italy. Unfortunately, owing to the famous vagaries of the newly computerized Italian train reservation system, let's just say that this was easier said than done. But we succeeded. My colleague coming to relieve me would meet me in Bologna and bring with him the clients' new reservations (made for a train coming from Bologna!). We could meet, he could guard the reserved beds, and I could catch a train to Milan, where I would

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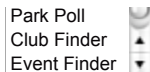
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meet my overnight train to Paris.

It was a perfect plan. But, like all perfect plans banking on the reliability of the Italian national railroad, it was doomed to failure.

Oh, for the excess of perfection and promptness of the Swiss. Swiss trains run, well . . . they run like clockwork. German trains are similarly punctilious about respecting schedules, although the hard-nosed attempt to keep trains on time sometimes seems more important than actually *being* on time. Ditto the modern French.

But the Italians? Well, that Mediterranean sense of flexible time has pervaded everything. Even the trains. Sure, the conductors and stationmasters try to keep everything running smoothly. They just don't seem to succeed. And the worst possible feeling a commuter can have is that haunting awareness of seconds ticking . . . and ticking . . . and ticking . . . but without any forward progress being made.

And so it was that summer evening in 1991; all the wheels of my perfect plan had been set in motion . . . until the engine ground to a halt.

To this day I do not know what happened, but somewhere between Ferrara and Bologna, my train slowed to a canter, then a trot, then a walk, then a limp, a crawl, and then just stopped. And didn't move for 30 minutes. So much for the 50-minute transfer buffer during which my colleague and I could chat. I took advantage of the delay to write down everything I would otherwise have said.

When we put-putted into Bologna, my colleague was waiting nervously on the platform. He quickly informed me that my connecting train was also delayed (the only advantage to a congenitally tardy system) so all was not lost. But we had no time to lose. We talked quickly; I dumped the essentials on him and he thrust my own all-important train reservations and plane tickets at me. After switching platforms, we stood, he on the platform and me on the steps leading up to one of the cars of my train, until the whistle blew. I held the door open with my shoulder and he jogged alongside the departing train until it sped out of the station. The slam of the released door released me too from my tour guide duties. I settled into a seat.

My thoughts turned elsewhere: to the wedding, the series of train connections I needed to make — Bologna to Milan, Milan overnight to Paris, Paris regional train service to the airport, flight to Stansted, another (British) train, and so on. It would be a long trip, but recuperative too.

Until, once again, everything ground to a halt.

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DESTINATIONS

Six European Train Tales Train Sprint, Part 2

By Ethan Gelber, GORP Editor

We had already started 20 minutes behind schedule, but my 60-minute transfer window in Milan seemed sufficient. With 40 minutes to spare, all was still well. Ditto at 30 minutes. Even at 20. At 15, I started sweating. The train had set off again, but not at a swift pace. We were not far from Milan, but I cannot count how many times I have sat on a stalled train within site of the main station platforms.



The rail yard leading into Milan's central station

And then, sure enough, the train stopped. Dead. We were all trapped, with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Curses in ten languages hissed into the still night . . . and hopeful expectation with it when the overnight train to Paris chugged out of the station on adjacent rails, within arm's reach but untouchable. We were too late.

What were the next steps? Too many for one person, so a grumbling gang of fellow backpackers and I organized. Those with missed reservations gave them all to a German couple that accosted the conductor and had him annotate them for exchange or refund. We sent a Swedish trio in search of cheap wine to get us through the inevitable wait. And the rest of us, led by the Italians, stormed our way to the front of the line at the information window for a review of alternatives.

For most, the next Paris-bound train was sufficient. But it got to Paris too late for me to get to the airport on time. There were however two other options, both night trains sweeping up Italy's west coast and then through the French countryside to the capital. I could catch one in Genoa, but a better bet would be to go to Modane (on the French-Italian border) and board a train there. The problem: Both options put me on another Italian train that would have to be on time. I gambled on the connection at Modane, opting to stop three stations short of the border and intercept my express there before my train could fall too far behind.

It was a wise decision. My

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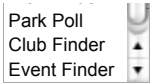
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train arrived 30 minutes late (more than the scheduled 20-minute lag between trains) . . . but so did the overnight train! It was possible that I would arrive in Paris with just enough time.

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But I was on the trip from hell. Nothing came easily.

There were no *couchettes* left so I had to squeeze my way into second-class seating between a Swiss and a Ukrainian (the latter very much a rarity at the time). At Modane, French border police checked all passports. They didn't like mine (twice laundered, with the picture peeling up), but didn't press the case. The Ukrainian, on the other hand, apparently had no visa. *That* was a problem. And it delayed the train almost 30 minutes. We eventually left without him.

When we arrived in Paris the next morning, the train was almost 50 minutes late. I could foresee calamity at the airport so I had hastily repacked my bags. I was carrying a lot and wanted to be able to run through the airport without checking anything. At the Lyon train station in Paris, I jumped from the train before it came to a halt, ran to the lockers where I deposited what I wouldn't need, and then sprinted to the regional train. I was twitching all the way to the airport.

When I reached the check-in desk, it was only 10 minutes before my flight's scheduled departure. A woman told me I was too late. I told her I didn't care and to call ahead to the departure gate to tell anyone there that I was coming. I had done all I could to get that far and refused to give up.

At the gate, five minutes later, sweating profusely, barely able to speak, I was told in no uncertain terms that I had missed my flight. Crestfallen, I pleaded. I was the best man in a wedding, I lied. The trains . . . the trains . . . I tried to tell. No, monsieur, I was told. Nothing to be done. The next flight was in six hours — too late for me — so I should relax. Was there anything that could be done, I begged. Nothing. After so much.

And then, hope springing eternal, a large Texan appeared at my left with a mousy apologetic Frenchman beside him. The Texan, stoic beneath his ten-gallon hat, his thumbs hooked into a thick leather belt and holding back a stylish jacket, glowered at the cowering departure gate attendant. The latter listened as the Frenchman, a representative of another airline, unfurled a tale of missed connections, lost luggage, found luggage, delays, etc. It came down to this: The Texan was supposed to be on the flight to England — my flight — and although he had not made it, his luggage had. Now, either the luggage had to come off or he had to get on.

Five minutes later, a special bus was run out to the plane. Three people were on board: the Texan, the ever-apologetic but triumphant Frenchman (to see the Texan all the way on to the plane) . . . and me.

The wedding was amazing.

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