

Twenty seven European capital cities, 46 trains, 21 days... the gruelling odyssey facing an intrepid group of Europhiles – and one solitary Brexiteer.

**JOOLS STONE** speaks to the man behind it all



Last October the European Parliament debated a proposal to gift all EU citizens with free InterRail passes on their 18th birthday. In the words of European Commissioner for Transport Violeta Bulc: “to give young Europeans the chance to discover Europe and encourage them to travel in an environmentally friendly way.”

While the idea was met with broad approval, some reservations were expressed about its financial and administrative viability. This led to a further proposal in March for a ‘youth mobility initiative’ called ‘Move2Learn, learn2Move’ which will help at least 5,000 young Europeans enrolled on the Erasmus e-Twinning Programme to travel around Europe for free.

InterRail may not be the essential rite of passage it once was for gap year students and other young Britons, but there’s every reason to consider hitting the rails sooner rather than later. One reason is that while Brits will still be able to InterRail post-Brexit, the business of securing visas will likely be onerous and time-consuming.

The other reason is that Europe’s rail network, once the envy of the world, is gradually fragmenting. Recent years have seen numerous night trains fall under the axe, including the entire City Night Line network which connected huge swathes of central Europe in the twilight hours, while even cross-border services in some parts of Europe are sadly depleted.

If you get a shuffle on, you could still visit all 27 EU state capitals in one trip, undertaken mainly by train. One group of seriously dedicated rail travellers and (mostly) committed Europhiles are doing precisely that next summer.

Setting off from Dublin on Friday July 13, 2018, their trip takes in no fewer than 46 trains, 23 countries, 27 cities, some strategic ferries and taxis, and ends with two flights to reach the remoter EU outposts of Cyprus and Malta, before winging it back to Blighty a mere 21 days later.

Leading the charge is rail travel fanatic Mark Lester, a 54-year-old software engineer and Yahoo alumnus from Weston-super-Mare. Inspired by the tumultuous political events of the past year, Lester has christened the trip ‘the Euro Love Train’. Its mission, aside from being a fantastic excuse for the mother of all European rail trips of course, is to spread the message that there are many on these islands who still cherish their European identity.

He describes the trip as ‘a mobile adult picnic’. “It’s essentially one big, rolling celebration of European culture, diversity, food and scenery,” he adds.

“The cumulative effect of hitting new capitals every day will leave you in awe of your civilization, and perhaps change who you think you are. The experience will live with you for years, maybe even a lifetime.”

You might be forgiven for thinking this trip would set you back thousands, but that’s not the case. Armed with First Class InterRail passes, plus supplements and a few nights’ hostel accommodation, the group are making the pilgrimage for around £1,300 each, all in. The single most expensive element of the whole trip is the 90-minute ferry from Valletta to Sicily, costing £100.

Lester has organised similarly high-octane rail trips in recent years across India (2010’s Great Indian Railway Challenge) and Europe (2013’s splendidly-named DisOrient Express).

So why are they travelling at such a hectic pace, and in the height of summer, when surely the broiling trains will be at



Top, Mark Lester peers out as his train crosses the Landwasser viaduct, on Switzerland’s stunning Albula line, during an earlier European trip.

Photo: Paul Clarke

Above, a map of the group’s planned route next year

their busiest? “It will be sunny, and not dark, and also not term time which helps some of us,” he says. “The only downside will be the amount of kids on the rails, but we’re booking out entire first class carriages which solves that.”

Might all this frantic rail travel prove a tad exhausting for some, more like work than leisure? “Some people say ‘you’re not going to see anything’, and while it’s true that the pace of our trip is dictated by the railway metronome, that’s just nonsense,” he insists. “The real party happens on the train. You get a decent flavour of what these destinations are about just by travelling through them, popping into a station café or deli to test out your rudimentary language skills. And, of course, sampling the local food and drink produce, which we’re especially diligent about. You soon get into the rhythm of it and actually when you do stop overnight, as we’ll be doing in a handful of cities, after a while it feels weird to not be moving while you sleep.”

The Euro Love Train will carry around 18 travellers at various stages of the journey,

with a hardcore contingent of around 10 completing the entire trip. They are an assortment of Brits, Irish, continental Europeans and exiled Americans. Interestingly, one of the party is even a confirmed Brexiteer.

“With this trip, we’re putting the emphasis firmly on ‘love’,” Lester says. “Colin is the solitary Brexit voice on board, so we’re deliberately avoiding the B word.”

One highlight is expected to come in Paris, where the travellers arrive just in time to witness the final stage of the Tour de France pedalling its way into the city. Next year is also a football World Cup summer, and the group are scheduled to be in Berlin during the final – and, if recent tournaments are anything to go by, there’s a fair chance Germany may be involved.

Many of the journeys on their route are highly scenic of course, such as the Bernina Express which glides over Switzerland’s Bernina Pass in glass-topped wagons. You don’t need to be trainspotter to enjoy this trip, but it probably helps.

Lester has learned some key lessons from previous rail challenges. One has been that the group has upgraded to First Class InterRail passes this time – mainly so they can sensibly use the showers provided. The travellers are also planning to take a set of 30 litre picnic hampers with them, and have their own culinary expert on board whose chief responsibility is to refill these in city stops – some of which have a fiendishly tight turnaround, just 56 minutes in Vienna, for example.

The group will also be pre-ordering picnic food at certain stops such as Rome and Vienna, where carefully selected local foodies have been commissioned to greet them on the platform, laden down with comestibles sourced from speciality food stores.

And the key to ensuring everyone gets on and the Euro Love Train does not descend into a Euro Hate Train? “Oh that’s easy,” says Lester. “Just don’t invite any wankers.”

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### INTERRAIL FOR BEGINNERS

InterRail was established in 1972. It now connects 30 countries across more than 170,000 kilometres of track. Some 300,000 travellers a year take advantage of the passes (ranging from 5 days to 30, with prices starting at 43 euros for a single country pass to 844 euros for 30 days’ continuous travel in first class) which provide unlimited travel on most rail routes in participating countries. Supplements apply on various high speed and premium services and to reserve sleeper accommodation. Buy passes at: [www.interrail.eu](http://www.interrail.eu) To get a good overview of current night train services and InterRail supplements, visit [www.rail.cc](http://www.rail.cc) To get the latest published railway timetables and the railway map of Europe, go to: [www.europeanrailtimetable.eu](http://www.europeanrailtimetable.eu) Find out more about the Euro Love Train, see their route map and learn how to follow in their tracks at: <https://gcerc.wordpress.com/2017/05/04/the-euro-love-train/>