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TRAVEL

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Ride the rails in Germany

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ARTICLE COMMENTS

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

McClatchy-Tribune News Service

LUDWIGSLUST, Germany — With my passport safely stuffed into a zipper pocket and the plane descending for an on-time arrival, there was nothing to be wound up about. But I couldn't help checking my watch as I climbed into a taxi headed for Berlin's train station, the Hauptbahnhof, which means "main railroad yard."

The driver, ignoring the rain, wove in and out of traffic for what seemed like hours — 38 minutes on the meter — until we pulled up at the entrance. Another minute and I was through the door and standing at the ticket counter, German rail pass in hand.

"American?" asked the ticket agent as he smiled and time-stamped my pass. "California," I answered, earning another, bigger smile. "Hollywood! Welcome to Berlin," he said, handing me a boarding ticket for the Dresden-bound train. He pointed toward the upper level and the restaurants and added, "The train goes in 90 minutes. If you're hungry, there's time enough to eat."

It couldn't have been easier. No gas-swilling car, no rental-agreement fine print, no overpriced parking lots. Just me, my Deutsche Bahn rail pass, a carry-on bag and a suitcase. The man in the bookstore had been right. In less than 24 hours, I was born again — as free as a hobo in an empty baggage car.

Three months earlier I'd been browsing through my neighborhood bookstore when a bearded stranger in his 30s stopped me. "Excuse me, ma'am. I see you're looking at the Germany guide book," he said, glancing at the cover. "Are you visiting Germany this summer? Have you thought about taking the train? It's a lot easier than driving."

Had I been planning to drive? I hadn't given it much thought. His comment got me thinking. I wondered if my rental-car habit wasn't merely a minor aberration, a need to be in charge and have the freedom to take the left fork instead of the right fork or to stop whenever and wherever I pleased. For me and most Americans, driving is second nature, a rite of passage, and it's especially true where I live. Los Angeles is infamous for its uber car culture.

For better or worse, Angelenos and cars have been twinned since the

If you go

- After searching several online sites, some of which access the same mind-bending options, I settled on

www.germanrailpasses.com/planning/timetables and an Adult First Class rail pass, for \$527, good for a month, with seven travel days. The Second Class rail pass, covering the same period, was \$391.

- The better-known Eurail Pass, available for travel in a minimum of two countries, costs \$610 and is good for two months and eight days of travel. For \$710, the same pass includes 10 days of travel.

- If you don't want a pass but do want to ride the rails, buy individual tickets in any German train station. For express trains between cities and for most trains, you won't need an assigned seat. If you want one, they're easy to get in low season. But on holidays or in peak seasons (summer), early reservations will be required.

More info:

- For destination information, contact the [German National Tourist Board](http://www.germany.travel/en/index.html) at <http://www.germany.travel/en/index.html>.

- German rail passes:

Advertisement area containing several placeholder boxes with a house icon and a blue arrow, and some partially visible text like 'E' and 'Pi'.

1940s, when the Automobile Club and the oil companies saddled up to promote their favorite hobby horse: cars, the gas to fuel them and the highways they depended on. The campaign was so successful that it delivered a fatal smackdown to the network of electric-powered street cars, the city's first and last far-seeing public transportation.

Nationally, Americans were routinely traveling by train, crisscrossing Woody Guthrie's prairies from east to west in comfort. You could board the San Francisco-bound train in New York or Chicago and expect springy window seats, clean sheets, good food, an observation car and a world of scenery. Once highways snaked out into every corner of North America, however, the passenger trains became collateral damage.

Not so in Europe. Rail service grew here, supplying essential transportation both between cities and in town. In Germany, where distances are shorter and cities and towns are close together, traveling by rail is fast and convenient, as well as affordable and clean. It's nearly as comfortable as the rear seat of a limousine, too — well, almost, but not quite.

If I'd been planning to explore Germany's hinterlands, wandering through farm fields and forests and over mountain passes, a car would have been a better choice. But I'd come to Germany for the sights and sounds of the city. I wanted to meet people, listen to music, tour urban neighborhoods and visit cathedrals. There were restaurants to be sampled, architecture to be evaluated and beer halls eager to serve me brews. I also wanted to linger unhurried in my favorite museums, without a tour guide telling me it was time to go.

The solution was to create a loop trip, with a stay in each city, a kind of connect-the-dots itinerary that included hotels in convenient locations, each one reasonably close to a rail station. There would be places and occasions where I had to take a taxi. But the cost and convenience far outweighed the cost of the rental, the fuel and the inevitable parking fees.

Just where do Deutsche Bahn trains go? Everywhere. The system counts 76,473 kilometers of track, and where the train goes, there are stations. Nor will you be stranded if you're staying at a suburban hotel or rural inn. Unless you're headed to a mountaintop, you'll find street cars and buses crossing routes nearby. With a map and your hotel address in hand, you'll never have to resort to the Hansel-and-Gretel cake-crumbs method of direction finding.

If your itinerary involves a train ride with more than one leg, say from Berlin to Leipzig, and then to Stuttgart, there'll be a train change in your future. To keep each leg as short as possible and to save on fares, look at a map of railway routes (there's a good one at www.raileurope.com), and plan a route that minimizes backtracking.

If you want to use a rail pass, you must buy it online before leaving home. The options vary immensely, so allot time to sort through the myriad possibilities, prices, benefits and discounts. A variety of tickets covers every situation: first or second class, local or express (the ICE trains), night or day, adult or youth, single traveler or family. Some passes attach other benefits handy for city touring, such as transportation on local streetcars and buses. Prices for this also vary by the season.

With your rail pass in your wallet you'll be set. Walk or take a taxi to the station and check your train and track on the departures screen. Your ticket will show your designated car. First-class cars are usually marked with a 1. Second class cars, a 2. If the cars are marked another way — it happens — show the conductor your ticket and he/she will direct you to the right car. If you're late and rushing up as the train is about to leave, jump in anywhere a conductor can be found still holding a door open. You can walk to your car from anywhere inside the train.

Once you've climbed aboard, find your seat, stow your luggage in the rack and settle in to read that guidebook or to snack on a meal from the train's food service counter (coffee, drinks, and hot and cold sandwiches). Then sit back to watch the scenery glide by and enjoy letting someone else do the driving.

www.germanrailpasses.com

• Eurail passes:
www.eurail.com/eurail-passes

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