



A regional train crossing the Schluchsee near the Black Forest, Germany.

McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

# Train travelers take the right track in Germany

Riding the rails among cities couldn't be easier thanks to dense network of routes

By ANNE Z. COOKE  
 McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

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, literally "main railroad yard."

The driver, ignoring the rain, wove in and out of the 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 with a smile, time-stamping my pass.

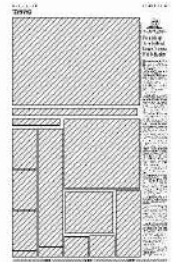
"California," I answered, earning another, bigger smile.

"Hollywood! Welcome to Berlin," he said, handing me a boarding ticket for the Dresden-bound train and pointing toward the upper level and the restaurants. "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 DeutscheBahn rail pass, a carry-on bag and a suitcase. In less than 24 hours I was born again, as free as a hobo in an empty baggage car.

## Clean and comfortable

In Germany, where distances are shorter and cities and towns are close together, traveling by rail isn't just fast and convenient, but affordable, clean, and nearly as comfortable — well, almost, but not quite — as the rear seat in a limousine.



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 anxious to serve me a brew. 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.

### Trains go everywhere

Just where do DeutscheBahn trains go? Everywhere. The system counts 47,518 miles 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 streetcars 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, you'll have to change trains. To keep each leg as short as possible and to save on train fares, look at a map of railway routes (there's a good one at [\[trains/deutsche-bahn/\]\(http://www.raileurope.com/europe-trains/deutsche-bahn/\)\), and plan a route that minimizes backtracking.](http://www.raileurope.com/europe-</a></p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

If you want to use a rail pass, you must buy it online before leaving home. The options vary immensely; allot time to sort through the myriad possibilities, prices, benefits and discounts.

An array 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, or any combination thereof. Some passes attach other benefits handy for city touring, such transportation on local streetcars and buses. Prices also vary by the season.

### Train spotting

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 display a "2." If the cars are marked another way — it happens — show the conductor your ticket and he or 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 the conductor still holds the 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).

Better yet, sit back to watch the scenery glide by and be thankful someone else is driving.

### If you go

Several online sites offer the same varieties of mind-bending options. The site [www.germanrailpasses.com/planning/timetables](http://www.germanrailpasses.com/planning/timetables) offered an Adult First Class rail pass for \$527, good for a month, with seven travel days. The Second Class rail pass, good for 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), you must reserve early.

For destination information, contact the German National Tourist Board at <http://www.germany.travel/en/index.html>. For German rail passes, go to [www.germanrailpasses.com/](http://www.germanrailpasses.com/). For Eurail passes visit <http://www.eurail.com/eurail-passes>.

— McClatchy-Tribune



MCCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

The autobahn and railway with an InterCity-Express train near Bad Hersfeld, Germany.