

TRAVEL

The best way to see Germany? All aboard!

A DeutscheBahn rail pass allows travelers to avoid the hassles of car rental, and the trains go everywhere.

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 (literally "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, 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 Deut- See **RAIL PASS** on N4



ICE 1, the intercity express train, in the Cologne train station. In Germany, where distances are shorter and cities and towns are close together, traveling by rail isn't just fast and convenient, but also affordable, clean, and comfortable. German National Tourist Board

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6 Nts **\$859***
Sun, Jun 1-8, 29
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A regional train in Germany crosses the Schluchsee near the Black Forest. The system counts 76,473 kilometers (about 47,520 miles) of track. Tourismus-Marketing GmbH Baden-Württemberg

Rail pass

Continued from N1

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. The man in the bookstore had been right.

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 you're book," he said, glancing at the cover of the book I was holding. "Are you visiting Germany this summer? Have you thought about taking the train?"

"It's a lot easier than driving," he told me with a knowing wink. "I had I been planning to drive? I hadn't given it much thought. Now I wondered if my rental-car habit was merely a minor aberration or the need to be in charge, the freedom to take the left fork instead of the right and to stop whenever and wherever. For me and most Americans, driving is second nature, especially where I live, in Los Angeles.

For better or worse, Angelesinos and cars have been twinned since the 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 to drive them on. The campaign was so successful that it delivered a fatal blow to the network of electric-powered street cars, the city's first and last far-seeing transportation.

By that time, 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. When highways snaked out into every corner of North America, the passenger trains became collateral damage.

But not in Europe, where rail service grew, 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 isn't just fast and convenient, but also affordable, clean, and nearly as comfortable — well, almost — as the rear seat in a limousine.

If I'd been planning to explore Germany's hinterlands, exploring 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 a brew. I also wanted to linger 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 parking fees.

Just where do DeutscheBahn trains go? Everywhere. The system counts 76,473 kilometers (about 47,520 miles) of track, and where the train



A traveler boards the train at Emden/East Friesland. Deutsche Zentrale für Tourismus e.V.



Passengers in the dining car on the train from Cologne to Hamburg. ALAN BEHR / McClatchy-Tribune

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.

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 www.raileurope.com/european-trains/deutsche-bahn/index.html), 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; all of them sort through the 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 as transportation on local street cars and buses. Prices 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 display 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 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 and be thankful someone else is driving.

✉ traveltalk@phillynews.com



An InterCity-Express (ICE) train crosses the autobahn near Bad Hersfeld, Germany. German National Tourist Board

PERSONAL JOURNEY

Out of North America and on to a Botswana safari

By Elizabeth Mager
FOR THE INQUIRER

For my son's high school graduation gift, I decided we would travel to Africa. When we vacationed together in the past, we visited national parks in the United States and Central America because we wanted to experience wildlife in its natural habitats. What better way to culminate our adventures than a safari in Africa?

The planning began. I desired a remote setting in a safe and progressive country that respected its natural treasures and worked diligently to protect them. Also, I longed for a camping experience where we lived in tents and ate outside by a wood fire.

We realized our dream in Botswana. This amazingly beautiful and friendly country in southern Africa fit the bill. Our group of seven visited the Chobe National Park, the Linyanti Reserve, and the Moremi Game Reserve, traveling between them by single-engine plane. We lived in 13-by-13-foot Meru-style tents with bucket showers. We enjoyed our early-morning breakfasts by the fire, and dined alfresco by candlelight. Lions roared at night and elephants chomped away on tree branches right outside our tents. In our 10 days traveling together, it was just our group, living in and surrounded by the wilderness.



The writer and friends in Botswana. She chose the wildlife adventure to mark her son's graduation. Courtesy ELIZABETH MAGER

accompanied us. Our leader, an ex-member of Botswana's elite anti-poaching force, entertained us with both funny and harrowing stories of life in the bush. Emmanuel constantly reminded us of the dangers, but we still felt safe with our experienced guides.

How to describe the safari? Daily early-morning and evening drives fascinated us because we never knew what we would see: elephants with their youngsters crossing the dirt road, an African fish eagle perched high in a tree, dozens of baby baboons leaping from tree to tree, making us laugh out loud. In addition to seeing these spectacular animals in their homes, we felt the vastness of the land, and experi-



The elusive female leopard in Linyanti Reserve.

enced the sights and sounds of Africa with our hearts. And the African light, especially the sunset, was breathtaking.

We saw giraffes, water buffalo, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, hyenas, and many colorful birds. Each serendipitous meeting, whether noticing a mother warthog and her two little ones scurry through the underbrush, observing the king of the jungle poised regally by a kill, or following the sleek, calm, and determined female leopard as she tried to elude us, was awe-inspiring. Our favorite sighting was arriving on the restful scene of a lioness and her two tiny cubs.

Realizing the world is diverse and full of beauty was the message I wanted to share with my

son on this trip. Stepping out of our familiar world and into a different one reminds us that, although life contains sad and bad events, it is also an adventure.

Elizabeth Mager writes from Oaks. Son Will is an adventurous sophomore at Boston University.

Did a travel experience move you, change you, or give you great memories? Email us how, in **500 words or fewer** (include a photo, caption information, and daytime phone number): inquirer.travel@phillynews.com. Put "Personal Journey" in the subject line. If we publish your piece, we'll pay you \$25. (Response volume prohibits our returning or acknowledging your submission.)