

No Obligation

Europe by Rail (free pancakes)

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The easiest way to get from London to Paris, from Waterloo Station to Gare du Nord is by rail. The Eurostar.

For the last minute traveler, it's the only way off the island. Last minute flights are too expensive, and boats take too long. Eurostar's chunnel service delivers travelers straight to central Paris in just two hours and forty minutes.

But the Eurostar is an evil stretch of track. Time and again it has led me to financial ruin and sleepless nights. Time and again it has thwarted me.

I have a Eurail pass that guarantees me rail travel in any one of 17 Western European countries. The U.K. isn't one of those seventeen countries, and so the Eurostar service costs about \$100 U.S. dollars each way. I paid \$300 for my Eurail pass, for the privilege to travel any fifteen days, anywhere in Europe, anytime during the next two months.

Every one and a half trips to the continent, seven hours total, costs me just as much as two full weeks on a train anywhere else in Europe, 360 hours straight, if I wanted. The Eurostar is sapping my funds.

Worse, time is running out. I'm only in Europe for another two weeks, and I'm wondering if I'll get the chance to use it.

This Eurail network I bought into... does it even exist? From where I sit, it's beginning to look like some kind of moving timeshare where they invite you in for free omelettes, and then send you packing with a worthless slip of paper and an overdraft notice.

And, like I said, the trouble is with Eurostar. Because to use my pass, I have to get to the continent. And to get to the continent I have to use the Eurostar. And the Eurostar takes me to Paris.

Between the scattered industry of south London, the dark stretches of tunnel underneath the English Channel, the well-tilled French countryside, and the well ordered Parisian streets, I doze in my seat, usually facing backwards.

And in two and a half Eurostar hours, when I roll into Gare du Nord and step from the platform, the ones I've come to see in this

city of romance and life, they've all eaten, they're all out.

Two hours and forty minutes, for me, on the train, is time enough to run the complete cycle of hunger: from peckish, to starving, and, finally, to the point where the stomach gives in, stops grumbling, and accepts what so many celebrities and rock stars and accountants and software executives come to accept at one point or another in their lives: accepts that it will always be alone, and that no substance, no injections of polysaccharides or simple proteins will ever change that. In two and a half hours, the stomach finally makes peace with its own emptiness, and because I sleep on the train, it does this by itself.

And I forget to eat.

This is important because, in my two long stays here, this city has embraced me with its beautiful buildings, and charmingly cramped elevators. With its lush parks and gleaming monuments. And I, faithfully, each time, have

left its bar floors and sidewalks with a fresh coat of bile.

Everything is small in France; glasses hold a quarter of what they do in England, but they refill them often, and it's easy to lose count after more than a dozen.

Earlier this weekend, I went from train to cab to buffet style French cuisine -- tables full with fresh meats, cheeses, bread and bottomless

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earthenware pitchers of vino. And, hour and a half later, empty red pitchers piled on the table, face red from singing French songs and toasting red glasses, I stumbled out and onto the street and the metro with freshly red splattered shoes.

I've escaped from Paris, from Eurostar, and used the "pass" exactly once, on a nine-hour sleeper from Paris to Munich, spending much of the overnight journey in a sort of Zen-like discomfort, crammed into a sleeping coach three inches too small. The French are a short people. Their trains are no different.

The sleeping compartments sleep six, and I shared mine with a few Dutch university students and a middle-aged French math teacher.

For nine hours straight, I endured the most resonant snoring I've ever heard, so vivid and graphic and loud that I could picture actual bits of phlegm shifting around and bouncing between the walls of this Frenchman's throat.

My father is a pretty decent snorer, and when we share hotel rooms, I keep my balled

WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



up dirty socks by the

side of my bed so I can chuck them at his hulking lump of noise in the middle of the night, bouncing them off his nose and forehead, and then racing him back to sleep before he starts again.

He hates this.

I don't speak French. I doubt I could've talked my way out of, literally, socking this spittle-spewing stranger in the face. So I spent that night, miserable, in my little short bed clutching my worn socks like stress balls, racing in darkness through the French countryside, a good bit of Switzerland, and the foothills of Bavaria.

When I got into Munich, I hobbled my way into a café, and, after coffee and a few moments thought, walked directly to a travel agent to book a return flight to London.

Time is running out. I've bought this rail pass, and I feel obligated to use it, expensive as it was.

I'm still in Paris now, I came four days ago for a quick holiday during my reading week. I have, at this moment, three hours to catch a night train to Barcelona for which I have no reservation, and my bag is filled with soiled clothes, clothes I packed last minute intending to clean them when I got here. Four days later, they're still as dirty as ever, I'm even worse, and I'm running late for my train.

I have a few train journeys left; the sleeper to Barcelona tonight should prove a good test. Watch the Spanish streets tonight; with luck, this latest rail journey will be kinder than my others.