

## Steve's Great Rail Journeys 2013-2017 - EUROPE



Until 2017 I worked as a freelance Tour Manager for Great Rail Journeys, leading tours by rail in the UK and Europe. The programme is busy and there is no opportunity to take detailed notes, so the tours are not included in the Journeys section of this page. The official tour programmes are on the GRJ website. In practice the highlights, both for the group and personally, are often the extras which can be organized during the tour. I write a brief summary of each tour on my return and this file has been put together from these notes and my personal recollection of tour highlights. This file covers tours to mainland Europe over the past five years (with the exception of Spain, which is included in the Spain pages).

### SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has been a key destination for Great Rail Journeys tours, from the earliest days of the company, due to the marvelous scenery and the variety of incredible railway journeys. Although the exchange rate makes Switzerland expensive, it remains one of the most popular destinations, both in summer and winter. The company has long-established links and contacts in Switzerland, and the number of tourists it brings to the country mean that it has very good deals with hotels. It would be difficult to do the same journey to the same standard for a similar price independently. Since 2007 I've taken over fifteen tours to Switzerland.

Many tours feature the **Glacier Express**, probably the most famous railway journey in Switzerland, and I have taken 8 of these tours since 2013. The tours include a rail pass for half fare travel across Switzerland on free days, which provides an opportunity to explore the country and its railways.



*The Stockalper Castle, Brig, guarding the Simplon Pass*

The most popular Glacier Express tour is the **Classic Glacier Express**, based in the towns of Brig and Chur. The tour includes the whole route of the Glacier Express from Zermatt to St. Moritz, and travels in first class throughout. **Brig** is a small town in the Rhone Valley at the foot of the Simplon Pass – extracting tolls from trade over the pass made the town prosperous. It is an important railway junction and an ideal base for excursions. **Chur** is a small and historic city on the upper reaches of the Rhine and is the capital of Graubunden canton. It is also a major railway junction between Swiss Federal Railways and the metre-gauge network of Rhaetian Railways throughout Graubunden.



*Alpenhorn Concert, Brig*



*The Matterhorn from Gornergrat in summer.*

The two included excursions from Brig are to Zermatt and Interlaken – both major alpine resorts with many options for onward journeys into the mountains by mountain railway or cable-car. **Zermatt** sits at the foot of the **Matterhorn** and most people opt to travel on the mountain railway to **Gornergrat** (3089m – over 10,000ft above sea level) for terrific views of the Matterhorn and the surrounding mountains. From **Interlaken** the Jungfrau Railways provide the opportunity to explore the mountains of the Bernese Oberland. On this excursion I've taken many of the group onward to **Jungfraujoch**, the highest station in Europe (3454m) reached by tunneling through the Eiger. We have also travelled to **Murren**, with spectacular views across to the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau mountains, and on to the **Schilthorn** cable car, famous from the James Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. The first time I took this journey it was cloudy in the valleys below but the Alpine peaks were clear against blue sky above the clouds.



On the free day I've taken the Klein Matterhorn cable car from Zermatt to the summit station at 3883m (12740ft) on the border with Italy, where people were skiing in August. In 2016 I took a group to the Eggishorn cable car for the first time – from the summit station there are tremendous views back down to the Rhone Valley and over the huge Aletsch Glacier (pictured, with Ted). In 2017 a

group of us took the cable car from Kandersteg and walked to the beautiful Oeschinenen lake.

From Brig to Chur the tour takes the Glacier Express and we eat lunch on-board in a panoramic carriage as the train travels through the upper Rhone Valley and the Furka tunnel to Andermatt. The line then climbs to the summit of the Oberalp Pass, close to the source of

the Rhine. It then heads down the valley, changes locomotives at the monastery town of Disentis, and travels through the Rhine Gorge to Chur.



*The Bernina line at Alp Grüm*

The excursion from Chur is by the **Bernina Express** to **Poschiavo**, in Italian speaking Switzerland. The route takes us over the Alps, in a series of spirals and tunnels. This stretch of line, the Albula Line, is a marvel of railway engineering, and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Albula Tunnel takes the line into the valley of the Inn near St. Moritz. The train climbs again over the Bernina Pass and down a series of zigzags from Alp Grüm into Poschiavo. This area is a major European watershed – from Chur the Rhine drains into the North Sea, the Inn is a tributary of the Danube, which reaches the Black Sea, and the rivers in Italian Switzerland join the River Po and ultimately the Adriatic Sea.

On the free day in Chur, most participants take the local train on the scenic journey to the small resort of **Arosa**. From there a cable car reaches the summit of the Weisshorn, from which one can see back down the valley to Chur on a clear day. An alternative, which I tried in 2016, is to walk the most scenic stretch of the Albula line, between the stations of Preda and Bergun, with many views of the railway as it turns and twists to gain height before the Albula Tunnel – the distance by rail is twice as long as by the path. In 2017 I took the opportunity to walk from Filisur station to the viewing platform for the Landwasser viaduct.



In January 2013 I had the opportunity to take this tour in winter for the first time. The itinerary is the same – while many road passes are closed in winter the railways stay open. Switzerland was like a picture postcard – deep snow (but rarely falling, except at night) and bright blue skies with excellent visibility. The trip to the Gornergrat and the Matterhorn took us above



the clouds (pictured above). From Schilthorn we watched mad people para-ski from the top of the mountain, and on the free day I led a walk between the mountain villages of Riederalp and Bettmeralp, near Brig, both only reachable by cable car. We watched cross country skiers from the Glacier and Bernina Expresses, and at times the railway lines were between banks of snow several feet high.

The ***Traditional Glacier Express*** version of the tour uses Chur and Kandersteg as bases. This less expensive tour uses different hotels and travels standard class throughout, though the difference in quality is not very noticeable on comfortable Swiss trains. I have taken it three times, twice in February 2014 and 2015 and in May 2017. On both winter trips the weather was excellent and the Bernina and Glacier Express journeys were as impressive as ever, through a brilliant white landscape. On one tour snow was falling in Kandersteg and paths were icy, on the other, fresh snow had fallen in Chur and the free-day trip to Arosa was through a black and white landscape.

**Kandersteg** is a small resort, lively during the ski season, and a good base to reach Interlaken and the surrounding mountains. The trips from Kandersteg to Zermatt,



Gornergrat and Murren provided fine winter views. A cloudy day gave a few of us the excuse to travel to Bern, the capital of Switzerland, a stunning small city built on a loop in the River Aare, viewed best from a brewpub in an old tram depot overlooking the city. In summer there are plenty of walks in the area and in 2017 many of us took a cruise on the historic paddle steamer on Lake Thun.

*The Schilthorn cable car (above) and the Glacier Express line at Oberalp in winter (left)*

The free days on these tours are an opportunity to reach other parts of Switzerland using the half-fare pass. In addition to those mentioned above, suggestions from Brig and Kandersteg include many other mountain railways around Interlaken, the 'Golden Panoramic Express' to Montreaux, the Centovalli railway via Italy to Locarno, Lake Geneva and the cities of Lausanne and Geneva. Suggestions

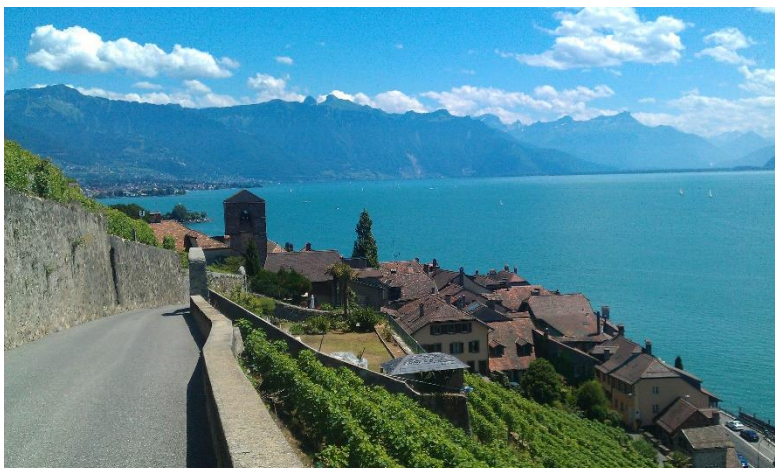
from Chur include the resorts of Davos, Klosters and St. Moritz, the cities of Luzern and Zurich, Appenzell and mountain railways around Lake Konstanz and Liechtenstein. There are also many local walks for those wanting a restful day.

These tours are operating in summer 2018 and winter 2018-19, some with minor alterations to the programme. Another option, *the Glacier Express and St. Moritz* is based in St. Moritz and Zermatt, taking in the whole Glacier Express route in one day and includes a trip to Lake Maggiore in Italy.



*The Chateau de Chillon, on Lake Geneva near Montreaux*

More than five years ago but still worth a mention, the *Alps of Lake Geneva* was a July 2012 tour based in **Vevey** on Lake Geneva, with trips to the **Chateau de Chillon**, the **Gruyeres** creamery, a steamer trip around the lake and rides on local mountain railways. My own highlights were a beer in the bizarre Giger Bar in Gruyeres, based on the film *Alien*, and the 360 degree view of the Alps from the summit of Les Diablerets. On a free day I took a group to Lausanne, where I found a stall selling the best empanadas this side of Chile, and Les



Brasseurs, a bar brewing its own excellent Alsace-style beers. This was followed by a walk through the Lavaux vineyards (pictured). Another extra was a trip on the Blonay-Chamby museum railway, one way by electric tram the other by steam.

This tour no longer operates, though it is an area of Switzerland worth visiting.

The **Jungfrau Express** is a longstanding GRJ Swiss tour, though I first took it 2014. Parts of the itinerary were new to me, including our base in **Meiringen**, famous for meringues and Sherlock Holmes. As well as the signature trip to **Jungfrauoch** it included visits to the **Reichenbach Falls**, where we watched the cows clanking down from summer pastures, the **Rothorn** steam mountain railway, a steamer on **Lake Brienz**, and a visit to **Luzern**. There was time for extra visits including a walk along the **Aare Gorge** to one of the most bizarre railway stations on the planet – a door in a cliff at Aareslucht Ost. A series of cable cars took us from Meiringen to **Alpentower** with fantastic views. From Luzern a group of us continued by steamer to Vitznau and mountain railway to the summit of the Rigi (pictured, left) On the return journey to London this was my first tour in over 40 where someone lost their passport, and we managed to get him back home to London.



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This tour is operating in 2018

*Sherlock Holmes, stoned (left) in Meiringen, and cryogenically preserved (right) at Jungfrauoch.*





**Wengen and the Jungfrau Express** is another tour built around the trip to Jungfraujoch, which I took in 2017 for the first time. The advantage of being based in Wengen, a car-free resort in the heart of the Bernese Oberland is that it allows plenty of time to explore the area properly. New for me was the trip from Wengen to Grindelwald by cable car via the **Männlichen** mountain and a visit to the **Trummelbach** Falls, 10 glacier-waterfalls hidden inside a mountain. While it was tricky keeping a large group together on complex journeys involving cable-cars, buses and umpteen trains, we made it without losing anyone. In the free time some of us took the cable car from Grindelwald to First and made it out on to the viewing platform (pictured), avoided cows on walks, and visited **Schynige Platte**, which gives access to terrific views and walks.

Crowded Interlaken is not my favourite place but this time I found some decent beer at the Barrel artisan café. This tour is operating in 2018.

The tours to Switzerland by rail involve an overnight stop at least in one direction. Some tours stop overnight in **Köln**, with time to see the Rhine and the cathedral. Tours via Köln take the opportunity to travel along the scenic **Rhine Gorge** line from Koblenz, past the Lorelei to Bingen. The other overnight option is **Strasbourg**, an interesting and historic city. It is worth noting that, despite many visits to Switzerland at different times of the year, although there has been the occasional rainy or cloudy day, I've never had a tour spoiled by a lengthy spell of poor weather.





## ITALY

In 2013 I took this tour to the heel of Italy, **Puglia and Basilicata**, twice. The outward journey includes an overnight in Strasbourg then continues through the Alps to Milan and **Rome**. Two nights in Rome allows time for a city tour and some free time. Our guide on one occasion made a scathing comment about Berlusconi and, inexplicably, for the rest of the tour her microphone wouldn't work, and the driver could not find any way to repair it. From Rome it is a 5.5 hour journey by Frecciargento fast train to Lecce, the base for five nights. This is followed by 3 nights in Vieste, before the long trip home via the Adriatic Coast and an overnight in Turin.



**Lecce**, in Southern Puglia, was new to me and turns out to be a small baroque city and a good base for exploring the region. From Lecce we used a coach for the excursions. We visited **Otranto** (a walled town and the easternmost point in Italy), and the lighthouse at the end of the world (the tip of Italy). A full day excursion took us to **Matera** (pictured), where much of the population lived in caves, and **Alberobello**, where they live in trulli. An extra trip took us to the seaside town of Gallipoli, and our coach driver organized (no doubt for a consideration) excellent lunches in superb restaurants – fresh fish by the sea in Gallipoli and a tapas-like meal of local specialities in Matera. On the second visit I discovered a café near our hotel that specialises in beer, including a pale ale brewed in Lecce .



*A swarm of trulli, Alberobello*

The final few days were spent relaxing in **Vieste**, a small but perfectly formed Italian holiday resort on the Gargano peninsula, including a boat cruise along the coast and into local caves.

This was a new tour for 2013 and my first visit to the area, so there were one or two glitches on the first tour, and by the second it was more relaxing. The tour has proved popular and is running in summer 2018, with very minor changes – a visit to an olive oil mill replaces the visit to the lighthouse.



*Gallipoli*

## RIVER CRUISES - The Danube

Great Rail Journeys also have a programme of river cruises, and in 2015 and 2016 I led two Danube Cruise tour groups. The cruises last a week, and the ships are reached by rail to and from London. The 2015 **Classic Danube Cruise** departed from and returned to Passau, on the Germany – Austria border and called at Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Melk. The 2016 **Luxury Danube Cruise** departed from Nuremberg, reaching the river via the Danube-Main Canal then calling at Regensburg, Passau, Melk and Vienna en route to Budapest. Both cruises included city tours with additional optional excursions available, to Salzburg and a Strauss and Mozart concert in Vienna for example.



*A lock on the Danube*

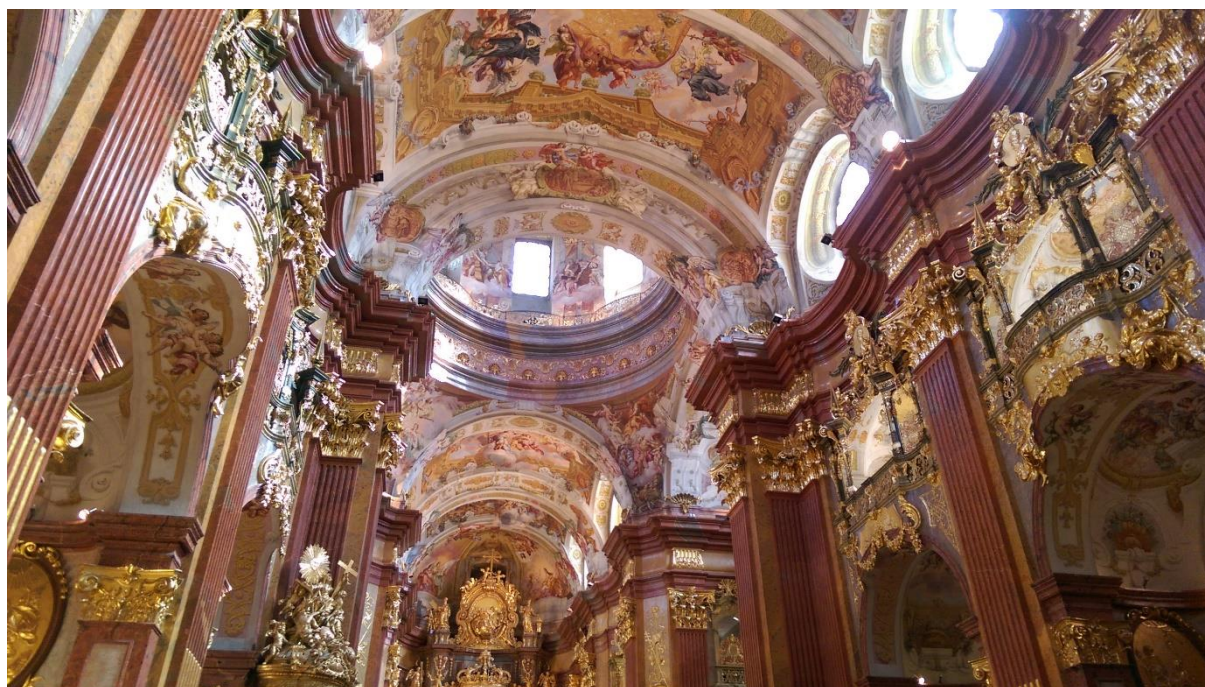
Long stretches of the river run through pleasant rural countryside, with the Wachau valley in Austria being particularly attractive. Looking on as the ship squeezes through the locks on the river is a popular activity - the locks on the Danube - Main Canal are particularly impressive.



*The Hungarian Parliament at night*

For me, the highlight of both cruises were the visits to **Budapest** – this was the first time I've been to Hungary. Both cruises featured an evening cruise on the river, with all the major buildings, including the Hungarian Parliament, floodlit. The city tour by coach takes in all of the major sites including the views from the castle hill in Buda. On the first visit a city walk in Pest included a backstage tour of the Opera House and a ride on Line 1 of the Budapest metro (opened in 1896, it beat Glasgow by a few months to be the second underground in the world).

Of the other cities the walking tours of **Nuremberg, Regensburg and Passau** were all interesting. The latter two were restricted by very heavy rain – I'd like to go back and explore further. A brief stop at Linz allowed time for a brief walk to the city centre, which whet my appetite to visit. I've been to **Vienna** before – the imperial city centre is impressive and it is good city break destination. I was particularly impressed by **Bratislava** where there was free time after the tour to wander around – I had only been there for a very short, very hungover visit and remembered very little.



*Inside the monastery at Melk*

Apart from the cities, on both cruises we toured the monastery at **Melk**, Austria, which overlooks the river. It is a totally over the top Baroque building. On an optional excursion in Hungary on the first cruise we visited the old town of Szentendre, the ruined castle at Visegrád, the enormous basilica at Esztergom and a brief visit to Slovakia to watch our ship arrive in Esztergom.



As usual Ted stowed away on both trips – he was the star of the show at the pirates evening on board, and managed to find a bar in Szentendre called Teddy Beer, selling excellent local ales. I also found some decent beer in Nuremberg, Vienna, Bratislava and Budapest – all the more reason for returning for a proper explore.

GRJ operate several cruises on the Danube, so it pays to look quite closely at the itinerary before deciding. On both ships

the accommodation and food were impressive, though the luxury cruise was clearly a step above the other. There are cruises on many other rivers – for example in 2007 I took a Rhine Cruise from Basel to Amsterdam. The advantage is the ability to visit a number of different places without the hassle of transferring luggage.

## Finally....

I've restricted myself to tours over the last five years - any longer and memory starts to fade, and it is more and more likely that tours have changed. I have led tours elsewhere in, Italy and Switzerland, to France, Ireland, Morocco, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Slovenia and a Mediterranean cruise. I'm happy to provide further information on the places I've been to on tour.

I restrict myself to European tours, but GRJ operates worldwide, including many of the famous railway journeys in the USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, China and Russia. More details of all of their tours can be found in their brochures or online at [www.greatrail.com](http://www.greatrail.com) .

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*Please note that these are not official descriptions of the tours and any opinions expressed are my own.*