

# When the train beats the plane

PETER LYNCH sits back and enjoys a varied rail trip from London to Istanbul

Istanbul is a mere three hours flying time from London but what a host of sights and experiences the airborne miss while jetting above the clouds between Europe's northwest edge and its southeast corner to Asia.

The Orient Express used to ply this route but there are no direct trains anymore. Yet a network of rails still criss-cross Europe so I book a rail and accommodation package with Railbookers, choosing a route through Cologne, Vienna and Budapest, and leave London on the 08.27 train.

Two hours later I'm in Brussels, with time enough for a Belgian waffle before catching a connection to Cologne. Because I am taking the night train onwards to Vienna I have a few hours to explore Cologne. Famed for its Gothic cathedral and, of course, eau de cologne but also its Brauhaus (brew houses), I make a beeline for the 800-year-old sailors haunt — Haxenhaus — on the banks of the Rhine.

Haxenhaus means "pork knuckle" because that's what they serve — that and Cologne's unique city beer, kolsch. It's not served in huge one-litre German steins but in little 0.2-litre glasses (smaller than a middy). Owner Willy Wichert explains that its not that locals are dainty or refined, they just like their beer cold and with a good head. But you never have to order a beer twice in Cologne;



A light shop in Istanbul's Central Bazaar, a labyrinth of a thousand little shops with men hammering metal or polishing lamps.

perpetually circulating waiters keep refilling your glass until you put a beer mat on top — real German efficiency.

As I sway back to the station for the 20.05 train to Vienna I stop off at the airport-style Deutsche Bahn Club lounge for complimentary drinks and snacks.

My 3m<sup>2</sup> passenger cabin has three leather seats that convert into three bunk beds and all but the carpet is smart and tidy. The tiny bathroom has a feeble shower but at least I don't have to share it with 250 airline passengers.

There's little to see on a night train; they usually run slower so passengers get a better sleep and arrive at a sensible time. After a good night's sleep I wake well before our nine o'clock arrival in Vienna. Breakfast is an unappetising affair of yesterday's rolls with packaged turkey and cheese slices. But Vienna's

Deutsche Bahn Club Lounge makes up for this.

Vienna is a grand city; almost, it seems, too grand and showy for living in — wide boulevards, streets of designer shops, horse carriages and more tourists than Viennese (it's a weekend in June). Its famous cafe culture is epitomised in the vaulted ceiling, columns and chandeliers of Cafe Central but with none of the promised artists and intelligentsia, just packed with tour groups.

Eventually, I find where the Viennese go to escape the tourist crowds when I take the metro to Praterstern, to see the famous ferris wheel from the Third Man movie. It is packed with families still enjoying the old-fashioned funfair, although the kids all clamour for some modern rides. Further north at Donauinsel, a green and traffic-free island in the

Danube, the Viennese are sunbathing, swimming, boating, cycling and sitting in dozens of picturesque riverside cafes.

Art galleries can be boring, but Vienna's Museum of Fake Art (28 Lowengasse) is enthralling. It's a fabulous antidote to art snobs, providing a genuine insight into what constitutes "art", with fascinating stories about crooked art dealers and how Michelangelo perpetrated the first recorded art forgery.

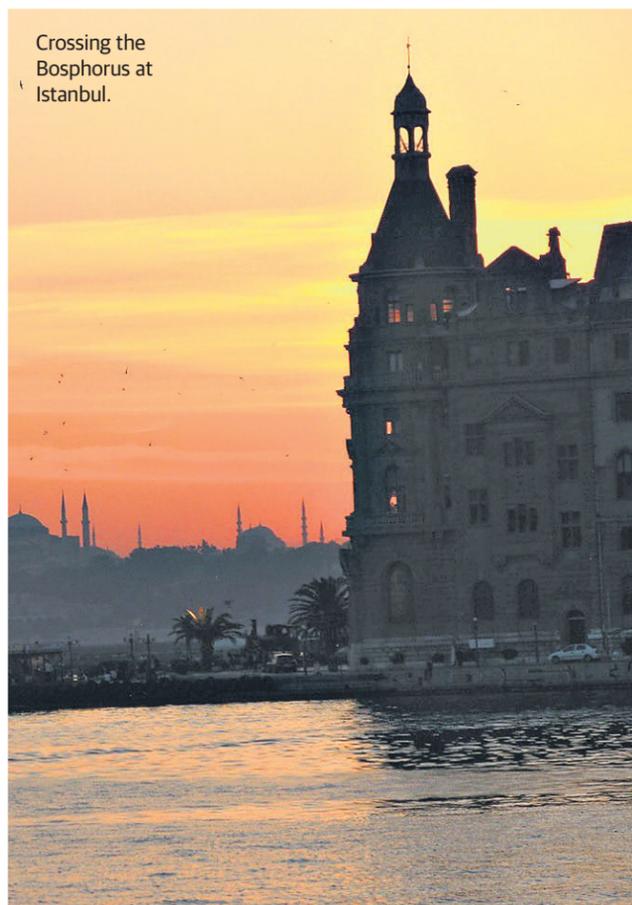
Next stop, Budapest, is less than three hours by train and the only indication of a border is the change to the tongue-twisting Hungarian script.

I generally avoid city bus tours due to the dully rehearsed recitation and the uninspiring insight. However, in Budapest I found Underguide, a group of knowledgeable and enthusiastic young locals keen to show off their city. My guide Zsuzsa collects me from my hotel and sets off to show me her Budapest. We take in the main tourist highlights but, instead of a sterile monologue, have fascinating discussions about what I find interesting. It's like having a local friend showing me places they know I'll love.

We stop for a drink at the hilltop Fisherman's Bastion for stunning city views, then have exotic \$1 pancakes at Granny's Pancake Kitchen and take a tram to the famous Gellert mineral baths. Lunch follows with a stunning array of Hungarian specialities eaten shoulder-to-shoulder with locals in the Central Market.

But my highlight is discovering Budapest's unique "ruin bars", scattered through the crumbling Jewish quarter. Ruin bars have become an amazing Budapest artsy/retro scene, bringing abandoned buildings, shops and warehouses back into use.

The format is simple: rent an old building in downtown Pest, don't renovate anything, invite contemporary artists and designers to be as creative and bizarre as they like, build a bar, hire a band and stay open until early morning. One of the oldest is Szimpla Kert and my table is in an old soviet Trabant — absolutely



Crossing the Bosphorus at Istanbul.



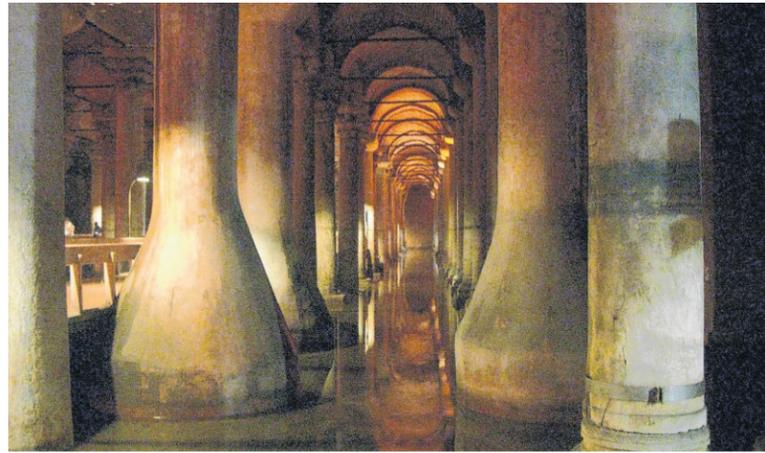
Imperial Palace in the grand city of Vienna. Pictures: Peter Lynch



The strangest pub scene in the world — a ruin bar.



A yard of ale in Cologne, a city famous for brew houses and Gothic cathedrals.



The subterranean Yerebatan Cistern is a highlight in low light.

**fact file**

■ Railbookers' ten-night rail trip from London to Istanbul starts at \$1380 per person, including all rail journeys, seat reservations, four and five-star hotels in Budapest, Bucharest and Istanbul and private two-berth sleeper compartments from Cologne to Vienna and Bucharest to Istanbul. 1300 938 534 and railbookers.com.au  
 ■ Guides in Budapest: underguide.com  
 ■ Danube Express: danube-express.com (more on this in a future edition)

the most amazing pub scene in the world.

The next leg of the journey is supposed to be an overnight train to Bucharest, but due to major engineering work (until October 2013) the Bucharest to Istanbul leg terminates at the Turkish border, replaced with a three-hour coach ride into Istanbul.

Being keen to arrive in Istanbul

by train I take passage on the private Danube Express train from Budapest, which takes a circuitous route through Romania and Bulgaria, avoiding the engineering works. It gets me to Istanbul at 9am three days later.

Sea gulls and palm trees indicate journey's end — the Bosphorus, the edge of Europe. Istanbul is all surprises — hot but with a cooling

aromatic breeze, exotically eastern but with western style. Instead of irritating street hawkers, I am engaged in friendly conversation, welcomed to Istanbul before the sales pitch.

I love Istanbul from the first minute and my only mistake is only stopping for two nights — there is so much to see and do.

My top Istanbul highlights are the Yerebatan Cistern, a cathedral-like, fish-filled underground water system featured in the James Bond film From Russia with Love, the magnificent Blue Mosque, and the Grand Bazaar, a labyrinth of thousands of little shops full of craftsmen busily hammering metal, sewing leather and polishing lamps.

Worth the trip on its own is the breathtaking \$1 sunset ferry crossing of the Bosphorus, a mere ten-minute journey from Europe to Asia, but a stunning and unforgettable experience.

Food is equally fantastic, such as lamb cooked in a sealed clay pot, brought from the kitchen on a flaming tray. The chef then smashes it open to serve. I expect it to have an exotic name, but he says: "It's kebab in a pot". A far too simple name for an exotically spicy stew.

What was so marvellous about this overland journey was how every new place seemed better and more fascinating than the place before and that theme continued from the western edge of Europe to its eastern edge.

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