PLATFORM EUROPE

SLOW TRAVEL EUROPE

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UNFORGETTABLE TRAIN JOURNEYS
ACROSS THE CONTINENT

BART GIEPMANS & WILLIAM SIMPSON

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FOREWORD

Europe by Train

We fell in love with travelling by train more than twenty years ago, almost without realising it. There were no grand plans or lofty ideals at the start, just a simple curiosity and a sense of adventure. One journey led to another, and before long that curiosity had carried us to places we never expected to find ourselves, like visiting vineyards on the slopes of Mount Etna, watching the midnight sun over Lapland, and waking in the Scottish Highlands at dawn.

Over the years, we realised that train travel changes the way you see Europe. From a motorway, the continent rushes past in fragments, and from a plane, it vanishes altogether. But from a train window, you see how it all fits together. Forests thicken, coastlines appear, cities emerge and fall away again. One country becomes another, and you hardly notice it happening.

Somewhere along the way, trains stopped being just a way of getting from A to B. They became the reason to travel to begin with. We started noticing more – landscapes, details, people. We struck up conversations we'd never have had otherwise. Some of our fondest memories come from these chance encounters, like a night train from Odesa to Lviv, where we spent hours talking with an elderly woman, sharing stories through gestures and smiles, despite not speaking a single word of the same language.

And then there are the stations. Europe has more than forty thousand of them. Some are vast and magnificent, others no more than a platform and a bench. But each one marks the beginning of a new journey, and nowhere in the world makes those beginnings as simple, or as inviting, as Europe.

With 250,000 km (155,000 mi) of track, you can travel from the Arctic to the Mediterranean, from the Atlantic to the edge of Asia, without ever leaving the ground. Get an Interrail or Eurail Pass, and 33 countries are yours to explore.

The routes in this book are ones we've travelled ourselves, often more than once. Some are well known, others rarely talked about. But we hope each of them inspire you to slow down, to watch the world pass by, and to remember that getting there can be just as fun as arriving.

Bart Giepmans and William Simpson

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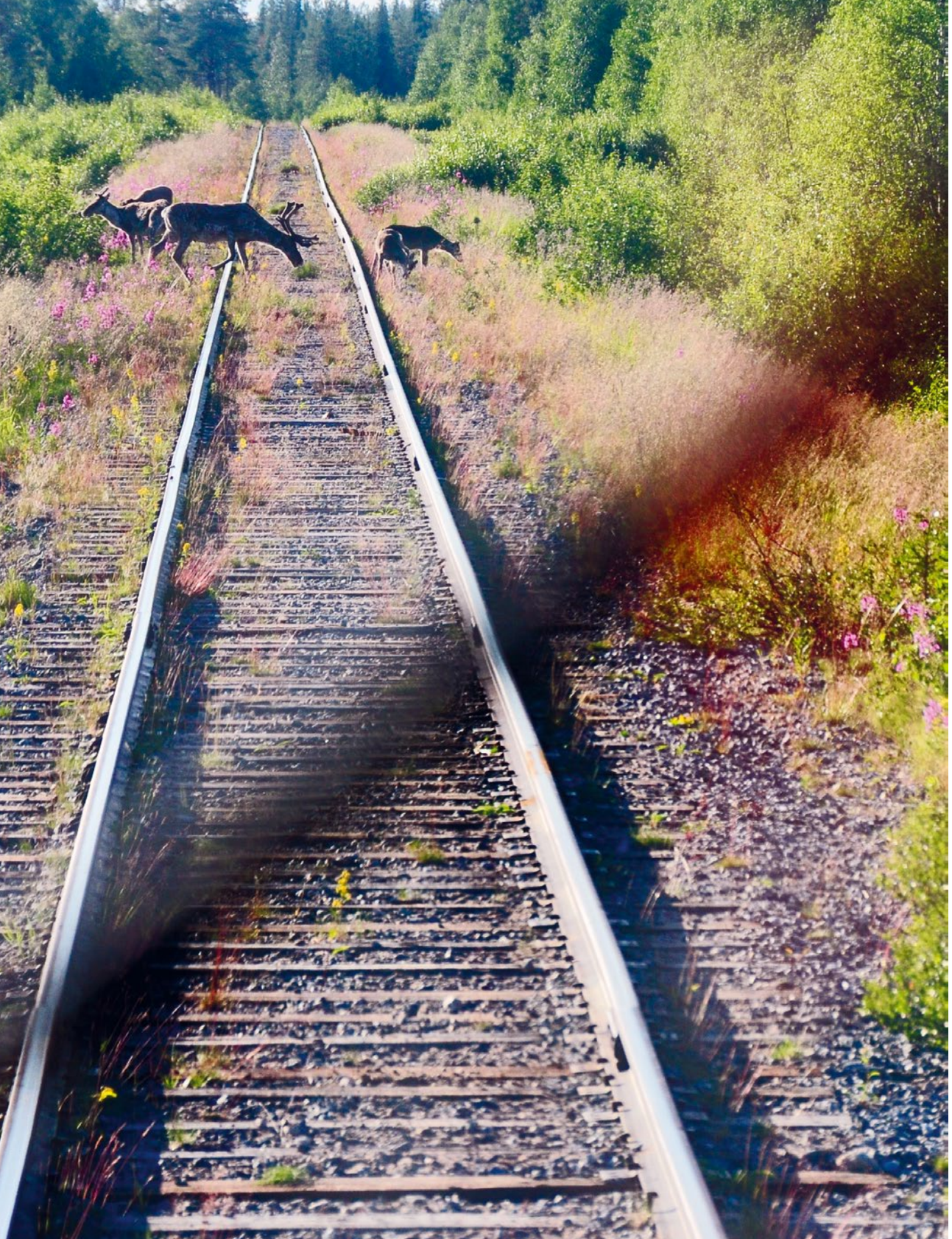

01 SWEDEN - NORWAY

STOCKHOLM - NARVIK

Beyond the Arctic Circle

The reindeer appear without warning, trotting across the tracks ahead of us. Our driver brakes, the train slows to a crawl, then stops. Through the window we watch them pause mid-crossing, glance back with mild curiosity, then wander into the forest. The driver checks the line is clear and we roll forward again. Welcome to Sweden's Inlandsbanan, the Inland Line, where wildlife has right of way and nobody's in a hurry.

We've been travelling for days now, following a chain of trains deeper into Swedish Lapland: first an intercity to Mora, then the Inlandsbanan through the vast interior, and eventually the Iron Ore Line towards Norway. Our destination is Narvik, a small port on Norway's Arctic coast, more than 1,600 km (1,000 mi) north of where we began in Stockholm. By the time we get there, we'll have crossed some of the emptiest country in Europe, where in summer the sun barely sets and the forests go on forever.

A LINE THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

The Inlandsbanan runs for almost 1,300 km (800 mi) from Kristinehamn in central Sweden to Gällivare in the north, cutting straight through the interior and deliberately avoiding the coast. The idea emerged in the late 1800s, though it took three decades to complete. The reasoning was both strategic and economic: an inland railway would be harder to attack than a coastal line, and it would connect the sparsely populated but resource-rich north with the industrial south.

Constructing it was an extraordinary feat. The route winds through dense forests, peat bogs and river valleys, forcing engineers to build some 250 bridges and lay mile after mile of reinforced track. When the line finally opened in 1937, it should have been a triumph for Sweden. Instead, it was Germany that benefitted most.

Despite Sweden's official neutrality during the Second World War, the government allowed Nazi Germany to move troops and equipment north via the Inlandsbanan. By the early 1940s, some two million German soldiers had travelled this route, up to 12,000 each week, bound for occupied Norway.

By the 1950s the railway was in slow decline. Car ownership was rising across Sweden and a new motorway ran almost parallel to the tracks. Passenger numbers fell, and in 1992, the national railway declared the line financially unviable and announced its closure. After 55 years, it seemed destined to fade into history.

SAVING THE LINE

But the following year, fifteen municipalities along the route joined forces to form Inlandsbanan AB and took over operations. Today a handful of services run each summer from mid-June to late August. With just sixty seats per train, it feels more like a travelling living room than public transport.

Each train on this route has a train host, and ours quickly becomes part guide, part storyteller. She points out wildlife, shares local history, and explains the hazards of reindeer on the tracks. With more than 250,000 wild reindeer in northern Sweden, encounters are frequent. Trains often stop suddenly, wait for the herd to drift away, then creep forward again. Up here, nature sets the pace.

STATIONS AND STOPS

There were once around 200 stations on the Inlandsbanan. Most have closed and many buildings were sold. Today passengers can board at 29 official stations, plus a handful of request stops where the train pauses if you signal the driver. There's even a brief halt at the Arctic Circle, marked by a signpost, so everyone can step out for a photo and a breath of cold air.

While some people use the line simply to get from one place to another, most, like us, treat the journey as an experience in itself. They break it into stages, spending a night here, two nights there, exploring small towns and the vast wilderness along the way. Thanks to allemansrätten, Sweden's right of public access, you can also camp freely almost anywhere in the country.

MORA, OUR FIRST STOP

We plan seven stops between Stockholm and Narvik, and the first is Mora, on the shores of Lake Siljan. Formed by a meteorite impact millions of years ago, it's now one of Sweden's most beautiful lakes, ringed by forest and red-painted cottages.

Mora itself is known for two things, the first being Njupeskär, Sweden's highest waterfall, which falls 93 m (305 ft) through a narrow gorge in Fulufjället National Park. The second is the Dala horse, the brightly painted wooden toy that has become a symbol of Swedish handicrafts. In the nearby village of Nusnäs, artisans carve and paint around 120,000 each year.

The train departs Mora at 1:25pm sharp, and with only one daily service heading north, this is

one departure you don't want to miss.
As we pull away and head deeper into the interior, the landscape grows wilder. The traditional red houses, coloured with faluröd paint made from mine waste, thin out. Soon there's only forest, mile after mile of pine and birch stretching to the horizon.

Our train host today keeps us entertained with stories and songs, and introduces us to fika, the Swedish ritual of slowing down over coffee and cake. Over the speakers she plays "Koppången," a haunting melody inspired by the landscape we're passing through.

Every so often we spot old water pumps standing alone among the trees. They're wartime relics, we're told, left from when German troop trains refilled their tanks here rather than in nearby villages, where soldiers might be tempted to desert. Our host talks about the secret movements of troops and weapons along this line, even mentioning *Schwere Bruno*, a massive railway gun that once rumbled through these forests. It's hard to imagine now, in a place so quiet and peaceful, yet the history still feels close to the surface.

HALFWAY NORTH

When we arrive in Östersund, it's raining, and although we're only halfway up the country, it already feels like the far north. Set on the shores of Lake Storsjön, which is said to be home to a monster not unlike Loch Ness, the town is known for its food, and as a UNESCO City of Gastronomy it lives up to its reputation, with cafés and restaurants across the centre serving both traditional dishes and modern Nordic cooking.

We spend the afternoon at Norra Station, a café, roastery and gallery, where the coffee is excellent and the atmosphere relaxed. Later we try Sav Glöd, a local birch wine made from sap tapped by hand and fermented into a crisp, earthy drink unlike anything we've tried before.

The only train north leaves at 7:40am, so we stay an extra night, giving ourselves time to walk the lakeshore and gear up for the journey into Lapland.

ENTERING LAPLAND

The next morning we continue to Storuman, the first stop in Swedish Lapland. It's a five-and-a-half-hour ride and the landscape grows wilder by the minute. We pass the former low-security prison at Ulriksfors, where inmates could come and go with relative freedom. "It's known as Sweden's first hotel," our train host jokes.

At Vilhelmina Norra, we stop for nearly an hour and head to Bergmans, a restaurant beside the tracks, for lunch. The speciality is Arctic char, simply cooked and very fresh. One of the pleasures of the Inlandsbanan is these generous stops in small places: time to eat properly, stretch your legs and speak to locals.

By the time we reach Storuman we're deep in the wild north. A century ago it was a small farming village, only growing into a regional centre when the Inlandsbanan arrived, which brought hydroelectric development and the timber trade. Today it's a quiet base for anyone seeking some peace.

A short walk from the wooden station, which dates to 1916, is Storumans Camping, where you can sleep in a traditional Sami kata (a kind of wooden tent) or in a log cabin overlooking the lake. We choose the cabin, and that evening climb Stenseleberget hill for views west to Norway's mountains on the horizon.

CROSSING THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

From Storuman the line continues to Jokkmokk, a six-and-a-half-hour journey through pine forests and marshland, over countless rivers flowing east to the Baltic Sea. This is some of the emptiest country in Europe and for hours we see only trees, water and sky.

After a while, we pass Sweden's smallest station at Buddnakk, little more than a wooden hut, then cross the Arctic Circle somewhere south of Jokkmokk. The marker is simple–just some white stones and a signpost. "They're not entirely accurate, though," our host tells us. "The Arctic Circle actually shifts a few metres each year. But it's close enough."

Soon after, the train stops again. A herd of reindeer is standing on the rails. The driver sounds the horn. Nothing. He waits, tries again, eases forward. At last the animals scatter into the forest. "We see everything up here," the driver tells us later. "Elk, lynx, sometimes even bears. Reindeer are tricky, though. They belong to Sami herders but behave like wild animals." If a train hits one, the railway pays compensation to the herder. It's a reminder that this is Sami land, where reindeer herding has shaped life for thousands of years.

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

It's after eight in the evening when we pull into Jokkmokk, but the sun still hangs high. In summer this far north, darkness never quite comes. The sun dips for an hour or two around midnight, then climbs again. It's disorienting at first, the endless daylight, but you adjust.

When the train disappears north, silence falls over the platform. Jokkmokk Municipality is roughly the size of Wales yet has only about 5,000 residents. The town itself is just a handful of streets around a central square.

Jokkmokk has long been a meeting place for the Sami. The winter market each February has run since 1605 and remains one of the great cultural events of the north. In summer the town is a hub for outdoor activities: husky trips, fat-bike rides and wild camping, with Northern Lights tours in autumn.

We stay at the Peace & Quiet Hotel, a cluster of floating cabins on a forest lake a few miles from town. The owner, Björn, once trained Special Forces soldiers to survive in the wilderness for weeks at a time. Now he offers his guests a gentler version of solitude. That night we sit on the deck watching the light fade, though never disappear, listening to the water lap against the pontoons.

THE IRON ORE LINE

From Jokkmokk it's a short run to Gällivare, where you can also spend the night at the Grand Hotel

Lapland beside the station. This is the start of the Malmbanan, the Iron Ore Line, one of Europe's most important freight railways.

The line was built for a single purpose: to move iron ore from the vast mines around Kiruna to the coast. Iron had been known about here since the 17th and 18th centuries, particularly by the Sami, but extracting and transporting it at scale was impossible.

For centuries, only small quantities of ore travelled south by reindeer and boat, but everything changed when the railway opened in 1902. Ore could finally move in large volumes, cheaply and efficiently. The mines expanded, towns grew and the region was transformed.

Today, the railway runs from the coastal city of Luleå to Narvik in Norway, passing through Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost city. Kiruna exists because of iron, but its vast underground mine has brought both wealth and upheaval. As the ground has slowly sunk, the city has had to move, shifting around 4 km (2.5 mi) east, a relocation still in progress. In summer 2025, even the 672-tonne wooden church was carefully lifted and rolled to its new home.

Immense ore trains, some 800 m (2,625 ft) long, still thunder along the line to the ports, but passenger services share the tracks too, opening this once-remote region to travellers in a way that would have been unimaginable a century ago.

THE GATEWAY TO LAPLAND

Beyond Kiruna the line follows the shore of Lake Torneträsk, a long, narrow lake flanked by mountains. The water is blue-grey and in summer patches of snow still cling to the higher slopes. This is one of Scandinavia's most beautiful railway stretches.

Many hikers get off at Abisko, the southern gateway to the Kungsleden, the King's Trail, a 440-kilometre (273-mile) route through the mountains. The Abisko valley is spectacular: wildflower meadows, fast rivers and peaks rising steeply on all sides. In summer the sun shines at midnight for weeks. In winter the same latitude brings the Northern Lights.

We ride the chairlift to the Aurora Sky Station at 900 m (2,953 ft), a research and viewing site on the mountainside. From there a trail climbs to the summit of Mount Nuolja at 1,164 m (3,819 ft) for sweeping views over Lake Torneträsk and the Lapporten valley.

In the early twentieth century, when the railway first opened, people travelled all the way from Stockholm for this very same experience. But back then there was no cable car, and the journey took more than two days. For many visitors, it was the adventure of a lifetime, something to be remembered and retold. People used to set off up the mountain in their Sunday best – men in suits, women in long dresses – climbing slowly towards the same views we're enjoying now.

DESCENT TO NARVIK

The final stretch takes less than two hours, running from Abisko across the Norwegian border to Narvik. At Riksgränsen, Sweden's last station, the old locomotive depot has been reborn as Niehku Mountain Villa, a base for hikers, bikers, and skiers, its name meaning "dream" in the Sami language.

From Riksgränsen the track begins a dramatic descent to the coast. This stretch, the Ofoten Line, is Norway's northernmost railway and one of its most impressive, the rails clinging to cliffs high above the Rombaksfjord. When we finally roll into Narvik, more than 1,600 km (1,000 mi) from where we started, it feels like the edge of the world.

But Narvik is far from empty. Despite its size, this Arctic port of around 15,000 people has played a pivotal role in history. Its deep, ice-free harbour made it crucial to the iron ore trade, and during the Second World War the town saw fierce fighting. The Battles of Narvik in 1940 were among the most significant naval engagements in the early stages of the war, and the Narvik War Museum in the town centre tells the story well.

Beyond its wartime legacy, Narvik is also a gateway to the mountains. A cable car rises straight from the harbour to the heights above town, offering sweeping views of Ofotfjord and the peaks that surround it. We spend our final evening by the waterfront, watching the light shift over the fjord and thinking about our long journey through this remote corner of Europe.

From Narvik, a night train can take you back to Stockholm in a single 18-hour journey, or you can continue south into Norway by bus to Bodø, where the main Norwegian railway network begins. Either way, an adventure awaits.

JOURNEY DETAILS

Begins at Stockholm Central, Sweden
Ends in Riksgränsen or Narvik in Norway

Where you'll go
Stockholm can easily be reached by direct trains from Berlin, Hamburg, Oslo or Copenhagen.

Stockholm – Mora, 4 hours
Mora – Östersund, 5 hours
Östersund – Storuman, 7 hours
Storuman – Jokkmokk, 6 hours
Jokkmokk – Gällivare, 1.5 hours
Gällivare – Abisko, 3 hours
Abisko – Riksgränsen, 1 hour
Riksgränsen – Narvik, 1 hour

From Narvik, a night train runs back to Stockholm in one 18-hour journey, or you can continue south into Norway by bus to Bodø, then take the Nordlandsbanan to Trondheim and Oslo.

Time needed
Two weeks minimum, though three is better. The distances are huge, and there are plenty of places to stop for hiking or outdoor activities. Some sections between stations can be hiked as well.

Best time to travel
The Inlandsbanan's slow trains only run in summer (10 weeks from June until August). Abisko, which you can also reach by direct night train from Stockholm, is popular for Northern Lights viewing. Wild camping is allowed in Sweden, but summer is peak mosquito season, especially in Lapland.

Tickets & reservations
We used an Interrail/Eurail Global Pass (15 travel days in one month), which covers trains from Hamburg or Copenhagen to Stockholm, plus all trains in Sweden and Norway. Reservations are required from Copenhagen onward (Hamburg-Copenhagen only in summer). On the Inlandsbanan, there's only one northbound train per day at each stop, and reservations are compulsory.

02 GERMANY – SWITZERLAND

COLOGNE – OBERALP PASS

Following the Rhine Upstream

Stand on the banks of the Rhine anywhere between Rotterdam and Basel and you'll see a river at work. Barges push upstream against the current, passenger boats churn past, the water wide and busy. It powers industry, irrigates farmland, and shapes national borders. Hard to believe this vast waterway begins as a trickle in the Alps, small enough to step across without getting your feet wet.

This journey through the Rhine Valley has been a classic European route since the nineteenth century, when steamboats and railways first opened the region to travellers. Castles, cliffs, and vine-covered slopes came to define the romance of the river, celebrated by poets and painters and eagerly sought out by early tourists. For decades, it was simply the way to travel south through Germany.

Today, though, most people take the high-speed line. Since 2002, fast trains have raced from Cologne to Frankfurt in just one hour, bypassing the river entirely. It's efficient, no question, but the slower route along the water is by far the more beautiful. And if you want to understand why the Rhine inspired such devotion for so long, you must see it from the old line.

COLOGNE, THE RHINE AT ITS WIDEST

We begin in Cologne, where the river is at its most impressive, nearly half a kilometre wide and fast-moving through the heart of the city. Just before the train pulls into the central station, it crosses the Hohenzollern Bridge, Germany's busiest railway crossing. Through the window, Cologne Cathedral rises above the water, its darkened stone and soaring spires dominating the skyline.
If time allows – and it should – Cologne deserves at least a few hours. We leave our bags in the station's lockers and walk straight to the cathedral. This is Germany's most visited monument and the third tallest church in the world, a Gothic masterpiece that took more than six centuries to complete. The sandstone has darkened from centuries of soot and pollution, giving it a brooding feel. Inside, the scale is overwhelming. Stand in the nave, look up, and you see why people have made pilgrimages here for generations.

THROUGH THE WINE VALLEYS

Trains run south along the Rhine several times an hour, and we take our time, hopping off whenever something catches our eye. In Bonn, Beethoven's birthplace is just a five-minute walk from the station, now a museum celebrating his life and music.
At Remagen, the remnants of the Ludendorff Bridge jut into the river, a reminder of March 1945 when American forces captured it intact, hastening the end of the war. A small museum nearby tells the story in detail.
At Andernach, we take a brief detour to see the world's highest cold-water geyser, which shoots 60 m (197 ft) into the air. It's more novelty than spectacle, but still worth the stop.

All trains on this stretch eventually reach Koblenz, where the Moselle flows into the Rhine at a pointed headland called Deutsches Eck. A massive bronze statue of Emperor Wilhelm I on horseback stands at the tip. We walk out to where the two rivers meet, then take the cable car up to Ehrenbreitstein Fortress, high above the confluence, for views over the entire valley.
From Koblenz, we detour again along the Moselle towards Trier. The first section to Cochem is one of Germany's loveliest stretches of railway. The track curves with the river, passing steep vineyards, medieval villages and castles perched on rocky ledges. This also happens to be Germany's oldest wine region. The Romans planted the first vines here two thousand years ago, and today more than five thousand winemakers produce some seventy million litres of wine a year, much of it excel-

lent Riesling. We stop in the village of Winningen for a glass before returning to the Rhine.

CASTLES, CLIFFS AND THE LORELEI

South of Koblenz, the river enters its most dramatic section. This is the Upper Middle Rhine Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where the river cuts through a narrow gorge between steep, forested hills. The train runs so close to the water we can see the current pushing against the bows of passing barges.

Just beyond St Goar we pass the Lorelei, a 132 m (433 ft) slate cliff rising above a particularly narrow and treacherous stretch of the Rhine. For centuries sailors feared this point: the current accelerates, the channel narrows and hidden rocks lurk under the surface. From that danger came myth. Heinrich Heine's poem about a siren luring sailors to their death is the best-known version, but the legend is much older.

The trains stop frequently along this route. We get off at Bacharach, a small town of half-timbered houses and cobbled lanes that looks unchanged for centuries. Bingen and Oberwesel are equally charming, each a good base for walks through the surrounding vineyards.

Wine enthusiasts should also look out for Boppparder Hamm, a great bend in the river lined with south-facing terraces that produce some of the valley's best Rieslings. Sheltered by the Hunsrück hills, this little microclimate has nurtured vines for millennia. We buy a bottle from a small estate near the tracks and tuck it into our bag.

MAINZ AND THE GUTENBERG MUSEUM

Mainz, an ancient city with a lively modern centre, sits at the confluence of the Rhine and the Main. It's known as Germany's wine capital, and we spend an evening in one or two of its wine bars, sampling bottles from the very regions we've been travelling through. But Mainz's real claim to fame is Johannes Gutenberg. Just off Liebfrauenplatz, the Gutenberg Museum celebrates the

man who invented movable type and changed the course of history. Inside are early presses, trays of metal type and beautifully preserved examples of early printed books, including pages from the Gutenberg Bible. It's a small museum but a fascinating one, and it makes you appreciate just how radical Gutenberg's idea truly was.

From Mainz, fast trains run directly to Basel and into Switzerland, but we're not ready to leave Germany just yet. Instead of following the Rhine south, we make a small detour and head towards the Black Forest. It means leaving the river behind for a while, but the reward is worth it. Heidelberg is less than an hour away, and it's far too beautiful to skip.

A DETOUR TO HEIDELBERG

Heidelberg survived the Second World War almost unscathed, a rare stroke of luck that preserved its old town. Today it's one of Germany's most picturesque cities: red roofs, narrow streets, and Renaissance façades climbing the banks of the Neckar.

We take the funicular up to the castle ruins, vast and atmospheric, with sweeping views across the valley. Then we follow the Philosophenweg, or Philosophers' Way, a gentle path along the hillside where Goethe and countless other poets and thinkers once walked. The panorama over the old town is well worth the hike.

THE BLACK FOREST RAILWAY

From Heidelberg it's a quick hop back to Karlsruhe, where we board the Schwarzwaldbahn, the Black Forest Railway. This double-decker regional train follows one of Germany's most scenic lines along the northern edge of the Black Forest. When we eventually set off, the landscape opens almost immediately. To the west the Rhine Valley spreads out, to the east the dark ridges of the Black Forest rise in the distance. On clear days you can see all the way to the Vosges Mountains in France.