

Travel > Ski

# I've caught the train to the slopes for 25 years, this is what I love (and hate) most

From convivial dining carts to complicated timetables, our ski-rail expert shares his verdict on taking the train to the mountains

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Travelling to resorts by train offers beautiful scenery, dining options and opportunities to socialise Credit: Harald Eisenberger

I've spent 25 years travelling to ski slopes by train, most often to well-connected French resorts such as those in the Tarentaise and Portes du Soleil. Last winter, I took the opportunity to trial whether a sleeper train could prove a hassle-free, low-carbon travel option for skiers wanting to visit the Austrian Alps.

Planning my journey, I traced a route across the rail map of Europe: London to Brussels by Eurostar followed by a Nightjet sleeper train to Salzburg, from where it's a short local train ride to the [Austrian ski resort of Bad Gastein](#), in the Ski Amadé region. Like many Austrian ski resorts, Bad Gastein is blessed with a train station at its centre – promising a quick transfer from rail tracks to the snow.

But just days before the trip, news came of an industrial rail strike spanning the whole of Germany. My sleeper-train plans were scuppered – for the outbound journey at least. With the help of the rail map and online searches, I plotted an alternative [route via Switzerland](#). No overnight trains, but plenty of stunning scenery.

The whole experience got me thinking about what I've learnt to love – and hate – about swapping airports for rail carriages on winter travels.

## The positives

### 1. Onboard dining

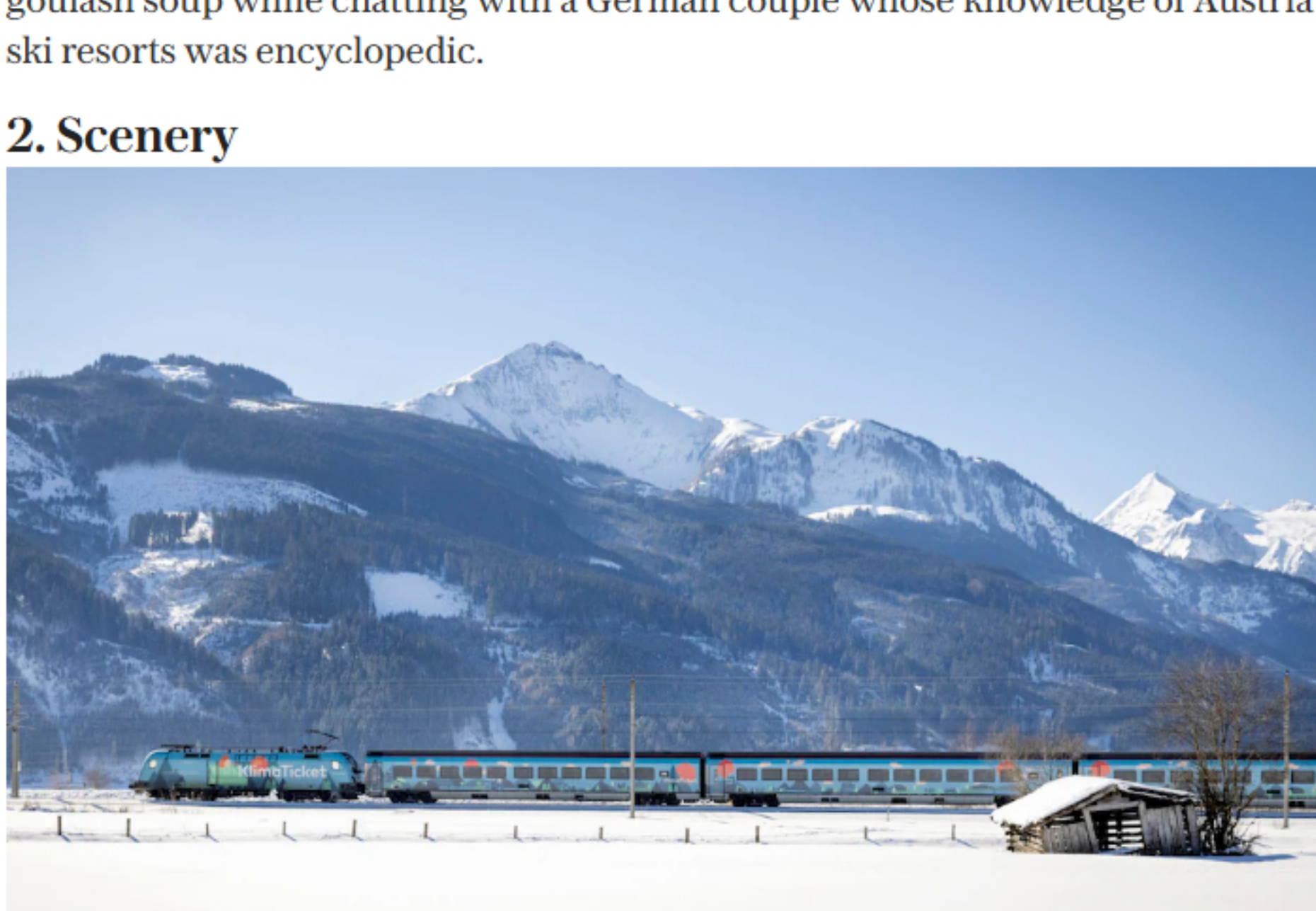


Rail services allow passengers to enjoy more leisurely meals on board

Many trains on the Continent have onboard café bars and restaurants so you can snack or dine as the landscapes drift by. French TGV café bars, for example, are convivial spaces with stools to perch on as you converse with friends and fellow passengers.

In Switzerland, InterCity trains have restaurant carriages with porcelain plates, proper cutlery and glassware – on white tablecloths. It all feels so civilised. Indeed, as if to emphasise this, en route to Bad Gastein I found myself sat across a train restaurant table from an affable young Swiss lawyer who was leafing through a book on the history of the British Conservative Party. Later, speeding through [Austria's Arlberg Valley](#) in the onboard bistro of a Railjet train, I enjoyed goulash soup while chatting with a German couple whose knowledge of Austria's ski resorts was encyclopedic.

### 2. Scenery



Scenic routes offer beautiful views of the slopes for rail tourists Credit: Harald Eisenberger

Through the train windows is an ever-changing vista. You get a ringside view of majestic, sweeping landscapes punctuated by villages, towns and cities. In Switzerland and Austria particularly, the lakeside, mountain and valley views are spectacular. Flying simply cannot compete.

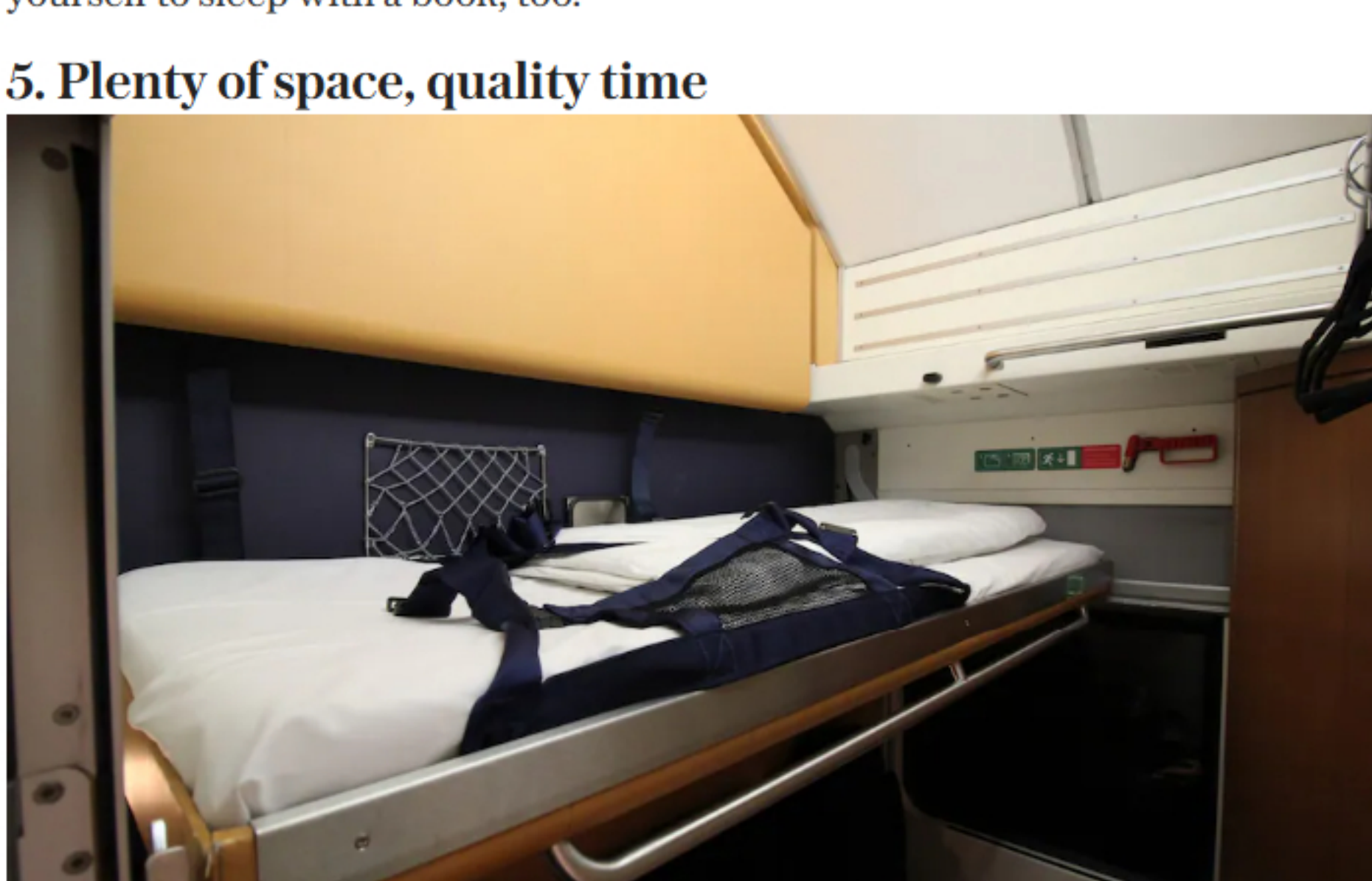
### 3. Convenient resorts

Bad Gastein is an example of the dozens of ski resorts with a train station located in the village centre. Notable examples include [Zell am See](#), Kitzbühel, St Anton and Schladming in Austria; Zermatt, Arosa and St Moritz in Switzerland; and Chamonix in France. When the train station isn't in the village, it's usually only a short bus or taxi ride – a world of difference from tedious, traffic-clogged [airport transfers](#).

### 4. Sleeper services

Night trains enable you to dream your way to the foot of the mountains. On the Nightjet, accommodation has two main categories: couchette compartments, with flat berths for four to six travellers; and [sleeper cabins](#), which comprise one, two or three people and mostly come with private shower and toilet, as well as towels and toiletries. There's a useful reading light by each bed, so you can lull yourself to sleep with a book, too.

### 5. Plenty of space, quality time



Daniel Ekan's cabin on the Nightjet train was a comfortable place to sleep while travelling Credit: Daniel Ekan

On my return journey, I'd expected the Nightjet to be full of skiers and that I might share notes on the slopes with whoever I was sharing a cabin with. But the train wasn't full and I ended up with a two-person compartment to myself. This feeling of space is a luxury afforded on daytime trains too, where legroom and a stroll to the café bar are a far cry from cooped-up plane journeys.

### 6. It's social

Rail journeys to the Alps give you large chunks of quality time to enjoy, rather than a stop-start conveyor belt of airport boredom. Trains afford a camaraderie with fellow travellers and bonding time with the friends or family you travel with. Sat around table seats, the ski holiday starts when the train slips out of the station, instead of when you arrive at the resort.



Train travel allows tourists to mingle before hitting the slopes Credit: Daniel Ekan

## The negatives

### 1. Too few trains

Demand for journeys from the UK to ski resorts continues to grow. Last month, research from the travel agent Iglu Ski found that interest in getting the train to the Alps increased by around 35 per cent between January 2020 (pre-Covid) and January 2024. Yet there are still far too few services. In spite of growing demand, Eurostar has replaced its twice-weekly indirect service from London to Bourg St Maurice with a once-weekly indirect service via Lille.

### 2. Booking online can be tricky

For some journeys to ski resorts, online booking isn't fit for purpose. Website algorithms often can't cope with the over-complex ticket system and fail to show available journey options; what's more, if you want to tailor-make your journey to give you more time in Paris, for example, online booking may struggle. Fortunately, there are independent rail-booking agents, such as [Railtrail](#) and [Trainseurope](#), that can help – but relatively few skiers are aware of them.

### 3. At the mercy of Eurostar

Eurostar's monopoly on the [Channel Tunnel](#) has left travellers with too few services per day. The company has a poor record of collaboration with other train companies to make longer-distance trips more seamless, and it continues to frustrate the many ski tour operators that want to be able to offer rail-inclusive packages to the Alps. Competition on the line cannot come soon enough.

## Essentials

Daniel stayed at the [Europäischer Hof Aktivhotel & Spa](#), which has doubles from €165 (£137) per night. Journeys from London St Pancras to Bad Gastein, with [Eurostar](#) and then [Nightjet](#) (cost from £185 with a place in a six-berth couchette).



Skiers can board the train close to resorts, as seen here in Chamonix, France Credit: Picassa/Daniel Ekan

## Five best rail-ski holidays still with availability this winter

### St Anton, Austria

[Ski Solutions](#) offers seven nights at the Hotel Arlberg, [St Anton](#), from £1,299pp, half board, based on two sharing, including return train travel and transfers, departing March 15 2025.

### Val Thorens, France

[Peak Retreats](#) offers seven nights at the Village Montana, [Val Thorens](#), from £1,106pp, self-catered, based on four sharing, including return train travel and transfers, departing April 5 2025.

### Sainte Foy, France

[Iglu Ski](#) offers seven nights at Les Fermes de [Sainte Foy](#), from £1,117pp, self-catered, based on two sharing, including return train travel and transfers, departing March 22 2025.

### Saas-Fee, Switzerland

[Inghams](#) offers seven nights at the Allalin Apartments, [Saas-Fee](#), from £925pp, self-catered, based on four sharing, including return train travel and transfers, departing March 15 2025.

### Les Arcs, France

[Sno](#) offers seven nights at the Hotel Aiguille Rouge, [Les Arcs](#), from £1,315pp, half board, based on two sharing, including return train travel and transfers, departing March 29 2025.

Find more of the best [resorts you can reach by train](#) in our guide.

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