

GET AHEAD
Kids will love the freedom of travelling by train



Railway children

Ditch the plane in favour of these family-focussed holidays by rail, says **Amanda Hyde**

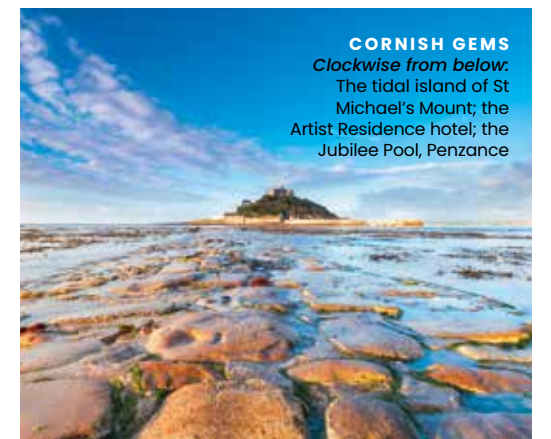
THE GREAT BRITISH BREAK

Cornwall by sleeper

TIME ON THE TRAIN: Eight hours and 15 minutes from London Paddington to Penzance.

ON THE RAILS: Driving to the West Country is notoriously slow and tortuous, especially once you've left the motorway and switched to idling, single-lane traffic. The Night Riviera Sleeper, which stops at London Paddington or Reading, is a far more civilised way to start a Cornish holiday (if in doubt, just factor in the onboard toilets versus the endless loo stops of the alternative). While two-berth cabins mean families may have to split up for bedtime (and the 10.45pm boarding time from London Paddington is punishing), beds with snugly duvets and crisp sheets make for a surprisingly good night. Light sleepers may be in for an early start, though: from just after 4am, the train makes increasingly regular stops as it wends its way along the final section of track between Exeter and Penzance. By the penultimate station of St Erth, the vistas begin shouting of the holiday to come as the train trundles through hazy countryside before revealing straight-from-a-storybook views of St Michael's Mount.

OFF THE RAILS: With its pebbly beach and mile-long promenade, Penzance is an increasingly popular base for a Cornish holiday – with the added bonus of a regular, open-top Land's End Coaster bus linking it to the artsy village of St Ives, the dramatic bay of Porthcurno (home to the open-air Minack Theatre) and the old market town of Marazion, across the water from St Michael's Mount. From the station, it's a five-minute walk to Artist Residence Penzance, which has rooms for up to four



CORNISH GEMS
Clockwise from below:
The tidal island of St Michael's Mount; the Artist Residence hotel; the Jubilee Pool, Penzance

(including the new Sail Loft with its cottage-core décor, copper bath tub and fun single bedroom featuring tiger cushions and bright blankets). Around town, book a boat trip to spot dolphin, porpoise and minke whales or go for a swim in the Art Deco lido (always around four degrees warmer than the chilly sea). And, for a child-friendly Sunday roast, make for the much-lauded Mexico Inn. This atmospheric old fishermen's haunt does pub grub

exceedingly well: save room for the scrumptious dark chocolate and peanut tart. →

THE DETAILS: Book the Night Riviera at gwr.com and Artist Residence Penzance at artistresidence.co.uk. Take a boat ride with Mermaid Pleasure Trips, cornwallboattrips.co.uk. The Mexico Inn gets booked up fast, so it's worth reserving a table ahead of your holiday, themexicoinn.com.





THE THEME-PARK EXTRAVAGANZA Disneyland Paris

TIME ON THE TRAIN: Two hours and 50 minutes from London.

ON THE RAILS: The direct Eurostar from St Pancras International to Disneyland Paris makes this one of the quickest, easiest train holidays you can take. What it lacks in scenic beauty (the countryside on both sides of the Channel is scruffy and forgettable), it compensates for in convenience – you can even leave your luggage at the station and get it delivered later if you're staying at one of the park's hotels.

OFF THE RAILS: For novice theme-park goers, Disneyland Paris offers a bite-size chunk of Mickey magic that's easily explorable over a few days. Choosing the right hotel is paramount: if your children are all-action types, pack in maximum park time by staying 30 seconds from the gates at the ostentatiously grand Disneyland Hotel – it's currently mid Princess-themed makeover and promises to be more gilded than ever on reopening. If they get easily overstimulated, the excellent Villages Nature (20-minutes by bus from Marne-la-Vallée) is a good place to decompress. A Center Parc-run resort surrounded by forest, it has calming attractions including a farm, sandy lakeside beach and island play area to counteract the Mickey madness. Once settled, you'll need at least a day for each of the two parks (Disneyland Park and Walt Disney Studios Park).

And, if you plan to do the big-name attractions, it's probably worth splashing out on Disney's new Premier Access tickets, which allow purchasers to skip the queues for rides including the adrenalin-fuelled Big Thunder Mountain and Buzz Lightyear's Laser



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Blast. If there are Hot Wheels fanatics among you, make time for the Lights, Motor, Action! Extreme Stunt Show – and, if you have teens, give them a proper scare at the stomach-churning Twilight Zone Tower of Terror. Book restaurants before you arrive or face the queues; the Ratatouille-themed Bistrot Chez Rémy is a delightful pastiche of a Parisian bistro as seen through a rat's eyes, and serves up classics such as steak-frites and roast seabass (though prices are eye-wateringly expensive; kids meals start from £18 and adults from £30).

THE DETAILS: The direct Eurostar service to Marne-la-Vallée for Disneyland Paris runs from March 2022 (until then, change at Lille and add an hour to your journey time). Book holidays direct with Eurostar, eurostar.com, or at disneyholidays.co.uk. To purchase Premier Access, create an account on the official Disneyland Paris app, via the App Store.

MOUSE HOUSE
Clockwise from above: the pastel spires of Sleeping Beauty Castle; Pluto welcomes you to the Tower of Terror; stay at Villages Nature

THE BUCKET AND SPADE TRIP Catalonia, Spain

TIME ON THE TRAIN: Nine hours from London, including the Eurostar to Paris and TGV onwards to Barcelona.

ON THE RAILS: Catalonia is a surprisingly easy rail trip away, thanks to the high-speed TGV link which whizzes travellers between Paris and Barcelona in around six and a half hours. Break up the journey with a night in the French capital, then watch your kids grow wide-eyed at the sight of the double-decker TGV train at the Gare de Lyon (grab a seat upstairs for the best views and maximum excitement). Despite the scenery, this journey may test some kids' patience – it's worth pre-making tick sheets for a game of sight-spotting en route. This will allow you to admire the sun-glazed villages and crumbling castles of the Rhône Valley, the vineyards and salt flats of the Languedoc (where you might spot a flamingo), the snow-tipped peaks of the Pyrenees, and finally the golden fields of Catalan's countryside. If that fails to placate them there are power sockets by every seat for screen time – leaving you free to admire the view – or try a trip to the buffet car in search of sandwiches, croque monsieur and pasta.

OFF THE RAILS: Thanks to its commuting seaside-dwellers, the stretch of coast around Barcelona is fairly well served by trains. Just 20-minutes away, the lively resort town of Sitges has enough to keep everyone occupied for a week, including 17 beaches and an old town packed with restaurants and shops, as well as



bike, boat and kayak hire. The main beach is good for a few days' play (especially if you visit in sleepy half-term rather than high season). Here, the lengthy stretch of sand comes backed by cute chiringuitos (beach snack bars). Grab tapas at El Chiringuito, which claims to have coined the term when it opened back in 1913. →

THE DETAILS: After the Eurostar, eurostar.com, stay at the Hotel Parisianer near Gare de Lyon, for a quick and convenient dose of family-friendly French chic, hotelparisianer.com. If you book tickets for the onward TGV to Barcelona-Sants through raileurope.com, you can specify a preference for upper-deck seats. The R2 train to Sitges leaves from the same station. Here, the seafront Hotel Calipolis has airy family rooms, hotelcalipolis.com.

BARCELONA'S BEST
Clockwise from top: Tibidabo is one of the oldest amusement parks in the world; stone streets; the city's beach; the Gaudí-designed La Pedrera building





THE CITY BREAK

Vienna by sleeper

TIME ON THE TRAIN: 14.5 hours from London, including the Eurostar to Paris and the onward sleeper service to Vienna.

ON THE RAILS: The journey is half the fun on this train-hopping trip, which travels across Europe on the new Nightjet sleeper service from Paris to the underrated city of Vienna. Once you've done the Eurostar and the taxi-shuffle through town to the Gare de l'Est, it's a leisurely 12-hour journey onwards in a comfy private cabin (book a deluxe compartment if you want an en-suite shower, although the tiny bathrooms are hard to navigate if you're trying to bathe a toddler). Unlike many sleeper services, this one leaves at a very civilised 8pm, which should keep over-tiredness at bay – with the added bonus of breakfast served in your cabin. The route cuts across Germany through the night then pitstops in Salzburg just as day breaks, before trundling through tidy countryside on the way to Vienna.

OFF THE RAILS: Vienna in summer is an

CITY SLICKERS
Clockwise from top left: ZOOM Children's Museum; the cosy Nightjet train cabin; the Danube; Schönbrunn Zoo

unexpected treat. The leafy city comes alive with a family-friendly mix of Danube-side swimming baths, forested parks and interesting museums (yes, even for kids). From May, the city's biggest buzz is its open-air pools, especially the much-loved Strandbad Gänsehäufel, on an island in the middle of the river. Complete with toddler pool, waterslides and a smattering of snack bars, it's a good spot to while away a day or two in the sunshine (make sure you grab an ice cream from Cafe Eiszeit). Afterwards, you'll find a museum to suit even the most exhibition-averse kids here – from the ZOOM Children's Museum, where they can create wood sculptures and make animation, to the city's famed Butterfly House, where more than 400 species flutter about in Art Nouveau splendour at the Hofburg Royal Palace. Leave time for Vienna's leafier attractions – notably the expansive Prater park, where you can watch rollerbladers whizzing and carriages trundling; hire a four-person bicycle buggy to pedal around the wiggling paths; picnic in a quiet meadow; or visit the famous fairground with its 200-year-old ferris wheel. 🗺️

THE DETAILS: After the Eurostar, *eurostar.com*, take a taxi to the Gare de l'Est for the Nightjet to Vienna, *nightjet.com*. In the city, Rafael Kaiser has roomy, central apartments that are perfect for families, *rafaelkaiser.com*.

