

## INTERRAILING FOR THE MATURE TRAVELLER!

Imagine—Discover—Dream. It only took us forty years, but there was no stopping us; interrailing across Europe, normally associated with students on their gap year or summer breaks, but why not the more mature traveller? Look out Europe! It was a challenge I presented earlier this year to a friend who I have known for the past twenty-five years, upon her retirement from nursing. “I’m not giving you a present, but instead I’m setting you a challenge. How do you fancy joining me for a month’s interrailing across Europe?”

For me, I had decided to leave full-time teaching and to ‘take a leap of faith—and do things differently’.

So I began by logging onto the Interrail website and started planning. Highly useful was a conversation I had with a friend’s son who had been interrailing a couple of years previously and recommended that we plan to spend at least two to three days in each place, as travelling more frequently can be very tiring (and he’s young!!). He also recommended that we book accommodation ahead of travelling in order to avoid wasting time upon arrival. This was particularly good advice for us, as unfamiliar city train stations can be busy and confusing at the best of times, let alone in a country where you don’t speak the language beyond school basics!

The first decision was which interrail pass to choose. This required a breakfast meeting! (Just the one?!!) Poring over a map together, we decided that our final destination would be Croatia,



*View across the Gulf of Trieste at  
Miramare Castle*

somewhere neither of us had visited. In order to understand how we could achieve this, we used an interrail guidebook which included suggested routes and destinations. Then, with the use of the interrail website, we were able to understand lengths of journeys and train times. Our final choice of route was as follows: St Pancras - Paris - Marseille - Agay - Milan - Venice - Trieste - Ljubljana - Zagreb - Split - Dubrovnik - Split (to fly home).

Five countries, thirty days, 1,696 kilometres and average temperatures between 25 and 28 degrees centigrade, and highest temperature 35 degrees!

The Interrail Global Pass was best suited to our needs and we chose to travel on a total of ten days within one month (September). With husbands and families agreeing to our escapade, we were committed!

For accommodation, we decided to use mainly Airbnb. We found that booking apartments, not rooms, allowed us maximum flexibility during our stays and we were able to catch up on the mundane—yes, washing! Also, we often chose to buy produce from local markets and shops and dined al fresco (often on a balcony).

Then how and what to pack?! Backpackers we were not! So, striking a balance between too much and too little was going to be difficult. The cliché was always going to be our ‘British’ obsession with the weather, consequently too many fleeces and wet weather gear were included, which never saw the light of day!! Bearing in mind that we had to be able to carry (heave) the bags on and off of trains which had varieties of precarious steps and heights, we chose bags that had wheels and handles as well as the capability of being carried on our backs, (but a feature we did not use). The best tip for packing was to take a travel towel, lots of light cotton clothing and comfortable shoes for walking.

Apart from the two of us, our best companion was the virtual world of technology. All our apartments either had wifi, or we could access the internet in cafés. Not only did we blog

regularly and *whatsapp*, which was a comfort for close family, but I also had an app for train times, and both email and texting were important for communication with our Airbnb accommodation hosts. Plus we could book tickets and passes to major attractions online.

Most important, was to look after each other. Early on, we discovered that travel days—where we sometimes had more than one change of train—were bitter sweet, a mixture of excitement in anticipation of our next destination, but a certain amount of anxiety around finding our next accommodation. We would often bear the cost of a taxi (make sure it's marked 'taxi') and were always met by our Airbnb hosts.

Any disasters? Not really, but some valuable lessons to learn. In Paris, we had a minor incident on the metro journey between Gare du Nord and Gare de Lyon, where my friend was pushed onto the crowded train by a woman (who was then nowhere to be seen) and then discovered upon arrival that her handbag was open with her purse hanging out of it! Fortunately, she had attached her purse and nothing was missing, but we learnt how important it is to be ever vigilant, particularly on travel days when it is obvious that you are tourists. Small padlocks are very useful for luggage and handbags.

Favourite places? So many. The trip was like a series of city breaks and each new place brought its rewards. We weren't disappointed. In Milan we walked around the terraces of the Duomo and visited Da Vinci's Last Supper, which we both found emotional. Then Venice; a feast like no other—Venice is Venice—there is nowhere else like it! Our visits included the Doge's Palace, off St Mark's Square, and we walked across the Bridge of Sighs, which connects to the interrogation rooms in the Palace; very sobering. In Trieste we took a bus up the coast to Miramare Castle, built by Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian and his wife. The stunning, aqua waters of the Gulf of Trieste are now a natural marine reserve. Next, Ljubljana, known locally as The City of Dragons due to the Greek myth of the hero Jason. The legend represents strength, courage and greatness as symbols of the city—and it is a great city, easily explored on foot over a couple of days. It is friendly and lively with performing arts and great street markets. Zagreb is a fusion of central European (Habsburg et al) and Mediterranean influences. Baroque and stately renaissance architecture blends with characteristically deco and art nouveau ... a vibrant city that is clearly making huge efforts to welcome visitors, and not expensive. We particularly enjoyed taking afternoon tea at the Hotel Esplanade, which was one of the original stopovers for the Orient Express. Highly recommended ... and the cost? The equivalent of £5 each! Finally, the Dalmatian coast; Split and Dubrovnik. One of the highlights was our walk around the walls in Dubrovnik, which one guidebook recommended would take up to a couple of hours—it took us over three! We also took the cable car up to view the Panorama over the city at twilight—very magical.

Finally, favourite train journeys? Probably the French Riviera from Marseille as far as Genoa, when the train cuts inland to Milan. Also, the six hour journey from Zagreb to Split was in and around the most stunning combination of rocky mountains, gorges, riverside and rural scenery.

As a mature traveller, you need to take your time.

Would we go interrailing again? Yes, without question—'in a heartbeat'! It is such good value and you see and experience so much more of a country and its culture. Whilst we can't yet match Michael Portillo and his Bradshaw's guides, who knows what's next?



*St Mark's Church, Zagreb*

***Kate Cameron***