

Cheap Return from Blackheath to Bagni di Lucca Station Please

My earliest journeys to Italy from the UK as an infant with my parents were by train. We would go to Victoria station to a special platform enclosed by a wooden structure, now long since removed. At



The famous Golden Arrow discontinued in the 1960's

Folkestone we would transfer to a cross-channel steamer and land at Calais. From here we would catch another train which would take us across Northern France via Thionville, cross into Switzerland at Basle, and enter into Italy via the Simplon tunnel.

This train route was still operating in 1976 when, in my twenties, I bought a return ticket to Syracuse, Sicily. The travel agent (this was clearly before on-line booking) found the cheapest option was by rail. The great thing about my ticket was that I could interrupt the journey wherever I wanted. Stops were made at Milan, Florence, Rome, Naples and Catania.

Sadly, this wonderful train itinerary no longer exists. It was removed in the 1980's and now the only way to do a rail journey from London to Florence is as follows:

1. London (St Pancras) – Paris (Gare du Nord)
2. Paris (Gare de Lyon) – Milan
3. Milan – Florence SMN.

It's two rail changes as compared to two rail-boat changes (that was, of course before the Channel tunnel was built).

The time of departure from London at 10.24 a.m. and the arrival time in Florence at 8.15 a.m. still, however, compares favourably with the old itinerary. What is less brilliant is that now there is a continuous railway line from London to Florence, and beyond. In theory, it should be possible to go to London's gothic castle of St Pancras (*photo below*) and stay on the same train until



Brunelleschi's cupola comes into view (*photo upper right*). Unfortunately, this is currently not possible due to privatized railway companies, 'executive' aligned travel, and the reduction of shunting and marshalling yards. I remember, for example, amazing night manoeuvres of our railway carriage at Basle, a station where rail systems from three separate countries converge.



Of course, the biggest reason why people don't buy (for example) a cheap return from Orpington to Bagni di Lucca is that low-cost air flights have monopolized journey prices and times. The cheapest rail fare from London to Florence, for example, is €363.40. And if you want to journey in comfort in a couchette then the one-way price rises to well over €500.

Europe is a continent made for rail travel, unlike America, Africa, or Australasia. It still retains a dense interconnected network. Its roads are often highly congested, reducing driving pleasure. On the other hand, one can really enjoy the variety of countryside from a railway carriage window. So why spend ten times as much to voyage from the UK to Italy by rail instead of by (for example) Ryanair?

It really doesn't make sense to fly within Europe, especially ecological sense. I am reminded of 15-year old eco-warrior Greta Thunberg from Sweden by train who travels to speak at conferences on climate change, although it might be cheaper (and quicker) for her to fly. When I was a young lad train travel was the cheapest way to get around (apart from hitch-hiking). Air flights were expensive. Now it's the other way round and, frankly, for travel around Europe they don't make sense.

A positive point in favour of travel in Italy is that trains (if one avoids the 'Freccie' and uses regional options instead) are really cheap and amazingly punctual. There is no argument about trying to find a cheaper bus option.

In Bagni di Lucca I always try to opt for the train to travel around Bella Italia. It's at least five (!) times cheaper than UK train travel over the same distance, much more ecologically responsible and, excitingly, takes one on tracks that often have stunning viaducts, bridges, and other engineering marvels crossing some of the most breathtaking landscapes in the world.

I look forwards to the time when taking a train from here, Blackheath Station SE London,



and alighting here, at Bagni di Lucca Station,



photo by Debra Kolkka

will be cheaper (and certainly more thrilling) than trudging up to Stansted airport at 5 in the morning!

– by Francis Pettitt

See Francis' Wordpress page, longoio3.wordpress.com.