



French connection

You can fly to the Riviera without leaving the ground on this high-tech train for hipsters. By Tristan Rutherford

Agatha Christie's *Mystery of the Blue Train* conjures up images of American heiresses and bankrupt British aristocrats on the sleeper service to the south of France. The rich and famous of yesteryear, F Scott Fitzgerald and Winston Churchill among them, were lulled down to the French Riviera in unparalleled comfort aboard the sleeper cars of the Train Bleu. This first-class-only route started in 1922, six years before the publication of Christie's novel, and mirrored the exclusively business-class air routes of today.

In preparation for the night train departure, passengers would have a Churchillian feast inside the Gare de Lyon's Le Train Bleu. This gilded establishment is still the embodiment of rococo overstatement, all velvet drapes, herringbone parquet and chandeliers in a carriage-shaped interior. Ceiling frescoes illustrate the delights of the route's winter-sun destinations; the palm trees and parasols of Monaco and Villefranche. The lavish setting is perfect for a three-hour lunch, and the €52 prix-fixe menu of foie gras de canard, roast lamb and patisserie, with a robust claret, is a good way to relax into the rhythm of a regal rail trip.

Gare de Lyon in Paris, top; the Provençal countryside, far left; PlayStation portables are available for hire

21st-century toys

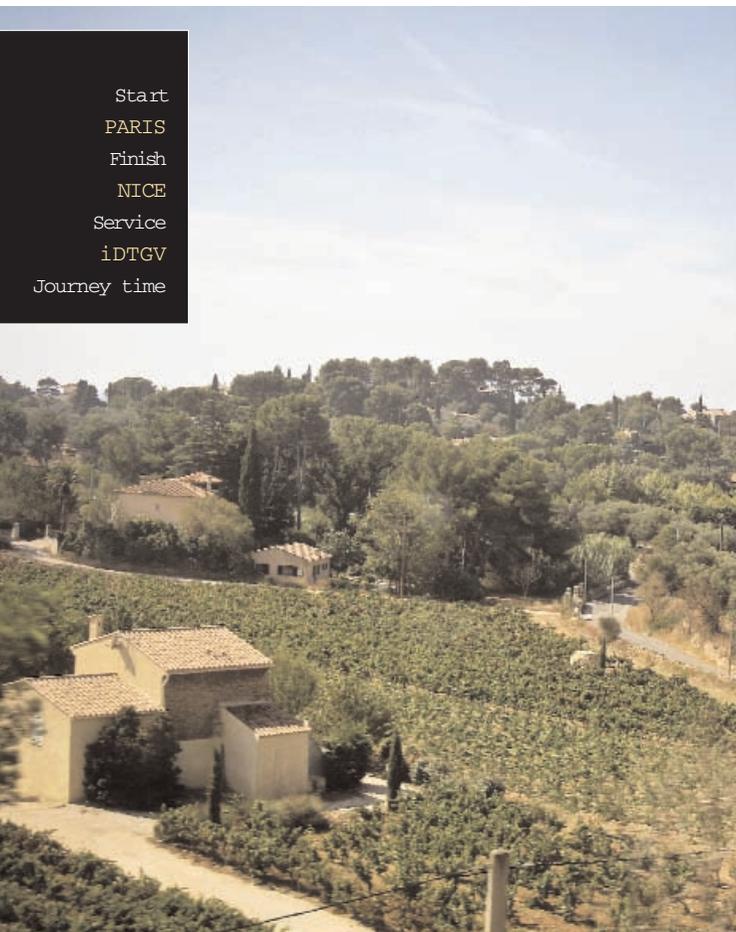
That said, the passengers on today's Paris-Nice run are a very different bunch from their formal forebears. They choose sushi over steak tartare,

reserved open-plan seating over dandified porters, and wireless connectivity over rubbers of bridge. French rail operator SNCF's iDTGV service offers all of these 21st-century trinkets, plus the chance to mingle with fellow first-class passengers in the bar. It's full-service concierge travel for the Star Alliance generation.

Five years ago, SNCF's raison d'être was to battle falling passenger numbers as travellers flocked to budget airlines. In December 2004, they rolled out their latest incarnation of the high-speed TGV service to its battleground states: the Riviera, Marseille and Toulouse. Research indicated that customers wanted the choice between quiet or boisterous carriages, draught beer or good coffee in the bar, not to mention printable e-tickets. The promise of slick city-to-city travel, in less time than it took to check in, board and pass security for a low-cost flight from

SIDINGS

The 20 train stops between Cannes and the Italian border are just a few kilometres apart and offer access to the entire Côte d'Azur. These are best explored by the local trains, which ply the scenic coast in both directions every 30 minutes. In summer, the inexpensive Carte Isabelle offers unlimited daily travel on these trains.



Start
PARIS
Finish
NICE
Service
iDTGV
Journey time



Orly or Charles de Gaulle, was essential. For the iDTGV, you can now book online for a noise-free 'Zen' or a lively 'Zap' seat, then board – and buy a drink – 20 minutes before departure. And you can carry as many bottles of liquid, knives and firearms as decency allows. As a result, iDTGV's routes boasted an 87 per cent occupancy rate in 2007, a figure that would make a budget airline boss envious.

On a recent run to the sun, the Zen first-class carriage fills up with a decorum not usually associated with Friday evening rail travel. Each set of luggage is wheeled into place well before departure, as eager faces whisper the curiously elegant phrase '*Messieursdames*' – a mangled 'ladies and gentleman', which expresses a 'hello everybody' with a hint of 'I'm also as well brought up as you are'. A minute before take-off, each occupant settles down with a copy of *Le Figaro*, *Paris Match* or the *Herald Tribune*.

The Parisian suburbs whoosh eastwards, as passengers take the opportunity to sample the

salles de bain. Ladies upstairs, gentleman downstairs. Although brown and charcoal grey plastic has replaced the panelled pine features of the original train, the coat hook, magazine holder and chest-high mirrors let you make your toilet in relative luxury.

Twenty minutes outside Paris and there is a barely perceptible advance of speed. The birch forests of the Ile-de-France make way for the desert-flat fields of northern Burgundy, which resemble an algae-topped lake as far as the eye can see, its obstacle-free green sheen crying out for land-speed records. For a while, we run alongside the autumnal trundle of the A6 motorway. The cars push 74mph, but the train advances past them – it's got the advantage of an additional 124mph, a speed hitherto the realm of video games. Speaking of which, a flashing bandolier of PSPs (PlayStation Portables) lies charged and ready for hire at the bar.

Things are getting lively in there. A touch of acid jazz is followed by 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough' by Diana Ross. Under the bauble lights, ladies from first class tuck into wraps, caesar salads and vodka-laced mango lassis. (The bar staff are as accommodating as they are genial.)

Headed for the future

Down the carriage, it is a post-work Friday night for those from second class, who are laughing hugger-mugger in a corner. A third group check out the DVDs for hire; *Jack Black* and *Ratatouille* among more authentic French art-house fare. *Messieurs* stare out of the windows through their *pressions* (served in proper glasses), safe in the knowledge that they are five kilometres closer to their destination with each passing minute. No traffic jams here. The shadows are long, though, with the train casting a fleeting outline across the jaggedy hills of southern Burgundy – France's answer to Derbyshire or Vermont.

A wander through to the Zap carriage is a vision of the future, far removed from the historical elegance of this route's illustrious past.

BELLS & WHISTLES

BEST BIT

Overtaking the cars outside Paris at 198mph.

TOP TIP

Silence your phone, and catch up on R&R in Zen class. Sleeping kits, with eye patches included, available from the bar.

PHOTO OP

Sunset over Burgundy fields (right side of train).

PACK THIS

A DVD from the €5 stands in Paris, in case you don't fancy the iDTGV selection.

ANORAK INFO

A TGV carried the entire cast and crew of *The Da Vinci Code* from London to the 2006 Cannes

Film Festival. The trip took a mere seven-and-a-half hours.

USEFUL PHRASE

'*Pourriez-vous baisser le volume sur votre iPod s'il vous plaît?*'

SOUVENIR

'PlayStation thumb' from a 90-minute session of Splinter Cell, Wipeout or Virtual Fighter 4. Rent a PSP and you get to keep the dinky earphones.

TRAVELLERS' FARE

Ricard for chilling out, mini *saucissons* for porking out.

OVERHEARD

'Do you mind if my shih-tzu sits next to you?'

Don't forget to look up from your gadgets to gaze at the Riviera



Technology worth €100,000 has been invested in each 40-person car. A medley of iPhones and iPods, DS Lites and Blackberries light up as passengers twitter, blog and chuckle into their screens. The laptops are faddish and frivolous, a sea of Sony Vaios and silver MacBooks – necessities or fashion statements? Reading lamps illuminate newly purchased hardbacks for those not partaking in this paradisiacal digitalis.

One lady on a table seat has too short an attention span for any of the above. Her long, confident curls and auburn streaks make a striking impression. The seat is shared by an impeccably behaved shih-tzu – Tibetan, she explains in English, although she could likely have done so in French, Italian or Spanish (one could imagine her conversing in Via Montenapoleone, Place Vendôme and Bond Street). Madame's Christian Lacroix sweater is in keeping with SNCF ethos: the Parisian fashion designer is currently working on the design for the new TGV interiors, which will encompass family cabins, business areas and more bars.

A young businesswoman is sitting next to Madame, in white shirt and black pants. Emails are tapped out on her PC – a workaday Dell – but remain stuck in her out-box for want of an outgoing mail server. Her vigilant attention to bullet points and subheadings is a lesson in advanced Word formatting. Did she deliberately select a seat online that was close to a power

socket? Oh the joy of dissecting other people's lives and habits over the course of a five-hour journey – and from the comfort of an armchair!

An hour from journey's end, and the iDTGV is hemmed in by the Mediterranean on the right, and travelling at the same speed as the A8 motorway to the left. To run a train à *grande vitesse*, you need a *ligne à grande vitesse*, and there's little space for one amid the quaint bustle of the Côte d'Azur. Each station we slowly pootle through – St Raphael, Antibes, Juan-les-Pins – still has a whiff of the old high life, the kind associated with the 1920s art deco tourist posters that once advertised the region. During that Belle Époque, the Train Bleu had a fierce competitor in the form of the Bentley Boys, an obtuse bunch of British, moneyed, gin slingers, which included diamond magnate Woolf 'Babe' Barnato and Le Mans winner Dudley Benjafield. This posse raced their turbocharged Bentleys from Cannes northwards against the speeding train. The Great Depression took its toll on the former, while the latter got speedier still.

Nice Airport's new terminal building passes by in a blue flash as we veer away from the A8. Our plane-beating train eventually eases its length into Nice-Ville Station, faster and more graceful than its airborne rivals.

SNCF are rolling out this high-speed, high-luxury concept over the entire French network and beyond. Roll on, we say, roll on.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

The iDTGV (www.idtgv.com) concept has been rolled out over much of France. Its sister project, iDNIGHT (www.idnight.com), follows the same routes, although journey times are generally much longer. Aimed primarily at younger passengers, the service features an open carriage that hosts events including DVD screenings, DJ sets, language lessons and poker tournaments.

There are a handful of little-known hotels in Paris that can add a pretty, yet inexpensive, addition to your journey. The Hôtel de Nesle (www.hoteldeneseleparis.com) in the Latin Quarter and the Hôtel du Panthéon (www.hoteldupantheon.com) by the Jardin de Luxembourg are both gems.

In Nice, the Hôtel Suisse (+33 (0)4 92 17 39 00) boasts superb views over the Mediterranean and is particularly recommended, while the Villa de la Tour (www.villa-la-tour.com), situated in the Old Town, offers year-round budget charm.