



# AMAZING TRAIN *Journeys*







COLOMBO TO BADULLA: p150

# Contents

Foreword  
About this Book

**Africa & the Middle East**

Johannesburg to Cape Town (South Africa)  
Andimeshk to Dorud (Iran)  
Bulawayo to Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe)  
Tazara Railway (Tanzania & Zambia)  
Iron Ore Train (Mauritania)

**The Americas**

The Sunset Limited (USA)  
La Trochita (Argentina)  
The Rocky Mountaineer (Canada)  
Perurail's Lake Titicaca Railway (Peru)  
Metro-North Hudson Line (USA)  
The Copper Canyon Railway (Mexico)  
The California Zephyr (USA)  
The Hershey Train (Cuba)  
New England's Amtrak Downeaster (USA)

6	The Rupert Rocket (Canada)	82
8	Lima to Huancavelica via Huancayo (Peru)	86
	The New Mexico Rail Runner (USA)	90
	The Serra Verde Express (Brazil)	94
12	Cruising the Pacific: the Coast Starlight (USA)	98
18	Coast to Coast on VIA Rail Canada	104
22		
28	<b>Asia</b>	
32	The Darjeeling Toy Train (India)	112
	The Hokkaido Shinkansen (Japan)	116
	The Eastern & Oriental Express (Thailand to Singapore)	120
38		
44	Hong Kong's West Rail Line (China)	124
48	The Reunification Express (Vietnam)	128
54	Mandalay to Lashio (Myanmar)	134
58	Baikal-Amur Mainline (Russia)	138
62	The Beijing to Lhasa Express (China)	142
68	The Death Railway (Thailand)	146
72	Colombo to Badulla (Sri Lanka)	150
78	The Nilgiri Mountain Railway (India)	156

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**WEST COAST WILDERNESS RAILWAY: p287**



**THE EASTERN & ORIENTAL: p121**



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**THE NORTHERN EXPLORER: p291**

Japan's Post Road Train	<b>162</b>
Trans-Mongolian Railway (Russia to China)	<b>166</b>
Beijing to Shanghai by High-Speed Rail (China)	<b>170</b>
<b>Europe</b>	
Settle to Carlisle (UK)	<b>176</b>
The Glacier Express (Switzerland)	<b>182</b>
Bilbao to Ferrol on the FEVE (Spain)	<b>186</b>
Trans-Siberian Railway (Russia)	<b>190</b>
East Coast Main Line (UK)	<b>196</b>
Le Petit Train Jaune (France)	<b>200</b>
Belgrade-to-Bar Railway (Serbia & Montenegro)	<b>206</b>
Bernina Express (Switzerland)	<b>210</b>
Venice Simplon-Orient-Express (France & Italy)	<b>218</b>
Heart of Wales Line	<b>222</b>
Munich to Venice on the Brenner Railway (Germany to Italy)	<b>226</b>
Fort William to Mallaig by Jacobite (UK)	<b>230</b>
Nova Gorica to Jesenice (Slovenia)	<b>234</b>
Cannes to Menton (France)	<b>238</b>

The Bergensbanen (Norway)	<b>242</b>
London to Fort William on the Caledonian Sleeper (UK)	<b>248</b>
Cologne to Mannheim (Germany)	<b>252</b>
Inlandsbanan (Sweden)	<b>256</b>
Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways (Wales)	<b>260</b>
Centovalli Express (Switzerland & Italy)	<b>266</b>
<b>Oceania</b>	
The Ghan (Australia)	<b>272</b>
South Coast Line (Australia)	<b>278</b>
The TranzAlpine (New Zealand)	<b>282</b>
West Coast Wilderness Railway (Australia)	<b>286</b>
The Northern Explorer (New Zealand)	<b>290</b>
Kuranda Scenic Railway (Australia)	<b>296</b>
Index	<b>300</b>
Acknowledgements	<b>304</b>







# Cruising the Pacific: the Coast Starlight

USA ●



Trace America's 'left coast' in all its varied splendour. The 34-hour (OK, it's Amtrak, so maybe more) trip between Seattle and Los Angeles curves alongside crashing Pacific waves, cuts through America's lushest agricultural land, and passes below snow-capped mountains and towering redwoods. Of all the Amtrak routes, this one offers the most scenic variety in the fewest hours.

Another reason this train is special: it's the only Amtrak service with a dedicated parlour car, open only to passengers who book sleepers. The parlour conjures old-time rail romance, with wood panelling and soft lighting, plus a special menu and wine-and-cheese tastings.

## 1 RIDING THE RAILS

On the second day of the trip from Seattle to Los Angeles, long-haul passengers are settled in. They've picked their favourite seats in the lounge car. They've shared their life stories and personal advice. So it feels comfortable and natural when, sometime after 4pm, everyone looks out the window and conversation stalls. The temporary community of the train hasn't failed; it's just that the Pacific Ocean has appeared.

IMAGE COURTESY OF AMTRAK



From south of San Luis Obispo to just past Santa Barbara, the ocean is the star. The floor-to-ceiling windows of the Sightseer Lounge car fill with light reflecting off the water – the 'shining sea' of song. In the dining car, strangers' chitchat at the shared tables is broken by meditative silences as the sun sinks lower. In the parlour car, people turn from their convivial cocktail tables, from their glasses of



wine or their *palomas* (grapefruit and tequila, picked to reflect California's Mexican heritage), and stare out the window.

It's not as if the train hasn't gone through dramatic landscapes already. The first day, starting outside Seattle, the route plunges into deep forest, often

*"the real thrill is where it runs at the edge of the continent, where the cliffs drop away to the water"*

wreathed in mist. Rangers in the lounge car point out such landmarks as 8366ft (2550m) Mt St Helens, its white peak still jagged from its 1980 eruption, and sometimes leaking steam. The 20-mile (32km) length of Upper Klamath Lake turns dark in the dusk, or reflects the rising moon.

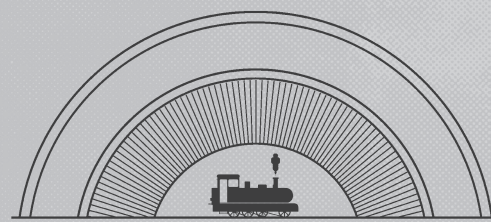
The next morning, tidy suburban tracts of San Jose – Silicon Valley – give way to the equally tidy fields

of California's Central Valley, which grows more than half of America's produce. The train cuts across vast green acres of spiky artichokes and glinting berries, under arcing sprinklers, alongside small armies of field workers. The food in this dining car – the same menu served on every Amtrak train across the country – tastes better, fresher, probably because the produce has travelled to the train from these very lush fields. As the route syncs up with the historic Spanish Camino Real, Franciscan missions, built in the 18th and 19th centuries, pop up in every town with 'San' (Saint) in the name.

But this is the Coast Starlight, after all, and the real thrill is where it runs at the edge of the continent, where the cliffs drop away to the water below. Past Santa Barbara, the train passes just above beaches and little towns – Mussel Shoals, Carpinteria – and the golden-hour light inspires reverie: what if I bought a surfboard and a VW bus? What if I rented a little redwood cabin, sheltered by windswept trees? This view could be mine, every night. America's West



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### TIPPING ON AMTRAK

Tip your sleeping-car attendant, especially if he or she brings you a meal in your room (always an option); between \$10 and \$20 per room at the end of your trip is typical. Also tip your server in the dining car, even if your meal is free; a few dollars per passenger is always welcome.



Seattle's King Street Station, refurbished in 2014, is dazzling, with ornate white tile inside.



Stroll the pretty Pearl District during the hour-long Portland stop – or stay longer for great eats and bars.



Seattle

Portland

Albany

Sacramento





© MARK READ | LONELY PLANET

**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Golden Gate Bridge; Hearst Castle; the surfing life as lived in LA. **OPENING PAGE:** South of San Francisco, the Coast Starlight hugs America's west coast.



© CHRIS CHADLE | GETTY IMAGES

Coast, especially California, the Golden State, has always been a place of dreams, and this train offers them every day.

## 2 LIFE ON BOARD

Sleepers are snug roomettes for two (toilets and showers are located downstairs) or larger bedrooms with in-room facilities. Sleeper tickets include all meals in the dining car, as well as local wine tastings (Oregon wines in the north, California wines in the south, naturally) and optional meals in the parlour car. In coach class, seats come equipped with a good recline and footrests, but there is no shower access. Snacks such as sandwiches, pizza and beer and wines are sold in the lounge car, and full meals can be purchased in the dining car. Wireless internet is promised but inconsistent, especially in rural areas.

## 3 MAKE IT HAPPEN

The Coast Starlight runs once daily, leaving midmorning and arriving late the next day. Book online ([www.amtrak.com](http://www.amtrak.com)), but call the number on the website to request a room on the right side going south or left going north. Book sleepers at least two months in advance, especially for holiday weekends. Coach seats are usually available, though even they may fill at peak times.

To break up the trip, Oakland (for San Francisco) is a good midpoint. You cannot book a layover; you must purchase two separate tickets. If you're travelling only a day leg (Oakland to Seattle, for example), a sleeper is a smaller surcharge and especially good value.

Trains run cold; pack warm layers. In coach, bring a blanket and pillow, and a washcloth if you want to brave a sink bath. **ZO**



Oakland is the gateway to San Francisco, but also an increasingly cool destination in its own right.



San Luis Obispo is the stop for Hearst Castle, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst's lavish home.

Admire Los Angeles' 1939 Spanish art deco Union Station, and get tacos at historic Olvera Street.



Oakland

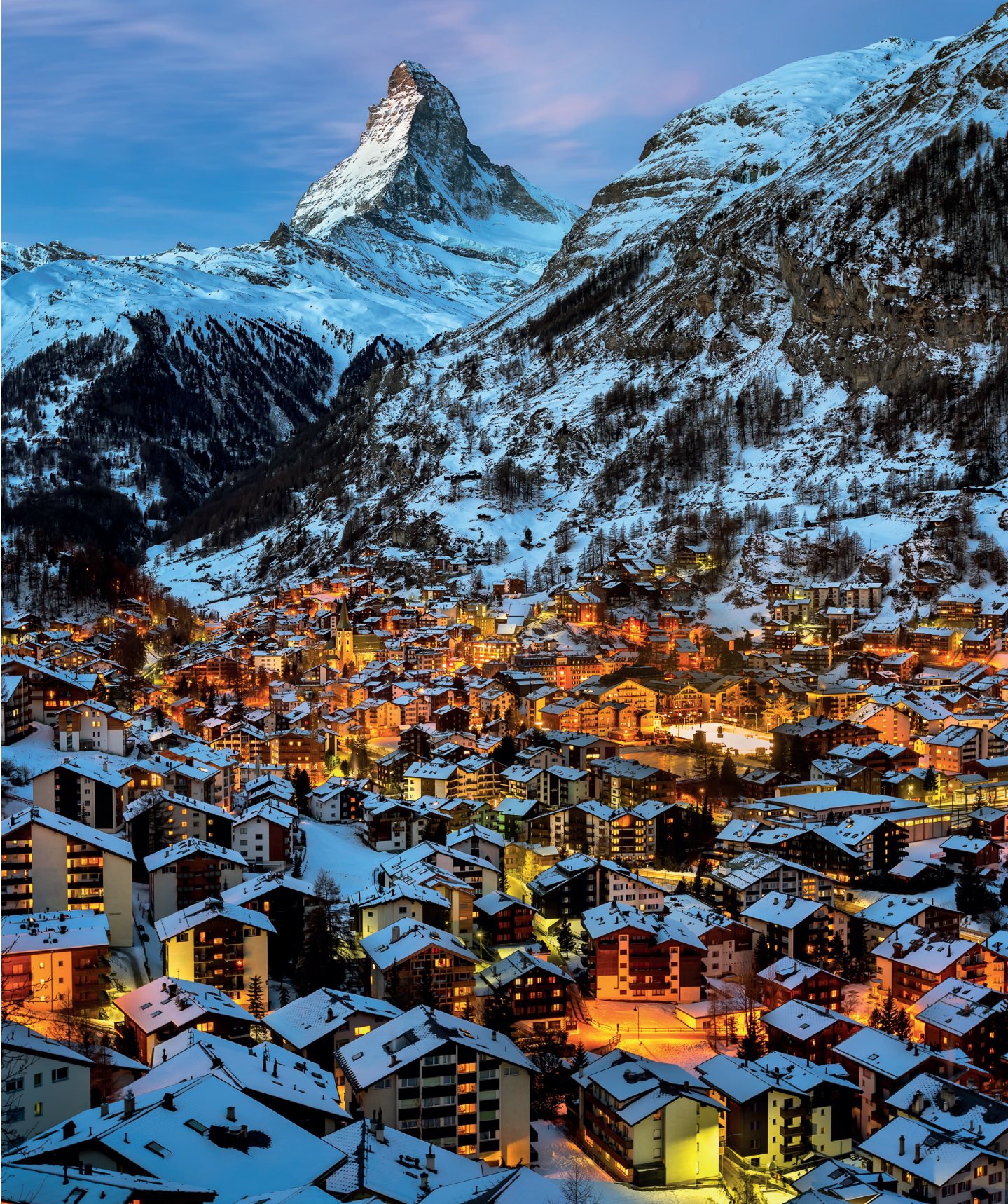
San Luis Obispo

103

Santa Barbara

Los Angeles

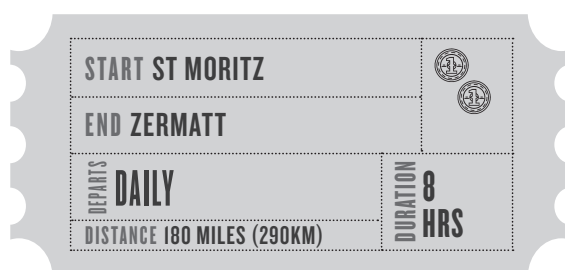






# The Glacier Express

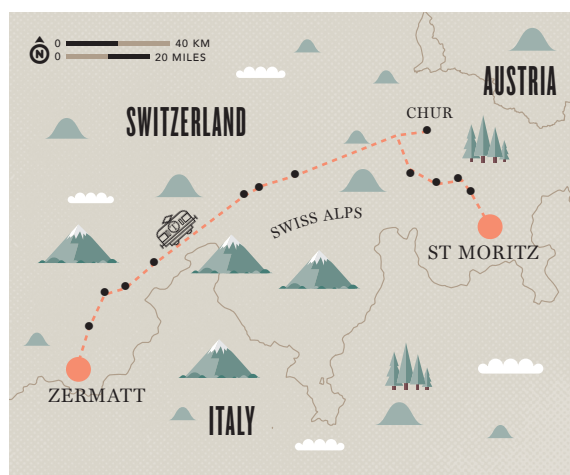
SWITZERLAND ●



No wonder the Swiss are a nation of rail fanatics, with such bang-on-time, ludicrously scenic trains. But if they could pick one definitive ride, the honour would surely go to the Glacier Express. This eight-hour journey from ritzy St Moritz to Matterhorn-topped Zermatt unzips the lovely Alpine terrain in the country's south, corkscrewing up to wind-battered mountain passes, teetering across 291 bridges and rumbling through 91 tunnels. The slowest express train on the planet, it intentionally moves at a snail's pace so as to big up those out-of-this-world views of meadows, forest, falls and mountains – all glimpsed through panoramic windows, natürlich.

## 1 RIDING THE RAILS

Boarding the Glacier Express at St Moritz Station is reminiscent of a more graceful age of travel when such journeys were the preserve of the truly wealthy. Liveried chauffeurs drop off smartly dressed passengers, the porters are dapper and the bright-red trains so impeccably polished that they gleam. The sense of excitement on the platform is palpable and justifiable – this is, after all, one of the world's greatest train journeys, and where better to begin than in the birthplace of Alpine tourism?



That the Swiss like to do things properly is no secret: trains are timed to the millisecond and journeys are never just about getting from A to B. But the Glacier Express goes a step further by presenting Switzerland in a nutshell. As soon as you've taken your seat, you'll be glued to your window for eight hours, as landscapes unfold cinematically. Doe-eyed cows graze in meadows that spread out like velvet carpets, the green froth of fir-cloaked hills rises up to jagged peaks topping out around the 13,125ft (4000m) mark, and the glacially cold Rhine and Rhône rivers roll past dark-timber hamlets, castles and church spires. Each new view elicits little shrieks of wonder.

Then there's the added engineering factor. Consider that the Glacier Express was first launched as a steam train back in 1930 and you'll see those crevasse-spanning bridges, rollercoaster tracks up to high mountain passes and tunnels in a whole new light. If the journey seems impressive now, back then it must have seemed nothing short of a miracle.



**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:** The impossibly beautiful Landwasser Viaduct; marvelling at the Alpine vistas.

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** The Matterhorn.

The journey can also be made in winter and there is a particular magic when snow polishes the mountains pearly white in the sun. From St Moritz, the scene is immediately spectacular as the train makes a steep, looping descent on the narrow-gauge Albula Line, a Unesco World Heritage Site. The 38-mile (61km) stretch of track between St Moritz and Thusis cuts through high Alpine country, trundling helter-skelter into tunnels and across ravine-traversing bridges.

It's a fitting prelude for the view that graces a thousand postcards: the Landwasser Viaduct. Rising 215ft (65m) above a river of pure turquoise, with cliffs and forest sheering above it, the curving single-track, six-arched viaduct has everyone grappling frantically for their cameras. The vista is a ready-made Christmas card when the snow is falling.

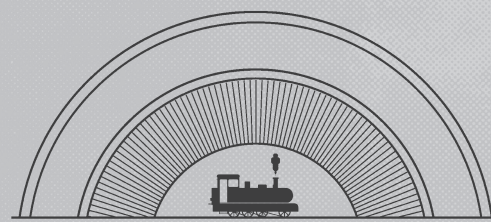
On the train rolls, shadowing the Hinterrhein River and castle-crowned hillsides before reaching the glacier-gouged Ruinaulta gorge near Flims, stippled with limestone turrets and pinnacles. The babble of several languages – French, Swiss German, Italian and Romansch – often fills the carriage around Chur, Switzerland's oldest city, and in Disentis, topped by a Benedictine monastery. Then the steep rack-and-pinion gradients begin as the train climbs up and up to the Oberalp Pass, the highest point at 6670ft (2033m), where gnarled mountains rise above the source of the Rhine at nearby Lai da Tuma.

Mooching along at an average speed of 24mph (40km/h), the Glacier Express is in no hurry – and why would you want to rush? Soon after the lovely Alpine town of Andermatt, it scoots into the Furka Base Tunnel, emerging in the glacier-encrusted Rhône Valley, where log-built chalets are dwarfed by 13,125ft (4000m) peaks. St Niklaus is like a drum roll for the ultimate view in Switzerland. As the train clatters up to Zermatt at 5250ft (1600m), the anticipation

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### THE MAGIC OF MATTERHORN

Zermatt's Matterhorn Museum does a grand job of telling the tale of the Matterhorn and the farming village at its foot, connected only by mule track to the valley below until 1891 when the railway arrived. The mountain was first summited by Edward Whymper in 1865 – an achievement marred by a rope-breaking tragedy.



Book a seat in the all-window panoramic carriage for knockout mountain views.

Draw breath as you cross the curving, six-arched Landwasser Viaduct, with the river but a splash below.



Hop off for a hike through the limestone wonderland of the Ruinaulta gorge.

St Moritz

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builds and gasps fill the carriage. And suddenly there it is: the Matterhorn, an almighty fang of a 14,692ft (4478m) peak and the ultimate Swiss icon.

## 2 LIFE ON BOARD

The landscapes might be wild but the train itself is highly civilised. Meals are brought directly to your seat – enjoy a glass of Swiss wine and regional specialities, such as *Bündnerfleisch* (air-dried beef) and *Gerstensuppe* (barley soup), as you chug through the Alps. Seat reservations are obligatory.

## 3 BUDGET ALTERNATIVE

If the Glacier Express is beyond your budget, save francs by opting to take the hourly local trains covering the same route (minus the panoramic

carriages). They are slightly quicker and cheaper. Visit [www.sbb.ch](http://www.sbb.ch) for details. All discount travel cards (such as the Swiss Travel Pass and Half Fare Card) are valid.

## 4 MAKE IT HAPPEN

There are one to three trains daily year-round, except late October to early December, when there is no service. Tickets can be booked at [glacierexpress.ch](http://glacierexpress.ch) or through tour providers. Reserve your seats as soon as you have firm dates. Upgrading to 1st class is expensive (almost double the 2nd-class fare) but means fewer crowds and greater comfort.

The one-way journey is impressive whether you begin in St Moritz or Zermatt. You can hop on and off as you like, or break the journey down into shorter sections. It's beautiful year-round but go in winter (December–April) for the full-on snow-globe effect. **KC**

