

# Four walls closing in? Reach for the stars

James Stewart sheds a whole new light on sleeping under the night sky on a visit to Switzerland

There has been considerable soul-searching of late in the luxury hotel industry as to what guests want from a stay, with the smart money saying that providing distinctive stays in unique locations to fewer guests might well be the way to go.

However, after conducting my own informal study of distinctive stays in unique locations in Switzerland, I've discovered a flaw in that model. However unique the location, the view from a luxury hotel is only as impressive as its windows are large. The solution's obvious. Get rid of the walls.

That is roughly the thinking behind Million Stars Hotel. Relunched this summer (the international launch fell to travel restrictions last year), the Swiss national tourism project lists around 50 stays of varying degrees of sophistication: from luxury suites on the roofs of city hotels to al fresco beds beside mountain hostels, from geodesic glass domes to mattresses on haycarts.

What they all share is a direct view of the night sky. The aim, say the organisers, is to promote closer connections with the outdoors. Considering how much appeal the outdoors of Switzerland has, that seems entirely sensible.

After cabin fever in spring then a dismal summer when Britain seemed



sealed inside a Tupperware container, I booked two stays in the southern canton of Valais, a region popular with Swiss holidaymakers. That was the other reason I liked the sound of Million Stars Hotel – it highlights areas beyond the obvious spots such as Interlaken and St Moritz.

The ascent from Mörle by cable car hints at what we're missing. Riederalp is a road-free village composed of the sort of chalets you usually see on cuckoo clocks. A chairlift continues beyond to Hohfluh. The air cools, your ears pop as you pass 6,890ft, then you feel a sharp pain as your jaw hits the floor. Ahead is the Aletsch Glacier.

The Alps' largest glacier was why I'd booked stay number one: Cube Aletsch, on the summit of nearby Eggishorn. Well, that and the exclusivity – when the last cable car descends from the mountain in late afternoon, the view is yours alone until morning.

I take a cable car from Fiesch to the check-in desk, aka Alpenlodge restaurant in Fiescheralp terminal. A woman hands me a key, a hamper of local meats and cheeses – and a business card. "If there's a problem during the night, call us," she says. A slight pause. "We'll send a helicopter." She guffaws.

At such moments a solitary stay at 9,186ft seems a bit daft. Then you take the cable car up Eggishorn, step outside the terminal and see Cube Aletsch. It's as five-star as a high-altitude cabin can be, with an expensive sofabed, a fridge

holding a bottle of prosecco and the requisite fluffy bathrobes and slippers in a basic bathroom. The front wall is made of insulated glass which glides open with the smoothness of precision Swiss engineering. There's also a wooden hot tub on the deck.

They've clearly thrown money at the thing. Yet I barely notice. I'm too busy gawping at the view.

At eye level beyond the deck is peak after snow-ribbed peak. The Aletsch Glacier carves beneath, 11 billion tons of grey-blue ice – enough to provide one litre of drinking water for every person on the planet for more than four years – creaking for 13 miles from a distant valley head, around a bend below then west towards the Matterhorn. It's an amazing sight; almost ocular tinnitus in that I never quite get used to it.

By 5pm the last daytrippers leave and the summit becomes wilder, more elemental. When the sun rakes across the glacier, cracks shine like gold filigree. The Matterhorn becomes a perfect pyramid in a pale sky.

I turn off my phone – the 4G up here is better than in Berkshire – ease into the hot tub with a glass of fizz and goggle. Cube Aletsch is not so much a room with a view as a view with a room.

I'm finishing dinner on the deck later when the last clouds pull back like theatre curtains. Framed by the mountains' black silhouettes, the sky boils with stars. The Milky Way is a cloudy stripe. Shooting stars blaze and

▲ A view with a room: Cube Aletsch on the Eggishorn

▼ Rise and shine: Berginsel B&B, in Oberems, has an almost mythical feel

die like sparks. In light pollution this minimal, the million stars tag undersells the thing.

I retreat inside the cabin when the temperature dips but am reluctant to sleep. The world's most redundant curtains remain open all night. I wake periodically and watch constellations inch across the sky.

Cube Aletsch is a highlight of Million Stars Hotel, as extraordinary as you'd hope. Could stay two costing a fraction of its price compare?

Berginsel is a B&B on a dairy farm in Oberems, a pipsqueak village of sagging

barns above the Rhone valley. After a splendid dinner of homemade raclette, Marie-Elisabeth (with eyes the colour of alpine streams) shows me my room in a private garden behind the farmhouse.

Beneath a pine tree at the valley's edge a double bed is made up with red gingham linen. Candles shimmer in lanterns. Villages twinkle far below. There's a faint smell of fresh hay from adjacent fields. It's less a room than Titania's boudoir.

"This space has always had a special atmosphere," Marie-Elisabeth says. "It's where I come to ask the moon my ques-

*It's an amazing sight; almost ocular tinnitus in that I never quite get used to it*

tions." I know the question you're wondering: what happens if it rains?

By 10pm, I'm in bed with a mug of mountain-herb tea. Within an hour, the wind is roaring in the pine boughs and a hanging lamp swings as if aboard a galleon. Thunder crackles, booms, rolls like a long echo far down the valley.

Then the rain starts. I try to tough it out, but when drops seep through the boughs I call it quits and retreat to a bedroom set aside in the house. A million stars? I didn't see one.

The strange thing is, it doesn't matter. Most people spend 90 per cent of their lives indoors. Any project which aims to nudge us outside, to reconnect with the natural world, gets my vote. To be snug outside while nature threw a tantrum was thrilling; as memorable as my night in Cube Aletsch in its way.

I'm back outside for breakfast at 7am; chomping homemade muesli and cheeses, slugging coffee as church bells drift up from villages and cowbells thonk and the sun warms my bones. Now this, I think, is luxury.

James Stewart was a guest of Switzerland Tourism (myswitzerland.com). Cube Aletsch costs from £176 a night B&B; Berginsel costs from £79 B&B. Both sleep two. Million Stars Hotel (millionstars.swisshotels.com) operates from May-October

Overseas travel is currently subject to restrictions. See Page 2



## Night trains in Europe – a Green dream from Germany

Hold on to your anoraks! Sleeper travel might be back on track, says Gavin Haines

Rail anoraks were aquiver last week as – in advance of today's general election in Germany – the German Greens announced plans for a network of night trains in Europe. Under the proposals, some 40 sleeper services would dart between dozens of cities and holiday resorts, providing a low-carbon alternative to flying on a Continent struggling to drive down emissions.

Looking at the brightly coloured lines on the Greens' map, it is hard not to romanticise about nodding off in Edinburgh and waking up in Paris – one of the routes proposed by the party. Berlin to Rome and Oslo to Prague are among others that fire the imagination. The plans add to the sense that a new golden epoch for sleeper trains beckons. Pushed towards extinction by low-cost carriers, sleeper services are showing signs of a comeback in Europe amid rising demand for low-emission travel.

"People are willing to travel increasingly long distances by train because they realise that climate change is a very real thing now," said Mark Smith, who runs the Man in Seat 61 rail travel website. "People tell me they want to cut their carbon footprint, but also that they want to get away from the airport and airline experience."

The market has responded. Austria's state-run operator OBB has been buying brand new sleeper stock to serve its

growing nocturnal network – something that would have raised eyebrows a decade ago. Its overnight Paris-Vienna service is set to launch in December, with Zurich-Amsterdam following in 2022; Berlin-Brussels and Berlin-Paris are due to get going in 2024.

Then there's European Sleeper. The Dutch-Belgian railway startup has secured funding to launch a night train between Brussels and Prague, calling at Amsterdam and Berlin. Travellers will be able to hop aboard from 2022.

Few firms have responded with quite as much pizzazz as Midnight Trains, however. The French startup has pledged to reboot the night train concept entirely from 2024 with a fleet of "rolling hotels". It has a sleek website and a weekly newsletter – but, according to Smith, no rolling stock.

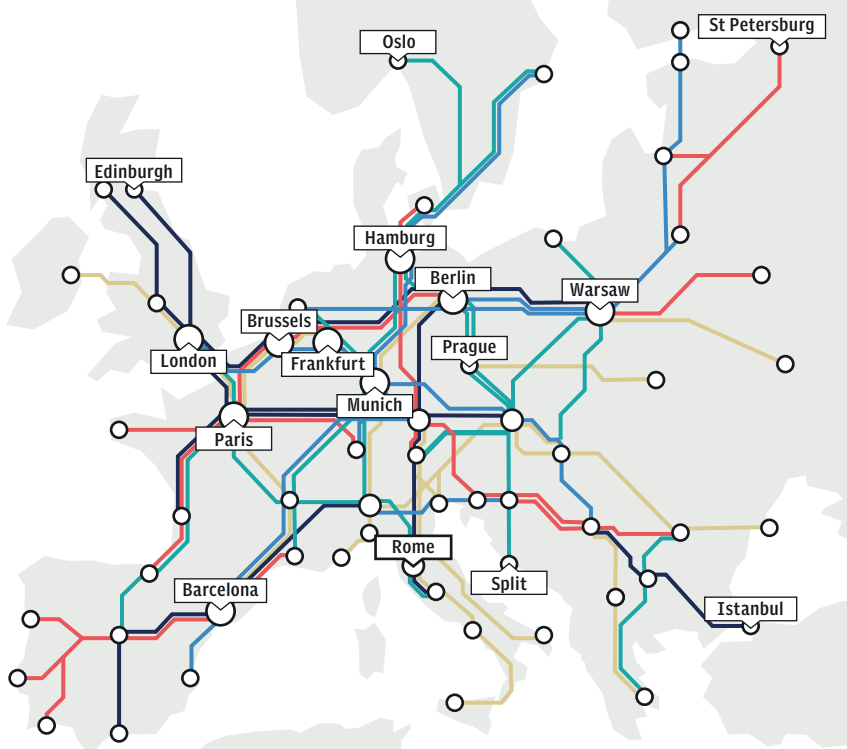
"There is a shortage of [used] rolling stock that is preventing operators from expanding," explained Smith. Most startups, he added, simply can't afford the upfront cost of buying new.

Like leaves on the line and the "wrong kind of snow", there are other obstacles holding night trains back – namely aviation's generous tax breaks, which give planes a competitive advantage over night trains.

"Before we draw lines on maps, we need to level the playing field between air and rail," said Smith. "Airlines pay no fuel duty, which is like me filling up my car at 60p a litre. Meanwhile, railways have to pay tax on electricity and diesel. Policies almost look as if they are designed to encourage emissions."

The German Greens claim to have solutions to such problems, including proposals to end aviation's tax advantages. The party also wants the European Investment Bank to invest in rolling

**European sleeper routes**  
The proposed overnight railway network for 2030



stock and then lease it out to rail firms at a competitive rate. First, though, the party has to persuade enough people to vote for them in today's elections in order to leverage any real power. With some polls putting them at almost 20 per cent of the vote – and given the fragmented nature of German politics – that's arguably the easy bit; the hard bit could be clearing the tracks for a genuine night-train revival.

**FIVE SLEEPER TRAIN ROUTES TO FIRE THE IMAGINATION**

**1. Edinburgh-Frankfurt**  
Calling at London and Paris, this cross-Channel service is perhaps the most ambitious route – and the least likely to succeed. High track access fees for HSI and the Channel Tunnel, plus friction at

the UK-EU border, mean it is likely to remain just a line on a map.

**Estimated duration: 14 hours**  
*Where to stay if it succeeds: For über-swanky lodgings a short stroll from Frankfurt central, check in at Roomers (00 49 69 2713420; roomers-hotels.com)*

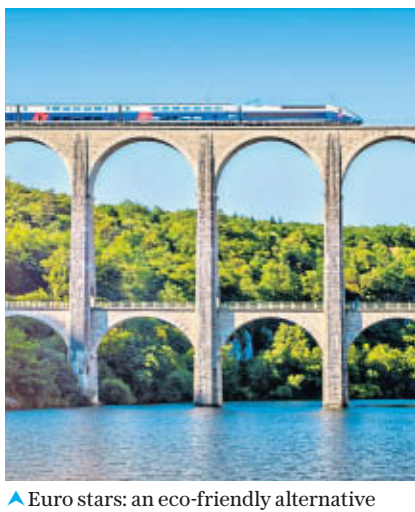
**2. Oslo-Prague**  
Calling at Copenhagen, Hamburg and Berlin, this is another ambitious route. It could make use of the Fehmarnbelt Tunnel, currently being bored beneath the Baltic Sea to provide a rail link between Denmark and Germany. One of Europe's largest infrastructure projects, the tunnel is scheduled to open in 2029.

**Estimated duration: 16 hours**  
*Where to stay if it succeeds: The intimate, upscale Cosmopolitan Hotel (00 420 295 563 000; hotel-cosmopolitan.cz) has elegant rooms, a destination restaurant and spa. It is also just a short walk from Prague train station*

**3. Berlin-Rome**  
This route is not as fanciful as you might think, given Europe's plans for a direct train between Berlin and Sicily. The 1,400-mile service will use the Brenner Base Tunnel, which is being dug beneath the Alps and will be the world's longest underground rail tunnel when it opens in 2028.

**Estimated duration: 16 hours**  
*Where to stay if it succeeds: The lavish decor at Rome's Hotel de la Ville (00 39 06 977931; roccofortehotels.com) is apt for travellers completing one of the longest rail journeys in Europe*

**4. Berlin-Split**  
A shorter version of this route is already up and running thanks to Czech rail operator RegioJet. Undeterred by the



▲ Euro stars: an eco-friendly alternative

pandemic, it launched a summer sleeper train between Prague and Split last year, calling at Budapest and Zagreb. It has been a "surprise night train success", according to Smith.

**Estimated duration: 20 hours**  
*Where to stay: For period features and elegant interiors, check in to Heritage Hotel 19 (00 385 21 720 027; heritage-hotel19.com)*

**5. Berlin-Paris**  
A sleeper train plied this popular route until 2014, when it was axed to general outcry. The route is now being revived as part of OBB's expansion of its nocturnal network. The first trains are due to depart in 2024.

**Estimated duration: 8 hours**  
*Where to stay if it succeeds: Ideal for onward travel to London, Hôtel Whistler (00 33 153 20 09 09; whistler-paris.com) near Gare du Nord goes big on the golden age of travel theme*