From Munich to Venice by Train: Just sit and watch the Alps go by

Posted on

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Neuschwanstein Castle was built by King Ludwig II in 1886 and inspired Disney’s Cinderella Castle.

Most European train journeys can be epic adventures, with luxurious high-speed trains moving effortlessly across international borders, passing mountain peaks, quaint villages, fruit-laden valleys, and ancient hilltop castles. If you're yearning for one such unforgettable experience, then the spectacular Alpine train route between Munich and Venice is a sumptuous feast for the eyes of any North American tourist to Europe.

This past summer, my wife and I chose this rail journey between Germany and Italy through Austria. I am so glad we did. Here's a bit about our all-too-short but unforgettable train trip.

Our journey begins at the München Hauptbahnhof, or Munich Central Station, the largest train station in Bavaria in southern Germany. Serving nearly 450,000 passengers daily, it is a bustling multi- platform station with restaurants, food stalls, coffee shops, and beer stands all under one roof, first built 175 years ago. It's a short walk from our hotel, and we roll our suitcases through Marineplatz, the historic plaza at the city's heart. At the station, we buy a few sandwiches and drinks for lunch while our German friend reminds us to keep our purses safe amidst the throng of people.

That German friend is Michael, who lives in Dusseldorf and has been a dear friend since we first met at high school in Chicago in 1977. A nearly half-century-long friendship has endured as we met frequently in various parts of the world from time to time.

"Just sit and watch the Alps go by," Michael says, waving goodbye.

We had booked our tickets online through Deutsche Bahn, Germany's national railway. We opt for first-class travel, which costs about 150 Euro per ticket for reserved seating. However, upon boarding, we discover we're on a train operated by Austrian Federal Railways under the acronym OBB. Though we've never been on one before, OBB is widely believed to provide one of Europe's best rail services. As the journey continues, we discover that the Munich-Venice Alpine route is serviced by DB, OBB, and Trenitalia, Italy's premier high-speed train operator. The train attendants on this day were all young Italian men. Most European trains have no check-in procedure. The station's info screens clearly list your train, platform, and

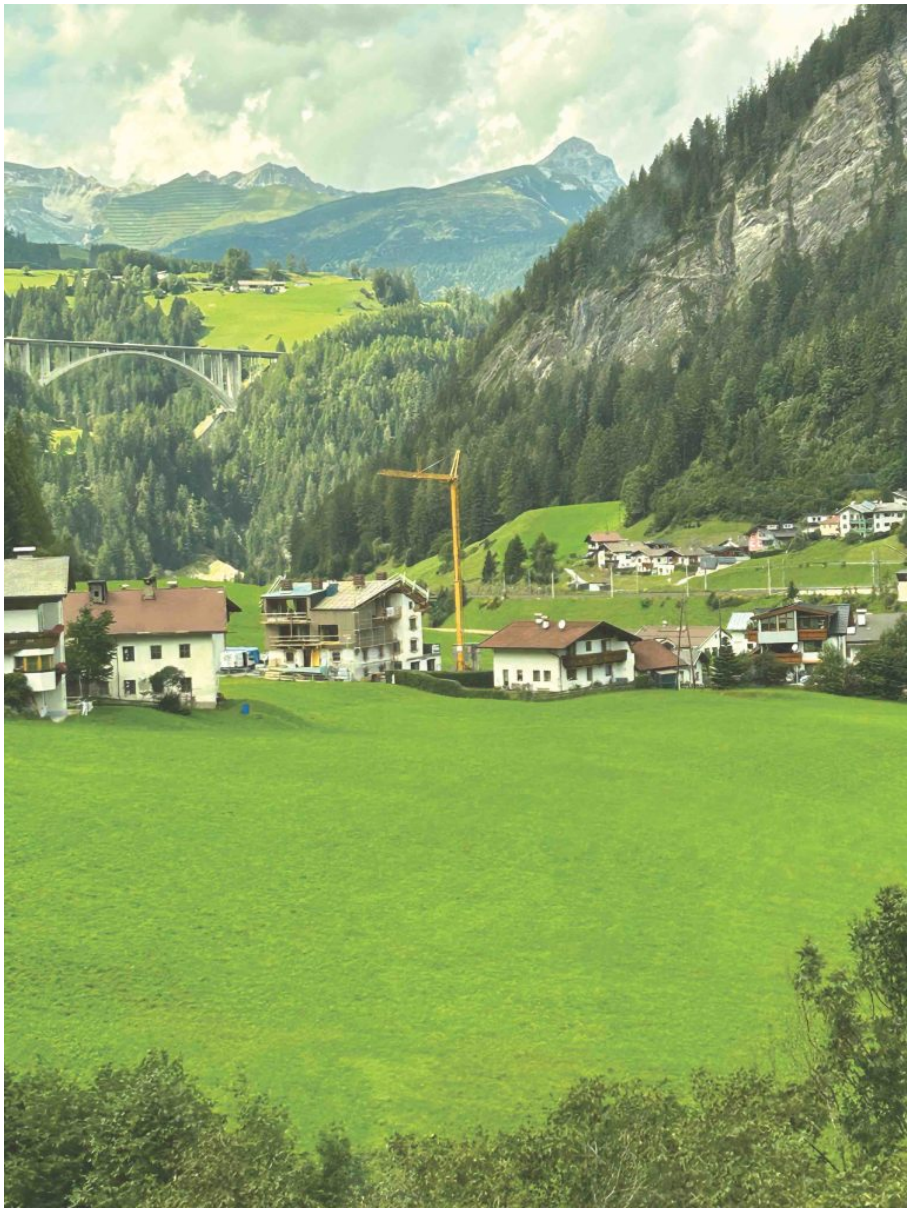
departure times. Boarding is unrushed as long as you have a reserved seat. A conductor passes by for a ticket check once the train gets moving.

On this train, the first-class cars are divided into compartments, each decked with four large leather seats and plenty of table space between seats and overhead luggage racks. The train has big windows on either side, allowing for unobstructed 180-degree views.

Nevertheless, we were disappointed that our booking was changed without any notification. We had booked two first- class window seats across from each other with a table in between. While the four- person compartment we were assigned was roomy and comfortable, we were forced to share it with two strangers. Fortunately, we were blessed with fantastic seatmates on this journey.

Sharp on time, the train moves out of München Hauptbahnhof, while passengers who boarded last-minute walk about looking for their seats. It’s a sunny Friday morning, and the train seems full of young and old passengers, most tourists heading to Venice.

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At the backdrop is the Wilde Gera, Germany’s largest and highest concrete arch bridge.

On this train, OBB has opted out of the usual restaurant car and operates a mobile kiosk serving snacks and wine. We’re happy we picked up lunch in Munich, for this journey takes about 7.5 hours. We were disappointed that OBB didn’t include a buffet car on this train. Buffet cars offer a meal during long-distance travel and

contribute to the overall journey experience, adding a touch of culinary delight to the adventure of train travel. This differs from super fast intercity trains that usually crisscross European cities. Nevertheless, its average speed of about 150 kmph is ample for us tourists and allows a few seconds to photograph the grand vistas on either side of us.

At Rosenheim, about 45 minutes from Munich, the train is joined by the Inn River and stays with us to Innsbruck in Austria. One of the Danube's key tributaries, the Inn, originates in Switzerland and meanders along the green pastures of the Austrian Alps, hugging the rail tracks and elevating the surroundings' wow factor to another level.

At Kufstein, the train leaves Germany and enters Austria without much fanfare. Europe no longer has border controls, and countries that once fought wars with each other now have invisible borders traversed freely by travelers and tradesmen alike.

Unlike flying, train travel is a great way to meet people. The first to share our four-person compartment was a tall Austrian gentleman who worked in Munich and was heading home to Innsbruck for the weekend. After spending the first 10 minutes working on his laptop, he apologized profusely for not introducing himself and began a great conversation.

Being a regular weekend traveler of this route, he gave us advance notice of the upcoming fairytale castles built on hilltops by the German nobility of the past. He estimates that around 25,000 of these castles are in Germany, mainly in Bavaria, in southern Germany. Neuschwanstein Castle was famous among them. It was built by King Ludwig II in 1886 and inspired Disney's Cinderella Castle.

Before saying goodbye to us at Innsbruck, he tells us where this scenic Alpine city gets its name. Innsbruck means "Bridge over the Inn river."

At Innsbruck, the train turns south, heading into what might arguably be the best part of the journey. The train now winds through the stunning Brenner Pass, which links southern Austria and northern Italy, one of Europe's great trade routes since the 14th century. This is also about the highest elevation of the Alpine route, with

the train reaching about 4,500 feet above sea level. Though the Alps are over 15,000 feet at their highest, our perch at 4,500 feet is enough to overload our senses with Mother Earth's bounty. Due to the rail line's relatively low altitude, the track mainly cuts through high mountain peaks and goes through a series of tunnels, the famous Brenner Tunnel being one of them.

While the Inn has left us to travel east, we're now joined by the Sill River, a muddy north-south tributary to the Inn. The Sill remains by the side of the tracks before disappearing as the train approaches the Brenner Pass.

At Innsbruck, we're joined by two new cabin mates, an Australian couple from Tasmania. We find out that the man works, predictably, for the legendary Tasmanian boot company Blundstone. Both are impressed to learn that we wear our Blundstones right through the brutal Canadian winters and that they hold up remarkably well to the snow, ice, and slush.

He assures me that would make for an exciting watercooler conversation at the office. They share different varieties of fantastic strudel they had picked up from an Innsbruck bakery that morning, and we're struck by how well strudel pairs with wine. Only a fool would say no to strudel in this part of the world.

The train crosses into Italy at Brennero, the first Italian town on the journey. At the Brennero station, two signs stand side by side: Osterreich – Italia, a subtle way of saying that you are now at the border of the two nations.

The train gradually leaves the mountains behind as the rugged hill country gives way to flatter agricultural land. For the next several hours, we pass through lush grape orchards, no doubt the ones that feed Italy's fabled wine industry. Wineries appear next to farmhouses, much like how the barn shares its space with the farmhouse in North American agricultural communities.

The last stop before arriving in Venice is Verona, the medieval northern Italian city made famous by Romeo and Juliet. From here, the train heads east for the last leg of the journey.

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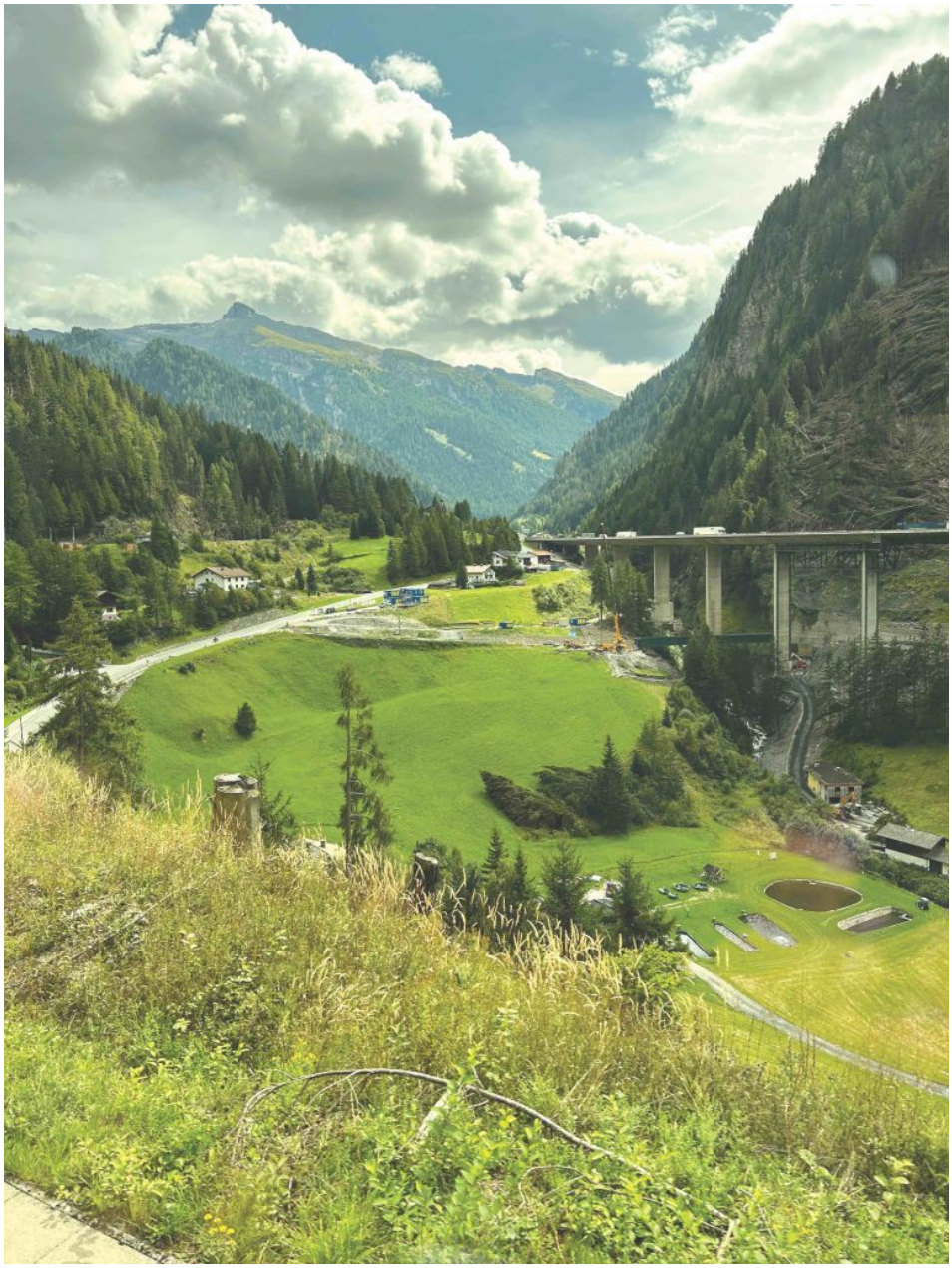
south, heading into what might arguably be the best part of the journey.

The train slows as it crosses the majestic Venice lagoon, dotted with fishing boats and leisure craft of various sizes. Slowly, the ancient buildings of the floating city begin to appear, and a glorious welcome is at the end of a beautiful journey.

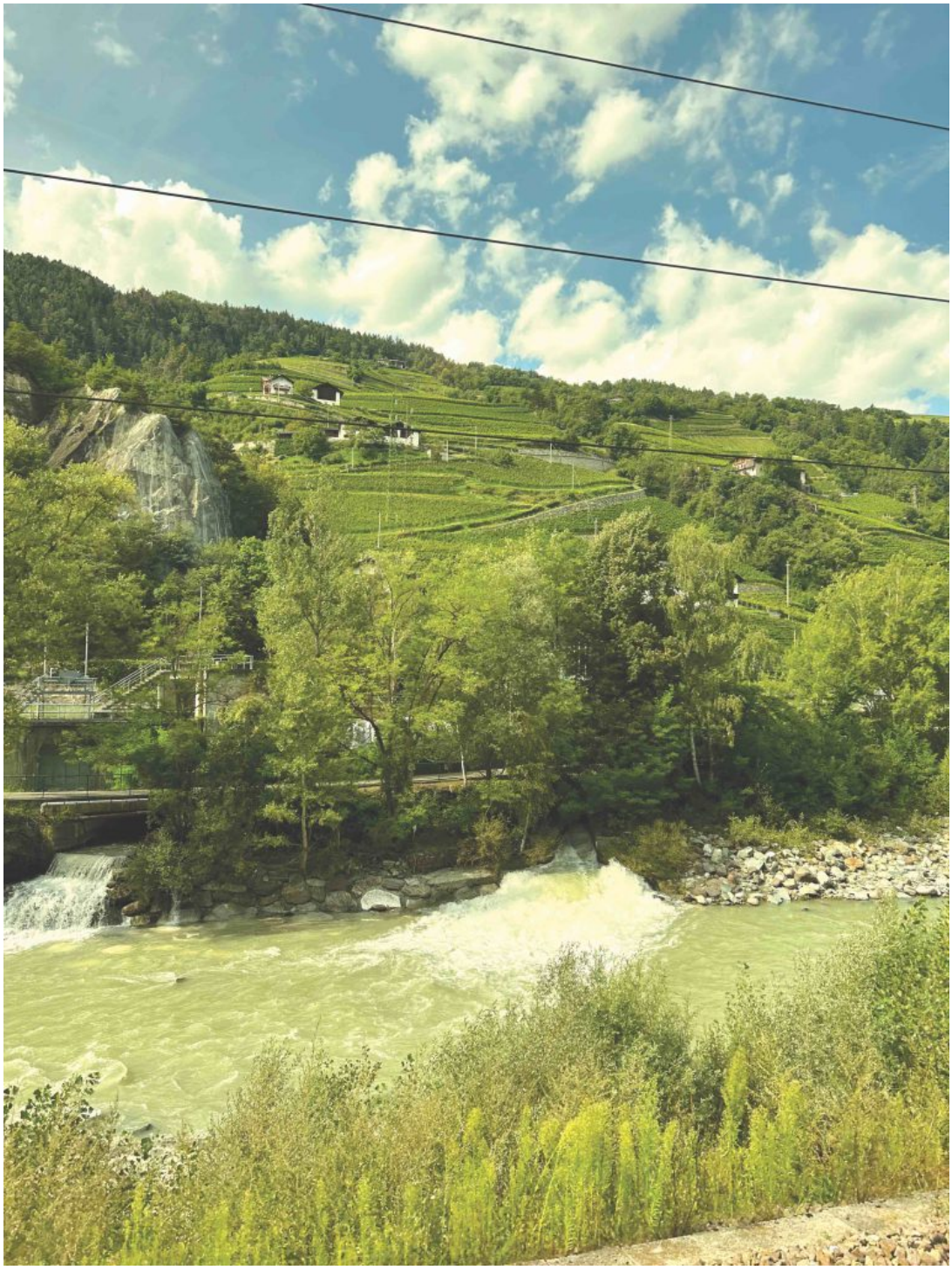
As the train approaches Venice, there’s no rush to disembark. We’re relaxed as we gather our luggage and ready ourselves for the next part of the adventure.

Our train ride ends at the Venezia Santa Lucia station, a stone’s throw away from the Grand Canal. As the train glides to a gentle halt, Venice welcomes you with an air of timeless enchantment, the usual throngs of tourists, and the ever-present buzz of the Vaporetto water taxis. Since Venice is the only city in the world where road traffic is completely prohibited, the next few days, we do nothing but walk… and drink wine!

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Brenner Pass, connecting Southern Austria and Northern Italy has been one of Europe’s trade routes since the 14th century.



Sill River comes into view.



Lush and abundant wineries capture the traveller’s attention.