

Making tracks to...

Lyon



Adding rail and air tour options into a brochure is one way for coach tour operators to offer additional product choice. It's also a way to retain customers who might otherwise look elsewhere for a non-coach holiday. Greatdays Travel Group is one of a number of tour wholesalers offering rail products. Stuart Render joined a fam trip to Lyon to find out more

There's something rather impressive about St Pancras International station in London. It's not just that it's home to the longest champagne bar in Europe, or Paul Day's 'The Meeting Place', an impressive 30ft bronze sculpture of a man and a woman embracing, a piece of artwork that's been given the nickname 'The Lovers'. It's not even Martin Jennings' 2007 sculpture

of writer and poet Sir John Betjeman looking up at the arched roof, a roof designed by William Henry Barlow, Chief Engineer of the Midland Railway Company, and a roof that, when the station opened in 1868, was the largest single-span roof in the world.

No, what's particularly impressive, and bearing in mind this is a railway station, are the trains, and in particular, the Eurostars.

For those of us of a certain age, well used to the excitement of taking a cross-Channel ferry for our occasional visits to the 'continent' when we were younger, looking at a train in central London, knowing that, in just a few hours, that same train will be in Paris, or Brussels, remains something remarkable. It is that remarkability, and the sheer novelty

and convenience of getting on a train in London and getting off it again 'abroad', that adds to the attractiveness of the product.

Eurostar has recently started to introduce new trains. They're sleek, modern and impressive, and quite a contrast with the original fleet that has been diving under the English Channel since 1993.

Options by train

But before you return to the front cover of this magazine to check that you haven't picked up a train publication by mistake, let me explain why, on this occasion, the focus is on the iron road.

Tour wholesaler Greatdays Travel Group is one of a number of tour wholesalers offering train travel as an option for coach tour operators, working closely with French rail and tour operator Voyages SNCF. Greatdays' 'European Tours by Train' programme offers destinations including Paris, Brussels and Bruges, Lyon and Annecy, Provence, and Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Tour durations range from four to six days. The rail option is also available for short breaks to London, and the wholesaler can tailor a programme to suit a group's specific

requirements. Gina Halden, Greatdays' Sales Manager B2B Accounts, explains the thinking behind the product.

"Adding train into a tour programme is an option growing in popularity," she says. "The number of operated tours that we have put together that include train travel as the main mode of transport have more than doubled since 2012. The speed and efficiency of Eurostar, and the connecting TGV high speed trains in France, make this an attractive option for coach tour operators and group travel organisers to consider as a way of giving additional product choice to their clients."

The journey begins

Greatdays has invited a small group of coach operators, tour planners and group travel organisers on a three-day fam visit to Lyon in France. Our journey will take us from London to Lille by Eurostar, where we'll change onto a TGV for the leg to Lyon.

Our Eurostar may be a train, but it's an international train, and the check-in process at St Pancras International requires every passenger to negotiate the all-too-familiar airport-style security checks. Through passport control and into the spacious departure lounge, and there's

Paris Metro, both of which will add to the journey time.

The interchange at Lille between Eurostar and TGV is as simple as walking to an adjacent platform. Look at a map and you can see that the Eurostar line to Paris follows much the same alignment as the line to Lille, turning south just before Lille, so in terms of both geography and convenience, Lille is the preferred choice.

There's an hour and a half before the Lyon train is due to depart so the group adjourns to a café on the station concourse. The excellent Euralille shopping centre is next door to the station, and Lille city centre is only a 15-minute walk away, but for relatively short interchanges the advice is not to stray too far from the station.

By 1255hrs we're on the platform waiting for the TGV, having remembered to 'composter' (to punch) our tickets by inserting them in the little yellow machines situated at the entrance to each platform.

The TGV arrives at the platform, but we can't see our carriage number. As we're re-checking our tickets a second TGV arrives and pulls in behind the first train. The two are coupled together. SNCF does this sort of thing. Two trains from different starting points join up at Lille for the journey south. A similar arrangement will take place in Lyon



Lyon's unique Guignol puppet museum



Tour hosts: Greatdays' Gina Halden and Francesca Vitti



Take the funicular up to the Fourvière Hill

time for a welcome cuppa before the train is called.

There's an opportunity to look through Greatdays' comprehensive travel pack, which, in addition to the tour itinerary and information about Lyon, includes seating plans for all the trains we're going to be travelling on. It's a thoughtful touch, adding to the confidence of those in our group who haven't travelled by train in this way before.

Our Eurostar is scheduled to depart at 0858hrs, and at 0835hrs the departure is called. Eurostar train sets can be very long, so check your ticket to find out which carriage you're in, and make sure you leave the departure lounge via the appropriately signed exit, otherwise you can find yourself at the wrong end of the train.

At 0858hrs on the dot, the train glides out of St Pancras. It's not long before we're at full line speed and heading past the Dartford Crossing and the impressive Queen Elizabeth II bridge.

We pick up more members of the group at Ebbsfleet International. Near Chatham the train powers across a high-level viaduct, giving spectacular views along the River Medway to Rochester.

We pass through the Folkestone Eurotunnel terminal, catching a glimpse of the shuttle carriages welcoming coaches and cars. But it is only a glimpse because the train is soon into the Channel Tunnel.

Half an hour later the train emerges into France. The journey time from London to Lille is just over an hour and a half, and we're soon disembarking at the modern Lille Europe station, leaving the Eurostar to continue on its journey to Brussels.

Lille or Paris?

It's worth touching on the reasons why Lille, and not Paris, is used as the interchange between Eurostar and the TGV.

Taking the Eurostar to Paris sees you arriving at the Gare du Nord. You then have to travel across the city centre to the Gare de Lyon. This requires either a coach connection or a journey, with luggage, on the

for the return journey.

At 1303hrs, once again on the dot, we glide out of Lille station for the three-hour journey to Lyon. This line avoids Paris, calling instead at Charles de Gaulle Airport, and Marne la Vallée (for Disneyland Paris) before running at up to 186mph through the French countryside.

The journey is, and this is no understatement, extremely impressive.

At 1600hrs (1500hrs back in the UK) we draw into Lyon Part Dieu station, and walk the short distance (750 yards) to our hotel for the next two nights, the Ibis Lyon Gare Part Dieu.

End-to-end journey time from St Pancras International to Lyon has been six hours.

Staying in Lyon

The Ibis is a modern, contemporary, three-star property with 144 bedrooms and free Wi-Fi throughout. Its location is great for the station, but it's a good walk into the old town. However, walk back to the station and you have access to Lyon's excellent public transport network.

I recommend the Lyon City Card, which gives unlimited travel for one, two or three days on the metro, trams, buses, trolleybuses and funiculars. Prices start at €22 for a one-day adult ticket. It might seem a little pricey, but in addition to the sheer convenience of being able to hop on and off the trams and metro, the card also gives free entrance into 22 of the city's museums and exhibitions, as well as offering discounts in many shops and other activities. Plan your visit and you'll be quids in – well, euros in.

On this visit there was also an opportunity to look at three hotels that are all built into a single building close to the station. There's a very well appointed four-star Mercure, an Ibis Styles and an Ibis Budget hotel. On a show round of the Mercure, the group found itself looking through a fire door into the Ibis Styles hotel. It's an innovative layout,

giving a choice of accommodation to suit all budgets, and handily located for the station.

Exploring Lyon

So, why Lyon? The city, the second most popular tourist destination in France after Paris, sits where the great rivers of the Saone and Rhone meet. The old city 'Vieux-Lyon' is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

A good starting point for a visit is Place Bellecour, a great piazza that sits between the two rivers, and home to the main tourist information centre. The TIC can arrange a two-hour guided tour that includes the city's main attractions. In the distance, high up on one of Lyon's hills, is the city's most emblematic monument, Notre Dame de Fourvière, a late 19th century basilica built in white stone (see main photo on page 33).. A funicular takes you up to the hilltop.

The basilica is richly decorated with Byzantine-style gilded mosaics, murals and rich stained-glass windows. But for most visitors it's not the basilica that's the attraction, it's the quite magnificent view across the city. A short walk along from the basilica is a Roman theatre, the remains of the Roman city of Lugdunum. Excavated in the 20th

on which stands the Lyon fine art museum with works by Veronese, Rubens, Tintoretto, Matisse, Picasso and Francis Bacon.

Sampling a bouchon

Lyon is often promoted as being the gastronomic capital of France, so a visit to a 'bouchon' is a must-do for any visitor.

A *bouchon* is a traditional Lyonnais restaurant that serves local dishes such as sausages, duck pâté, roast pork and many other meat dishes. *Bouchons* are famous for their convivial atmosphere, often family-owned, and being the sort of place frequented by locals.

There are reported to be around 20 officially certified *bouchons* in the city. On this visit the group had dinner at Le Bouchon des Carnivores, one of four restaurants run by the Chabert family. The aforementioned convivial atmosphere was very much in evidence.

Festivals and Christmas

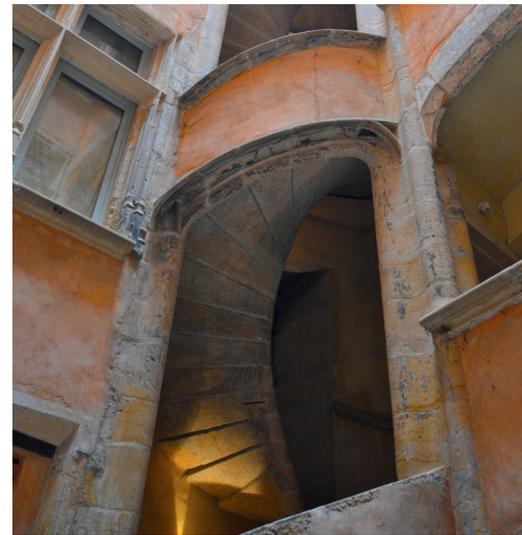
Each December, Lyon hosts the Fête des Lumières, the Festival of Lights, with around four million visitors taking part in a four-day event focusing on Lyon's heritage. The event is described by the tourist office



Eurostar's new trains now in service



Spectacular views of Lyon from Fourvière Hill



Lyon's traboules reveal architectural secrets

century, the site is now used in summer for the popular Nuits de Fourvière music festival.

Lyon's greatest secret

Back at the lower station of the funicular is the entrance to Vieux Lyon, a maze of narrow streets and historic buildings, many dating from the Renaissance or earlier.

It is within the old town that Lyon reveals what is arguably its greatest secret, the traboules.

Hidden behind old doors, and winding their way between courtyards and through buildings, are these secret alleyways and staircases.

The layout of Vieux Lyon is such that there are very few connecting streets running perpendicular to the river. The traboules allowed workmen and craftsmen to transport clothes and other textiles through the city while remaining sheltered from inclement weather. It is believed there are as many as 400 traboules across the city. Most are on private property, serving as entrances to local apartments, but around 40 can be visited by the public. Small information plaques fixed to the walls next to the access doors are the only indication of what lies behind. On this visit it was noticeable how reticent tourists were in opening the access doors that, to all intents and purposes, look no different from the doors leading to private homes.

But do persevere, and you'll be rewarded by a glimpse not only into the city's past, but also a look at where many residents live today. One narrow alley opened onto an interior courtyard in a 15th-century house. In another traboules we found ourselves in a world of mullioned windows, Gothic galleries, ancient wells, fountains, covered Italian archways, and a spiral staircase carved out of stone, something our guide described modestly as a miracle of medieval engineering.

Probably the most famous square in Lyon is the Place des Terreaux,

as being innovative, intriguing and startling, and best of all free of charge. Designers from all over the world use video, music and sound effects to accompany vibrant images dotted around the city. Lyon also hosts two Christmas markets, one in the open air at Place Carnot, and a second, undercover, at Croix Rouse.

Lyon is ideal as a short break destination, and after a full day's sightseeing, and another 'convivial' evening, it was time to return home. Leaving Lyon Part Dieu station by TGV at 1100hrs, we arrived in Lille at 1410hrs, departing by Eurostar at 1536hrs and arriving back at St Pancras International just after 1600hrs, an end-to-end journey time, once again, of six hours.

Coach Monthly would like to thank Greatdays Travel Group for facilitating this enjoyable and informative visit.

➤ To find out more about Greatdays' European Tours by Train, call 0161 928 3242, email sales@greatdays.co.uk or go to www.greatdays.co.uk

COACH MONTHLY SAYS

For a magazine that focuses on coach tourism, it seems odd for us to be promoting train travel. However, where coach travel offers absolute end-to-end convenience, the train usually offers a quicker journey. This adds cities such as Lyon to the list of attractive short break destinations. Of course, travelling to and from London will add to the overall journey time, and changing stations in London may not be to every client's liking. However, much like the air/coach option, including a rail-based option in your brochure could help to ensure that existing (and potential) clients looking for a non-coach holiday option place their business with you, and not with another holiday supplier.