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EURO CITY SAUNTERS

Following on from **walk** magazine's feature on the best mountain walks in Europe reachable by rail (*winter 2007*), Chris Ord pounds the continental pavements to find the best city walks on offer across the Channel.

Not everyone who puts one foot in front of the other necessarily wants those steps to be up a mountain, across rocky ground or fording wild rivers, or to be swimming in self-satisfaction atop a snowy peak. Some people get the same high, the same sense of achievement, sitting at a well-positioned street-side café mulling over an art collection they've seen, the architecture they've admired and the history they've inhaled while wandering leisurely around Europe's greatest cities.

But with so many cities within a 24-hour train journey of London's St Pancras, which to choose? Here's our pick, noting that Paris has been excluded not because it isn't one of the best; we just think that it's time to venture beyond what is now, in essence, Britain's front door to the rest of Europe. Besides, it's quicker to get to our first stop: Brussels.



BRUSSELS, BELGIUM**Train time:** 1hr 51mins (direct)**Highlights:** Art nouveau, comics and waffles**Further info:** www.visitbelgium.com,
www.brusselsinternational.be

As this article is all about travelling by train, it is only right that Brussels gets the nod. The city inaugurated continental Europe's first railway line between it and Mechelen in the 1830s. And yes, we know how pretty Bruges is. But Brussels is bigger, grander and - I'll say it - plain better.

The capital city has more to attract the willing walker: from its mix of grandiose architecture contrasting with sleek high rise; to its artistic attractions, Euro-political intrigue, market-town history and sweet and savoury culinary fare. Art and architecture buffs will love wandering its streets as the city boasts some of the best art nouveau displays in the world, plus an array of leading galleries. It was home to surrealist artist René Magritte and art nouveau hero Victor Horta, not to mention cartoonist Hergé and his most famous creation, Tintin.

The best place to start your walk is at the Grand Place, an atmospheric 13th- and 15th-century baroque and gothic market square - formerly the centre for a number of craft guildhalls. After admiring the intricate golden figures atop the halls, head to one of the city's earliest art nouveau works: the gilded plaque to the south of the square. On the square proper is Musée de la Ville de Bruxelles, a good place to get the lowdown on the city's history, plus somewhere you can eye every piece of clothing ever 'worn' by its most famous statue - that small boy endlessly relieving himself, Manneken Pis. The statue itself is found to the south of the Grand Place.

There's plenty more in the vicinity, including Galeries St Hubert, Europe's oldest glass-covered shopping arcade. But for fun, stroll north for the Centre Belge de

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la Bande Dessinée, where you'll find one of the world's best collections of comic strip art including Tintin, the Smurfs and Asterix. It's a must for art nouveau fans, too, as it occupies a building designed by Horta. For comic fanatics, divert from here along the 'Comic Strip Route'. It takes in 18 large comic strip images decorating the sides of buildings around the city centre and continues to grow as new cartoons pop up.

Others can head back south, via the imposing 15th-century Saints Michel and Gudule Cathedral, and on to the Museum of Musical Instruments housed in the strikingly beautiful Old England Building - a Paul Saintenoy masterpiece combining the architectural styles of neo-classicism and art nouveau. Inside are over 7,000 musical instruments and on the top floor, a magnificent 360° view of Brussels, including the Royal Palace across the way. A few steps further south is the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts for a smattering of ancient and modern art and, behind it, Mont des Arts where you'll find more museums and theatres.

Worth wandering to is the Sablon area further south, famous for antiques and two grand areas: Place du Grand Sablon where you'll find chic boutiques, al fresco cafés, fashionable restaurants, trendy bars and a lively open-air antiques market; and Place du Petit Sablon, an elegant flower garden with lavish fountains surrounded by stone statuettes representing the medieval trades that brought prosperity to Brussels.


If you're keen for more art nouveau, strike out a kilometre or so east to the Musée Horta - the house of the architectural giant and a great introduction to the movement. There is also a dedicated art nouveau trail tracing private and public buildings further afield. If you're thirsty, head to the Musée Bruxellois de la Gueuze, a traditional working brewery. If that's not enough to refresh your palate, take your pick from over 450 Belgian beers at the many local bars. The EU capital stuffy? Never.



Clockwise from top: Overlooking Grand Place; Tintin mural; Manneken Pis; Grand Place; Galeries Saint-Hubert.

All images: www.brusselsinternational.be





From top:
Sagrada Família;
Las Ramblas;
terrace view from
Gaudí's home at
Park Güell.

BARCELONA, SPAIN

Train time: 15hrs 50mins (change at Paris)

Highlights: Gaudí, modernist art
and architecture

Further info: www.barcelona.com



Any walk through Barcelona's cheery streets, no matter what the impetus, cannot help but be imbued with the vision of one man: Antonio Gaudí. You can't pace too far without seeing his wonderful and unpredictable architectural

influence, whether it's lamp-posts or churches. Of course the great man had help. His fellow modernists, including Montaner and Cadafalch, added their own tweaks to the city's bricks and mortar. Plus there was the modern-day reinvention of the city with public sculptures commissioned from leading artists including Lichtenstein, Turrell, Oldenburg and Chillida. The result of both history and invigoration is an urban dream world that has left an artistic thumbprint on every street corner.

Barcelona's main interest points are spread out over a distance, from the Mediterranean seaboard in the south-east to the glorious Park Güell in the north. But nothing is unreachable on foot and there's plenty of churrios and espressos to keep you fuelled en route. For a Gaudí-themed tour of the

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city, start with a wander around the enchanting Park Güell. Built between 1900 and 1904, the fantastical hillside park deserves at least an hour of your early morning attention. Wonder at Gaudí's audaciousness as you discover mosaic dragons, rubble-hewn bridges and hidden grottoes. Visit the house in which he lived while designing the park before taking in the best views of Barcelona from the main terrace. In the distance you'll spy your next target: the Sagrada Família, Gaudí's unfinished masterpiece.

An hour or so could easily disappear here, too, while you fully take in modernism's most ambitious monument. Marvel at the parables and slightly menacing figures hewn into the outside stone before entering its cavernous interior. Gaudí worked on the Sagrada for over 40 years, devoting the last 15 years of his life to it. The church has been under construction for over 126 years and isn't likely to be finished for another 25 or so.

Next, head west to Passeig de Gràcia, one of Barcelona's main drags. Along its grand stretch – usually marked by huge queues – is the Gaudí-designed La Pedrera, a grey rippling apartment block featuring an amazing rooftop terrace. Further on is the equally impressive Casa Batlló, known as Casa dels Ossos (House of Bones) after its skeletal, organic quality. Not to be outdone is Casa Amatller next door, designed by Gaudí contemporary Josep Puig i Cadafalch.

Enough of Gaudí? Stick to the touristy but intriguing Las Ramblas for the captivating street performers before darting into side alleys to the east to explore the maze of alleys that make up the Old Town and the Barri Gòtic. Both areas are chock-a-block with medieval and Roman buildings, bars, cafés and galleries, including the Picasso Museum (a must-see; he spent his early years in Barcelona). There are also plenty more architectural and historical delights, the cathedral and Museu d'Història de la Ciutat being particular highlights. You'll need more than a few days to walk all of Barcelona's sights – there's still the waterfront, markets, museums, theatres and plazas to see yet. Best you stay a week.

Chris Ord

Turespaña

Chris Ord

Clockwise from top:
Panorama of city;
statue of Mozart at
Mozart Platz; St
Sebastian Cemetery
near Mirabellplatz.



Yes, the nearby hills are alive with *The Sound of Music*, but Salzburg itself holds enough musical interest – it's the birthplace of Mozart after all. The city also boasts ornate architecture gifted by the bishop-princes of the late 8th century.

Located on the south bank of the River Salzach, the Altstadt (old town) is as quaint as a UNESCO World Heritage Site should be, with its myriad plazas, fountains, courtyards and churches. The quarter is mostly pedestrianised with a warren of footpaths making for excellent leisurely exploration. Towering above the Altstadt is the rocky Mönchsberg peak crowned by Hohensalzburg Fortress, one of the largest castles in Europe and the pinnacle of any good walk through Salzburg.

From the train station north of the River Salzach (in the modern part of town), head south to the Mirabellplatz and Mirabellgarten. Scenes from *The Sound of Music* were shot in the expansive gardens and with any luck you might happen across a musical performance in the Schloss Mirabell, a palace built in 1606 by prince-archbishop Wolf Dietrich for his mistress.

Next on the magical musical tour, not far from the river's north bank, is Mozart's home, where he lived from 1773 to 1780. Inside are excellent exhibits relating to his life and family, plus the Mozart Sound and Film Museum. It was here that Wolfgang wrote the symphonies, divertimenti, serenades, concerti and arias that are still revered today. Wander over a nearby bridge into the old town and there's more of Salzburg's favourite

SALZBURG, AUSTRIA



Train time: 15hrs 15mins
(change at Paris and Munich)

Highlights: Music, Mozart and baroque history

Further info: www2.salzburg.info,
www.austria.info

son; this time Mozart's Geburtshaus where the prodigy was born on 27 January, 1756.

After your fill of music (for the moment), it's time to take in the splendour of the old town's architecture – mostly baroque. Work your way east to the Dom (main cathedral), built in the 1600s. Inside you'll find a Romanesque font

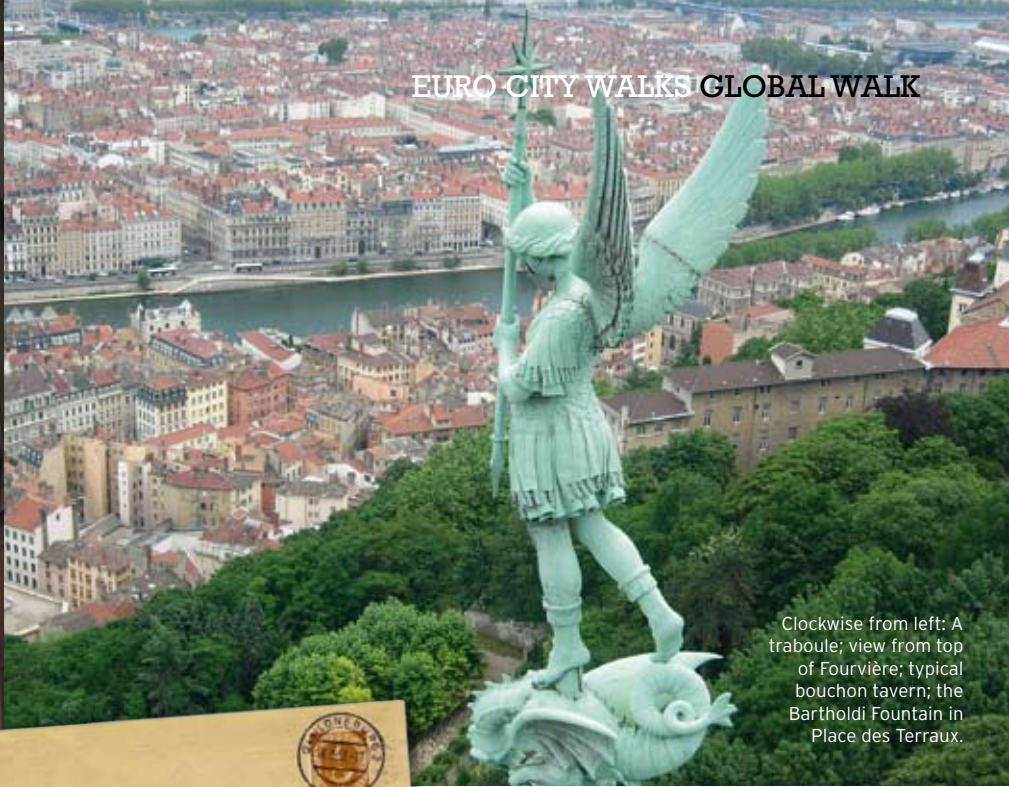
where Mozart was baptised. Check the cathedral schedule for musical performances – you may be able to see a first-rate choir performance. Next to the Dom, the Residenz features splendid baroque staterooms of the archbishop and a gallery with a good selection of Flemish and Dutch paintings. Across the plaza is St Peter's Abbey, dating from AD 847. The catacombs accessed in the graveyard are well worth exploring before heading west to the Rupertinum Gallery, home to great 20th-century works of art. From here, it's a 15-minute walk up Mönchsberg to the grandiose Hohensalzburg Fortress. Dating back to 1077, the building was home to the prince-archbishops of Salzburg until the late 15th century and features a stateroom, tower and even torture chambers.

Take in a last sundowner view over the city before heading back down into Altstadt. Then maybe see a performance at the grand Festival Halls (with over 4,000 cultural events hosted in the city each year, there's bound to be something on) or head straight for Steigl's Brauwelt beer museum for, well, another type of sundowner. >>

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SIGNPOST SIGNPOST



Clockwise from left: A traboules; view from top of Fourvière; typical bouchon tavern; the Bartholdi Fountain in Place des Terraux.

LYON, FRANCE

Train time: 4hrs 40mins (change at Paris)

Highlights: Renaissance architecture, textile history and food

Further info: www.lyon-france.com

Most European cities are tied to a catalogue of historical interest, but Lyon's pages of the past number more than most. The city's Roman, medieval and Renaissance architecture is to die for; it was a stronghold of printing press technology way back in the 15th century; it's the birthplace of Punch and Judy; and Lyonnaise silk is world-renowned. But all these factors play second fiddle to food. Lyon is a gastronomic destination par excellence with only Paris boasting more Michelin-starred restaurants in France. Best we get you walking then, so you can enjoy, guilt-free, the fine fare to be found along the city's many pedestrianised streets.

Roman amphitheatre. Look out too for the Tour Metallique - a mini Eiffel of sorts.

Coming down from Fourvière, you step into the Vieux Lyon (old Lyon), the largest Renaissance quarter in France, made up of the three villages of St-Jean, St-Georges and St-

Paul. St-Jean Cathedral is a drawcard here, as are the famous traboules - secret covered passageways. Created during the Renaissance as short cuts, they later became escape routes for the French Resistance during World War II.

From Vieux Lyon, cross the footbridge to the north, perhaps dropping into Musée Gadagne, a local history and puppet museum housed in a 16th-century mansion, before exploring the working-class Croix-Rousse

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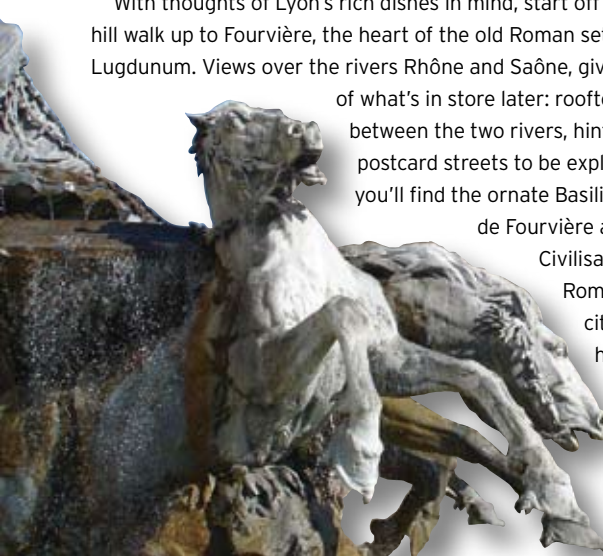
With thoughts of Lyon's rich dishes in mind, start off with a rigorous hill walk up to Fourvière, the heart of the old Roman settlement of Lugdunum. Views over the rivers Rhône and Saône, give you a preview of what's in store later: rooftops wedged between the two rivers, hinting at picture-postcard streets to be explored. On the hill you'll find the ornate Basilique Notre-Dame

de Fourvière and Musée de la Civilisation Gallo-Romaine covering the city's two millennia history, plus it's worth seeing the nearby

quarter where the canuts (silk-weavers) once toiled. You can still watch traditional looms in action at La Maison des Canuts.

Heading south, zig-zag down the peninsula that is Presqu'île, centred on the wide acres of Place Bellecour. See Impressionist art at the Musée des Beaux-Arts set in a former abbey before revisiting Lyon's textile roots at Musée des Tissus, which unravels the story of Lyon's silk weaving.

By now you're wondering about that epicurean foray promised earlier. You'll no doubt have found your own gems along the way, as there are plenty of laid-back bouchon taverns for dégustations, especially in Vieux Lyon. Or if you're a gastronomic namedropper, splurge out on a meal at Paul Bocuse's eponymous restaurant. He is considered one of the 20th-century's greatest chefs and it's well worth the 4km/2.5-mile walk north of the city centre to reach him. ■



All images: www.lyon-france.com