



MARK PIGGOTT rambles on Las Ramblas, sleeps on the beach in a thunderstorm and beats a strike with his Inter-Rail ticket

It was 2 a.m., and the ticket inspector was shaking his head. ‘Supplimenti’, he said, and wrote on a scrap of paper L 2,500. I was in no mood to argue. I paid up. Besides, it was just over £1.

Excitable ticket inspectors are just one of the hazards the hardy Inter-Railer must endure. But if you’re under 26 and British, £145 buys a month’s unlimited travel around the European rail network. It is a bargain, even if you have to pay the occasional supplement.

Last year some 60,000 Inter-Rail tickets were sold in Britain. They cover 21 countries (including some in Eastern Europe). Some Inter-Railers try to cover them all, others will linger through a single country. Here’s what I did with mine.

Breakfast in Paris, after an overnight ferry from England, was less glamorous than it sounds. I didn’t linger but caught the TGV to the South of France. I met two friends in Coulliere and we set off for Barcelona.

Barcelona is hot, busy and friendly. The squares are full of people talking, eating or drinking. We treated ourselves to a pension on Las Ramblas, an all-night street which is Soho, Oxford Street, King’s Road and much more rolled into one.

Back to Southern France, which after Spain, seemed expensive, beer prices quickly forced us East. We caught an overnigher to Milan, a spectacular journey along the Med through Nice, Marseilles and St. Tropez. We ate croissants watching the sun come up over the sea.

Milan’s central station is immense, a memorial to the dictatorship of Mussolini. We particularly admired the waiting room in which we spent many happy hours. As Milan is known for its fashion, I decided I would be thrown out of town if I didn’t leave fast. Our destination was Venice. The train comes in over the lake, right into the city centre. I expected Venice to be dirty, smelly and full of Americans. It turned out to be charming, clean and unexpectedly small. We walked the whole city in a day, camping on the mainland by night.

Taking the overnight train from Venice down to Brindisi in Southern Italy, I caught

the ferry to Greece. Sleeping on the deck isn't as bad as it sounds. The warm wind and gentle sea induced my best sleep for weeks. But the next day, with no correct money and no food, the hours started to drag. We docked at Patras at five in the afternoon, and after suitable refreshments I decided to sleep on the beach.

Exhausted, I flopped on my mat and sleepily watched the sun go down, looking forward to an early morning dip; then a large rat jumped on my back and I rapidly altered my plans.

I walked back to Patras and found the big, rambling Youth Hostel. Here I met Johnny, a New Zealander who claimed to have drummed for Simply Red. He was fat, hairy and a pain to the women in the hostel.

People say Patras isn't Greece but, for me, it is more Greek than the sun-bleached villas of the postcards. Dirty, smelly, run-down, friendly; I liked Patras and I think it liked me. At least, when I pleaded poverty to a shop assistant, she gave me a free doughnut.

Rion Beach is only eight miles from Patras, but might as well be another world. A line of bars and restaurants spill out onto the beach, with the campsite right in the middle of things. It had the best toilets and showers I've ever seen on a site. We stayed at Rion for a peaceful week away from the crowds.

We got bored when the thunder came, and headed for Corfu.

A small, clean place with Venetian architecture, Corfu Town was relatively unspoiled, until we arrived. The cheap beer was tempting, and by mid-afternoon we were behaving like lager louts. We left town the next morning.

We missed the last bus to Benitses and spent a night in a tent on a beach during another thunderstorm before hitching back to the ferry and Italy.

At Brindisi we learnt that a national train strike was threatened. We got the last train up the coast to Bari. In the waiting room, an idiot from Enfield was advising two open-mouthed young lady Inter-Railers on which places to avoid: 'Don't go to Venice, it's s... dirty, smelly, full of Italians. And the Greek islands are s..., boring, poor, full of peasants...'

Luckily, our night train to Milan was a luxury one. We had a full compartment to ourselves. The seats pull out to form an enormous bed, and we woke up pulling into Milan's central station and its waiting room.

Our train that afternoon went through the dramatic Swiss Alps to Lausanne. We had no time to explore, as we had to get the TGV to Paris. We arrived in Paris at 9.40 p.m. Our Inter-Rail tickets ran out at midnight, so we had to get to Dieppe fast.

In the Metro we had no francs. Then our friend from Enfield, saved the day. He gave us the money to get across Paris, and told us the time of our train- 10.14. We sprinted and caught it with seconds to spare. If it hadn't been for 'Arry Enfield we'd have been stuck, down and out in Paris and not London.

The train to Dieppe was full of tired and weary Inter-Railers, each with sorry funny tales to tell. Queuing at Dieppe in the cold rain, I popped to the front to see what was happening. 'There's a queue here you know,' said a voice. Ah, to be close to England, with its decency and love of queues.