

BY EMMA JOHN

25

DAYS,

1959

MILES,



9

COUNTRIES

FOR ONE
BRITISH
WRITER LEFT
ADRIFT
BY BREXIT,
A CROSS-
CONTINENTAL
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WAY TO
RECONNECT
WITH HER
EUROPEAN
NEIGHBORS.



DEPARTURE

LONDON, ENGLAND

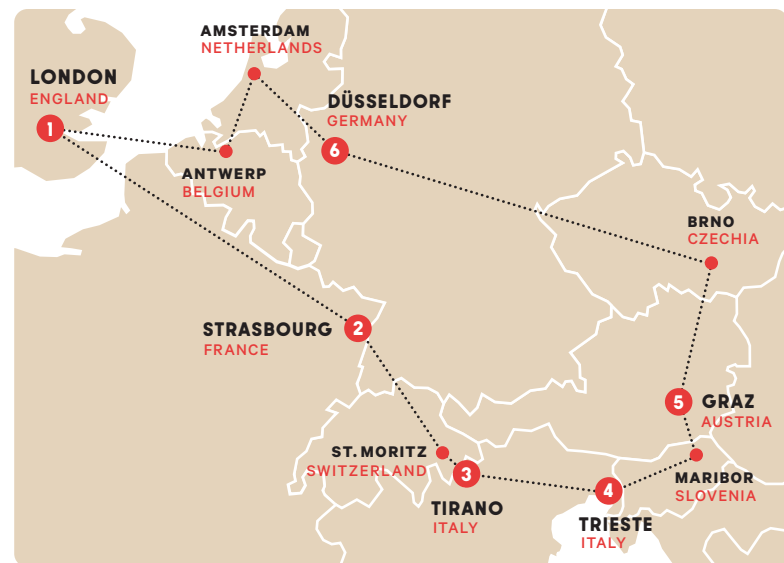
LONDON ST. PANCRAS is quiet this morning. The cavernous railway station is empty of commuters, its coffee shops shuttered. I often travel from here—it's a mere 10-minute bicycle ride from my home—though I rarely see it this early. But then again, I'm rarely embarking on such a long trip.

Usually, I'd be at this station to take a train to the suburbs or the coast. Today, I fold in with the passengers queuing to take the high-speed Eurostar trains that will whisk us from the U.K. to Europe. I've joined them because I am lost—not physically, just philosophically. Six years after the referendum, I still haven't come to terms with Brexit. As a Brit, when my country voted to leave the European Union, I was shocked and furious, bereft at losing the freedoms of work and travel, not to mention the economic and political stability that membership provided. For a long while, I was convinced that someone in power would reverse our fate. Eventually, anger and denial gave way to the more helpless stages of grief. I mourned something I couldn't

fully articulate—a symbol of fraternity, a shared hopefulness in a greater good. Joni Mitchell was right: *You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.*

The forced removal of my European citizenship only made me less satisfied with my British one, and as soon as pandemic-easing allowed, I hunted for a way to reconnect with the continent that remained—geographically, if not politically—my home address. Trains were the obvious option. And I liked the idea of a trip that wasn't just environmentally sustainable but also seamless, without the constant interruptions of airports and security checks. Europe's interconnected rail networks are, after all, one of the triumphs of cross-border thinking that Britain has decided to opt out of, and would be, I thought, the quickest way to find connection on the ground.

So, I came up with a grand tour: a 25-day, nine-country journey that would begin and end in London—and, hopefully, help me rediscover what it means to be European, even if I'm not, officially, anymore.



From left: Strasbourg's medieval center; picnickers on the city's riverfront. Previous page: The St. Moritz train station.



№1 LONDON ↓ STRASBOURG, FRANCE

401 MILES

SEVEN HOURS and two trains later, I'm on a tourist boat navigating the canals of France's Alsatian capital, Strasbourg. There is, perhaps, no more quintessentially European city. With only the Rhine separating it from Germany, Strasbourg spent centuries being claimed by rulers of various domains. It has been independent, German, French, German again, French again—no wonder it has learned to embrace its European identity. So much so that it is now an official capital of Europe, housing a number of EU institutions, which is one of the reasons I've made

it my first stop. I'm also convinced that border cities (such as Strasbourg) will help me get a sense of Europe as a continent, rather than just a collection of individual nations. That these cities will help me embrace both the arbitrariness of borders and how seriously we take them.

Facts tumble out of the boat's speakers, as jumbled and colorful as the architecture that surrounds me. I learn that evidence of some of Europe's ruling peoples—stretching from the Holy Roman Empire of the early 10th century to the Napoleonic one of the 19th—has piled up on the city's banks. Strasbourg's medieval heart is full of half-timbered houses, their vertiginous roofs lined up like so many bottles of riesling, one of the region's most famous wines.

In 1681, France's Louis XIV fancied Alsace as a garden and annexed it. Following the Siege of Strasbourg in 1870, which leveled entire blocks, came the dramatic style change of Neustadt, with its imposing, neoclassical buildings. Shortly after, in 1872, the city's new ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, rebuilt government departments and the University of Strasbourg to "Germanize" his newest subjects after their defeat by the Prussians.

It wasn't the last time Alsatians were caught in conflicts between France and Germany. In the Place de

la République is a statue of a mother holding her two dying sons, one facing Germany, the other facing France. And while it took time for the population to heal from the effect of two World Wars, the city now manifests a geography of reconciliation.

The boat putters past some post-war housing projects, and then with a glint, Strasbourg's most recent identity reveals itself. Next to the river sits the great glass sweep of the European Parliament. Once a month, it brims with delegates seeking a modern, post-territorial future for the continent. It's empty today—just a symbolic monument to an inscrutable ideal that I long to grasp.

Switzerland's Glacier Express, which must squeeze through the Alps, is known as the "slowest express train in the world."

Nº 2 STRASBOURG



TIRANO, ITALY

362
MILES

BACK AT STRASBOURG'S train station a few days later, I'm ready for the next leg: a 72-hour blitz across Switzerland aboard two of Europe's most spectacular trains, the Glacier Express and the Bernina Express. Switzerland is at the geographic heart of Europe while abstaining from its political community, which can make it seem, to outsiders like me, a rather detached nation. But the country is also dealing with its own EU issues. (Recent talks over the possibility of the country joining the union have been as rocky as the Swiss Alps.) Switzerland, of course, also has an excellent train system, and if you want to get from northeastern France to Italy, you can't avoid a crossing.

After an hour, we've hopped across the French border and the landscape turns instantly Swiss. Brown-and-white cows ruminant in the meadows; houses with chalet roofs are strewn as if someone had absent-mindedly dropped them there. Even the national characteristic of polite efficiency kicks in: When I change trains in Basel, the conductor apologizes for our three-minute-late arrival and assures us that every connecting service has been held.

Aboard the Glacier Express the following morning, I watch the Alps pass by in dramatic gasps. Yesterday, the land undulated gently in ever-growing waves, until tree-covered slopes hovered above us. Today, low

clouds obscure the soaring peaks. We enter the Gotthard Base Tunnel and don't emerge until 20 minutes later. When I look back, I see the mountains folding into each other, like a deck of cards midshuffle, and the horizon disappearing as snow and cloud merge.

It's an unusually holistic experience, taking an Alpine train, with its curved observation roofs and windows placing you insistently in the picture. As we climb through Oberalp Pass, the scenery envelops me until we are finally lifted above the cloud-and-snow line. At the peak, looking down, I see a ribbon of blue that marks the icy beginnings of the Rhine River. On the heels of the architectural density of Strasbourg, the train feels like a welcome bubble—a hushed sanctuary in which to drop concerns of identity, borders, and politics, and simply savor the beauty of the continent.

Maybe that's why the follow-up journey, the very next day, catches me in the solar plexus. Climbing onto the gleaming Swiss locomotive, which will descend nearly 6,000 feet to drop me in the northern Italian border town of Tirano, I can't help but wonder how this second Alpine journey could live up to what I've witnessed.

And yet the Bernina Express is somehow more dazzling and more confronting. Streams trickle so close to the windows, I feel I could reach out and touch them. The light reflected from the Morteratsch Glacier invades my eyes and my brain; the magnitude of the mountains is overwhelming. As the train begins its steep slope down to the Poschiavo Valley, I find myself suppressing sudden sobs.

Embarrassed, I turn my face to the window. Then I hear a sniffle and realize the woman in the opposite seat is having a moment too. It turns out she's French Swiss and speaks perfect English. I tell her I'm surprised she's so affected by the mountains, given that she lives with them. "I've never seen them like this before," she tells me.

Seeing home with a fresh perspective—that's what I've wanted from this trip. This small but unexpectedly moving encounter with a stranger feels like a positive omen. We sit in companionable silence, eyes drying.





Nº 3
TIRANO
 ↓
TRIESTE, ITALY
 177 MILES

From left: Alexandros Delithanassis, the owner of Trieste's Caffè San Marco; the city's Miramare Castle.

THERE IS TIME in my schedule for a single day in tiny Tirano, to visit its medieval shrines and modern vineyards, and then I'm back on the train, continuing east to Trieste, arguably the least Italian part of Italy.

It might be one of the birthplaces of Western civilization, but Italy as a unified country wasn't founded until 1861, and Trieste's identity as an Italian city is even less established. Though it was handed to Italy as part of the 1915 Treaty of London, Trieste's formative years came during the 19th century, when it was the primary seaport for the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Evidence of its Hapsburg heyday is all around, from the monumental

squares and grandiose statues to the elegant cafés where people actually take the time to sit down and drink their espresso.

After a couple of days in the city, I'm enamored with the Viennese-style coffeehouses and their air of cultural salons. On my second night in town, I discover the Caffè San Marco. I've been lured in by its bookshop and tempted by its dinner menu; within minutes, I've also been ambushed by its charismatic owner, Alexandros Delithanassis. He is entertaining several regulars and soon, they have all migrated to my table. Even the chef quits the kitchen to join the discussion of literature, politics, and who is

going to win the upcoming Eurovision Song Contest.

They translate for me from their Triestine dialect, a sort of Venetian Italian sprinkled with vocabulary from many nearby areas, including Germany and the Balkans (the Slovenian border is fewer than 10 miles away). As a port city, Trieste was a multicultural meeting point, and the religious tolerance extended to its citizens up until the early 20th century was unique for Europe. Hence the gold dome and bell towers of the Serbian Orthodox church and the white towers of the Greek one, not to mention the vast synagogue, one of the continent's largest. Alexandros, increasingly animated



by both wine and anti-Ukrainian War sentiment, is pointing at his friends, elucidating their ethnicities. "Serbian! Slovenian! Bosnian! Greek!" He moves my cutlery so he can include the table in his fervent gestures. "When we speak in dialect, we are free!"

Freedom is still a painful subject here, however, as is Italian nationalism. One of the regulars, Tomaž, is the retired headmaster of a Slovenian-language high school in Trieste; he explains that the city used to have the highest density of Slovenian people in the world. Then, in the 1920s, shortly after Trieste became part of Italy, the Fascists moved in and persecuted them, burning down the Slovene National Hall, banning their language from being spoken, and purging Slavs from government jobs. Nor were outrages perpetrated on one side alone; there are pits in the hills around Trieste believed to contain the bodies of hundreds of opponents of the Yugoslav Communist Partisan army, who occupied Trieste for 40 days at the end of World War II. Various groups have resisted their uncovering. The truth, it seems, is too painful to face.

Tomaž's Slovenian wife, Nadiya, whose parents experienced oppression, is tired of talking about it all. "Trieste is the epitome of the nonsense of war," she says. From the table, there's a cry of "Brava!" But this is a place to speak of difficult things, to wrestle with the world as it is, not just as we would like it to be. Alexandros is deeply passionate about reviving Trieste's spirit of emancipation, of tolerance and welcome, beneath these vaulted ceilings, which have long made space for the loftiest thoughts and ideals. "The coffee beans make the coffee," he cries, "but the coffeehouse makes the democracy!"

And so the joyfully raucous conversation continues until the small hours, not least because another bottle of wine magically appears whenever anyone suggests leaving. Closing time means nothing, except an excuse to put on Balkan folk tunes. We get up from the table, throw our arms over each others' shoulders, cry *opa!*, and try to avoid dancing on our neighbors' toes.

Nº 4
TRIESTE
 ↓
GRAZ,
AUSTRIA
 146 MILES

AS THE TRAIN CHUGS out of Trieste a few days later, it winds around the Adriatic Sea, past the fairy-tale white turrets of Miramare Castle and mussel beds winking by the shore. Carving our way inland across the Karst Plateau, I remember a story one of my new friends told me in the café. On a recent hike through these wooded hills, she had stopped in a village whose river marked the edge of Italian territory. One of the residents told her that, in the early part of the 20th century, locals used to be afraid to cross the bridge to the Slovenian side. They had been taught to believe that side was dangerous, even though everyone had friends and even family living there.

Hard borders, soft borders, open borders. Europe's geography may have been determined by its wars, but you can't understand it solely through lines on a map. The ink refuses to stay where you put it; it bleeds across the page, just as people have roamed and traded across the continent, have marched, or fled, or found new homes. I had thought, naively, that when I picked a route through Maribor, Graz, and Vienna, I was following my own whim. I wasn't, of course. I was following an old and well-worn trading route, one that had carried Trieste's cargo back to its Austrian rulers for hundreds of years. Its road was superseded by a railway in the mid-1800s—the very line that now smooths my path and determines my destinations.

I speed through Ljubljana, often admiringly described as one of Europe's most easygoing capitals, and spend a night in Slovenia's second-largest city, Maribor, which is even more chill. Graz, an hour north, proves to be the inverse of Trieste—

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From left:
The Russian
café in Graz;
the city's build-
ings are a mix
of Renaissance
and baroque
architecture.



an Austrian city that wishes it were Italian, where the pizza is as good as the schnitzel. Perhaps this is why I keep accidentally wishing people *buongiorno* instead of *grüß gott*. Perhaps not. I've been fumbling through a series of inappropriate greetings and mispronounced apologies throughout the trip, saying *por favor* to Italian waiters and *danke*-ing Slovenian ticket collectors. Nothing during this trip makes me feel more insecure than my linguistic incompetence, because



everywhere I arrive, I am met with fluent, smiling English and the sham-ing suspicion that it is quite possibly my interlocutor's third language.

On my second day in Graz, I take a food tour—this is Austria's culinary capital, after all, thanks to the Mediterranean-influenced climate of the surrounding countryside—and establish a rapport with my guide, David, over pumpkin seed-oil ice cream. He invites me to a house party his friends are throwing to watch the finals of the Eurovision Song Contest. The original reality pop tournament, Eurovision has taken over our TV scheduling once a year since 1956, sucking nearly every European into its orbit. Think *The X Factor*, but with more outré costumes and real-time geopolitical consequences.

In a tenement apartment not far from Graz's university, a dozen of

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us crowd onto the upstairs landing where the hosts have set up a projector, along with every chair and beanbag seat they own. Eurovision has always been a festive event, but since each country is judged by its peers, it's also an oddly diplomatic one, a way to gauge the mood of the nations and how they feel about each other. The U.K. traditionally performs badly—we've come in last five times in the past two decades, and last year managed to score not a single point. That's out of a possible 912.

I squeeze onto a two-person sofa with a couple who kindly explain the non-English lyrics for me. Giacomo is from Italy and René from Austria, so between us we have several horses in the race; our appreciation becomes more vociferous the more acts perform and the more plum schnapps we drink. I listen enviously as they chat

away in any of four languages that suit their need. Perhaps it is pity for my monolingual state that prompts them to ask me what Norway's song is about—it's in English, with the unfathomable title "Give That Wolf a Banana"—but I'm thrilled to be able to contribute to the discussion.

The U.K.'s entry is a solo artist with long hair and a big TikTok following, and he sings a slightly Bowie-esque number about going into space. It's, you know, fine. "He's got a good voice!" Giacomo says, which is a far warmer response than I expected or feel it deserves. "I love his beard," René says. I'm surprised when they bring up Brexit—I have been nervous to mention it in polite company on my trip, given how rudely I consider my country to have behaved throughout the process, and I had assumed that Europe felt well rid of us Brits by now. And yet the tone here is not of contempt, but of sorrow. Giacomo says he was so devastated, he cried. "We couldn't believe it," René says. "Britain has been such a fundamental part of Europe's history, and vice versa. It's a huge loss for all of us."

My own reaction had been to hurl cushions around the room in impotent fury. Today, it's heartwarming to bond with Europeans over something intended to break us apart. I tell them how much I regret the lapse of my schoolgirl French, and I pledge, with a passion that surprises me, to start working on it immediately. Travel aside, it has become obvious to me that the best way to maintain my European connection—to defy the dissolution of common interest and shared heritage that Brexit represented—is to be able to communicate freely in a language that's not my own.

The votes come in. We toast each others' successes with more schnapps and discover that my TikTok Brit has done surprisingly well. He ends up coming second behind the performer from Ukraine, whose popular victory is a show of solidarity we all appreciate, and when the credits finally roll, the three of us stumble outside together and onto a tram, another thing that Europeans are great at. Trams, that is, not falling onto them.

READY TO HIT THE RAILS?

EUROPEAN TRAIN
TRIPPING 101

The all-inclusive passes known as Interrail (for European and U.K. residents) and Eurail (for everyone else) offer the simplest and most flexible way to travel across the continent by train. They're also much more economical than individual same-day tickets.

Through Eurail's website or mobile app, you can purchase the pass that's best for you: anything from four days of travel within a single month (US\$251) to an all-inclusive, three-month-long trip (US\$920). The app is extremely helpful with planning—you can map out a route without navigating timetables across 33 countries—and also with most midtravel changes. Some specific journeys, including most high-speed international routes, require a reservation and an additional fee (usually less than US\$20); for sleeper trains, you'll need to choose whether to book a seat or a bed.

If you decide to skip a Eurail Pass in favor of individual train lines, you'll get the cheapest tickets by booking in advance. Most tickets go on sale three months before departure and can be purchased through the train company or such third-party providers as thetrainline.com. —Emma John



This page:
In Trieste,
swimmers
and snorkel-
ers enjoy the
Sticco Mare
beach club.
Opposite page:
Eurail offers
travelers a
range of passes
to explore Italy
and beyond.

№ 5 GRAZ ↓ DÜSSELDORF, GERMANY

576 MILES

FROM GRAZ, I head to Vienna, because from there I can pick up the Nightjet, an overnight service that will cover the 560 miles to western Germany while I sleep. My train is scheduled to arrive at its final destination in late morning, although I plan to alight earlier, at Bonn. That's why I'm the first on the sleeper carriages to turn in and the first to be wished "*schlafen Sie gut!*" by the steward. When my alarm beeps me awake at 5:30 a.m., I pull on clothes, wash in my cupboard-basin, and walk the length of the sleeper carriage, where I bump into an apologetic conductor. "No, *entschuldigung*, Bonn will not be the next stop," he explains. "We are running three hours behind schedule. Construction works required us to use an alternative line. May I bring you some breakfast?"

Whatever irritation I might feel subsides the moment I look out the window. If we hadn't run so late, I wouldn't be watching as we hug the bends in the Rhine, following its winding course. I would never have seen this procession of Rhenish villages in the morning light, with their churches, their watchtowers, their clusters of colorfully trimmed houses, and their seemingly endless profusion of castles—this one on a cliff-top, that one by the shore, this one peeking magically from the middle of a forest. It's a river cruise at double speed, and I sit on my bunk transfixed.

At Bonn, finally, I must leave the scenic route and change trains, joining the commuter pack as they whiz north to Düsseldorf. No country today is more committed to the concept of a united Europe than Germany. (Fitting, since it shares borders with nine other countries.) Like many of its sister cities, modern-day Düsseldorf is a largely postwar creation, a miracle of reconstruction, as well as proof of how much Europe has evolved even in the past few decades. Its canal-side boulevard, the Königsallee, is lined with luxury stores; its former factories are loft apartments; its "old town" itself is a reconstruction.



This page: Friends enjoy a sunny day at Düsseldorf's Paradise Beach on the Rhine. Opposite page: The city's Flingern district.

For all of Düsseldorf's wealth and development, however, the rebel spirit that fueled the punk and electronica movements here in the 1970s can still be found, if you know where to look. And Klaus Rosskoth, a graphic designer turned art dealer, has offered to show me. His gallery, Pretty Portal, sits on the quirky Brunnenstrasse, surrounded by other independent businesses: the slow fashion store, the Lebanese deli that hosts a DJ every Friday, the pint-size café next to the cinema. The pavement is beautified with pots of edible plants; Klaus identifies the retired botanist who tends to them on behalf of the entire street.

Painted in vibrant colors on the wall outside Pretty Portal is a masked woman, the work of Fin DAC—the street artist whose 200-foot-tall portrait of Frida Kahlo adorns an apartment building in Mexico. Klaus was a graffiti artist himself back in the 1980s, and for the past 15 years he has been inviting the world's best urban artists to Düsseldorf to leave their mark.

THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN TRAIN TRAVEL

Cheap flights are Europe's guilty pleasure. The proliferation of short-haul routes and budget airlines over the past couple of decades has made air travel not only the quickest way to hop between countries but also often the most inexpensive. Some flights will cost less than what you'll spend on taxi fare from the airport.

It's hard to fight back against that kind of market advantage, but the European Union is determined to try. In 2019, rail journeys accounted for only 8 percent of

all passenger travel in the EU, but the union wants to triple that by 2050. Rail is also a key part of the European Green Deal, which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030. This will require as much as a 90 percent decrease in transport-related emissions.

In 2021, the EU announced the European Year of Rail, an initiative to encourage more train travel. A specially commissioned train, the Connecting Europe Express, went on a 26-country journey to showcase the power

of rail and highlight the need for more integrated services across the continent. Investments in high-speed, border-crossing railways have become a priority, with talks underway to create a master plan for a transformation of the continent's network over the next several decades.

Meanwhile, individual countries have been boosting their own rail infrastructure and increasing services, such as the nonstop three-hour Italo route between Milan and Rome.

Several countries have revived

or added sleeper services, marketing them as an attractive alternative to flying. France's state railway, SNCF, restored the six-hour night train between Paris and Nice, with tickets starting at US\$20. New Swiss night trains take passengers from Zurich to Budapest or Zagreb, and the Belgian-Dutch European Sleeper line plans to link Brussels and Amsterdam with Prague in a partnership with Czech operator RegioJet. Austria was an early investor in overnight routes; its Nightjet

service now boasts more than 25 destinations.

As countries reinvigorate rail travel, they're actively decreasing short-haul air travel. Austria has been at the forefront of those efforts. The government's financial support of Austrian Airlines during the pandemic was conditional on the company terminating its 50-minute Vienna to Salzburg route. In 2021, France approved a ban on domestic flights for routes where there is an equivalent rail journey that takes less than two and a half hours. —E.J.

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He drives me to the nearby district of Flingern, pulling up next to a supermarket where a mural of sculptor Joseph Beuys gazes out across the parking lot. The mural is one of Klaus's many commissions, by the Italian duo Orticanoodles, but we're here to see Kiefernstrasse, the street where houses are covered in a riot of bright and joyous murals, which the residents helped choose and design. A darker spirit of anarchy once possessed these buildings—in the 1980s they were squats that housed members of the Baader-Meinhof gang, a leftist militant organization—but today they are celebrated for their creativity, be it in the form of the Chinese dragon slinking its way from pavement to roof, or the house that's a giant crossword puzzle.

On our return, we take a detour past the contemporary architecture of MedienHafen, the redeveloped harbor area, its buildings different in shape and color, and made more compelling by the way they interact with each other. It's not a bad metaphor for Europe, I say, and Klaus chuckles in approval. He is an ardent Europhile, someone who thinks of himself as European first and German second; Düsseldorf is far more multicultural than when he was a kid, which he enjoys. "Maybe I'm a dreamer," he says, "but I like the idea of Europe, the courage it takes to have that vision, to pursue this kind of unity."

Why does his speech make me well up? Is it sentiment, or is it just that, at this stage of the trip, my own vision is getting blurry from fatigue?

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MedienHafen, Düsseldorf's renovated harbor, features both the Rhine Tower and the Neuer Zollhof complex, designed by architect Frank Gehry.

№ 6
DÜSSELDORF
↓
LONDON
297 MILES

PASSING INTO THE Netherlands the following day, I swear I see a dozen silver sousaphones from the window, the instruments playing in formation on a loading dock. But before I can confirm, the industrial park around me morphs into pasture, where cows sprawl about like dogs in the sun. Amsterdam's streets are no less hallucinatory, its tall, wonky buildings threatening to topple on me as I walk beneath them. On the horizontal plane, Dutch cyclists bear down remorselessly from all directions; I'm feeling less a part of Europe and more a character in an arcade game.

I make it to a couple of landmark museums, where I listen to the hundred tongues of global visitors just like me. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Britain's Grand Tourists made trips far longer than mine, visiting the fountains of culture in Athens and Rome and Paris—but then they did it in more leisurely circumstances and likely had servants to carry their luggage. We do have something in common, though. The original purpose of such journeys was to educate aristocratic young men (and eventually young women) in the history, culture, and politics of the wider world—to help them understand Britain's place in that world, and to appreciate where so much of what they valued had come from.

The Low Countries nestle tightly together. From Amsterdam, it takes merely two hours to reach Antwerp, Belgium. Soon after arriving, I present myself at the hotel check-in desk with a big smile and a mouthful of poorly accented observations about my *réserve*. The receptionist looks at me, baffled, and asks if we can speak English. Turns out that Antwerp is in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

I'm staying in one of the city's emerging creative districts, a car-free place called the Green Quarter. There's so much that's buzzy here—breweries, restaurants, design ateliers—that it takes a couple of days before I venture to the historic center. When I do, I'm struck by how familiar the architecture is, how much of Europe's style and pattern I've absorbed. Elongated facades squeeze into a cobblestone square, the sort of offbeat grandeur that invites you to smile, not tremble.

On the south side of the old town, behind Antwerp's fashion-conscious shopping streets, I come across the 16th-century church of St. Andrew, whose priest offers to show me around. A vast carved pulpit spreads across the nave like a tree, but Father Rudi preaches from it only a handful of times a year. He's more interested in modern additions, such as a gown by the acclaimed Belgian designer Ann Demeulemeester that now adorns the statue of Mary, or the reconstruction of the Altar of the Minters, completed in 2002. "We installed it when Belgium joined the Euro," he says.

Father Rudi turns out to be passionate about unity, of values and of communities shared across borders. He shows me a series of city guides his parishioners helped produce and picks up the one most relevant to me, titled *How British Is Antwerp?*

The pamphlet tells the story of Antwerp in terms of British contributions and characters—"so that you will feel more at home here," he says. "Mary Stuart's court ladies, [and other Catholics], came here as religious refugees. English wool merchants made Antwerp very rich. So many nationalities have helped create our history: Norwegian, Danish, Irish. . . . We made these city guides as a sign of our hospitality, to put some of this rigid nationalism we've seen in better context." He chuckles. "Sometimes it's easier to be good friends with anyone other than your neighbors."

I've never thought of Belgians as my neighbors before. But the three-hour train ride from Antwerp to London will be quicker than it would be from London to Edinburgh, a city I've visited dozens of times and with whose citizens I feel a genuine kinship. As my train departs for home the following day, leaving Father Rudi and all my new friends behind, I know I'll be back soon. For it's been good to discover that I'm still welcome in Europe, but even better to learn I'm considered part of the family. 🇺🇸

Contributing writer Emma John wrote about immigration in Berlin in the January/February 2020 issue of AFAR. This is photographer Felix Brüggemann's first story for AFAR.