

Three culture vultures hit the tracks

Hi there Katy and Anna,

Usually when my Dad is banging on about the "good old days", I just pretend to be listening. But he's had a tempting idea about how we could celebrate finishing our A-levels when we leave school, before we all go our separate ways. He suggested we take a leaf out of his book – it turns out that when he was eighteen, he bought an Interrail pass with a couple of his friends and travelled by train from place to place in Europe. This would have been in the 1980s, when half of Europe was behind the Iron Curtain, shrouded in mystery for teenagers from the West. To travel to quite a few countries you needed to apply in advance for a visa, which meant jumping through several hoops. Their idea was to glimpse some European culture, though I can't help but wonder how much culture he did actually get to see.

It's funny what sticks in your mind, my Dad said, vividly describing how they spent a night on the floor of a train station in Nice. Apparently the youth hostel was full and there was nowhere left for Dad and his friends to go. You need to keep in mind that this was ages before we all became glued to our smartphones, and instead they got all their travel info from a single paper guidebook, which pretty much says it all. That must have been kind of insane, don't you think?

Then there was the time when Dad and his mates were in Budapest, and they decided on a big splurge of a meal with goulash, chocolate pancakes – the works (and probably a glass or three of red wine too, knowing Dad). They tried to give the waiter a tip at the end of the meal by leaving some money on the table when they left, but the waiter chased after them to give them their tip back. I can't imagine that happening anywhere now!

I asked him: "So Dad, what about all those museums and galleries you were supposed to be visiting?"

He said that after Nice they took a train to Padua in Italy. They walked in the heat of the afternoon to a chapel that had a good write-up in their guidebook. Inside the chapel it was cool and dark and on the walls, illuminated, were the most marvellous frescoes painted by Giotto of the Last Judgement and other scenes, in the brightest blue and orange and purple. There was something about the way the painter handled perspective that drew you into the frescoes and made you feel, Dad said, sort of "part of them". It turns out that all those years ago Dad did find some culture after all!

So, girls, what do you say? Are you up for going Interrailing this summer?