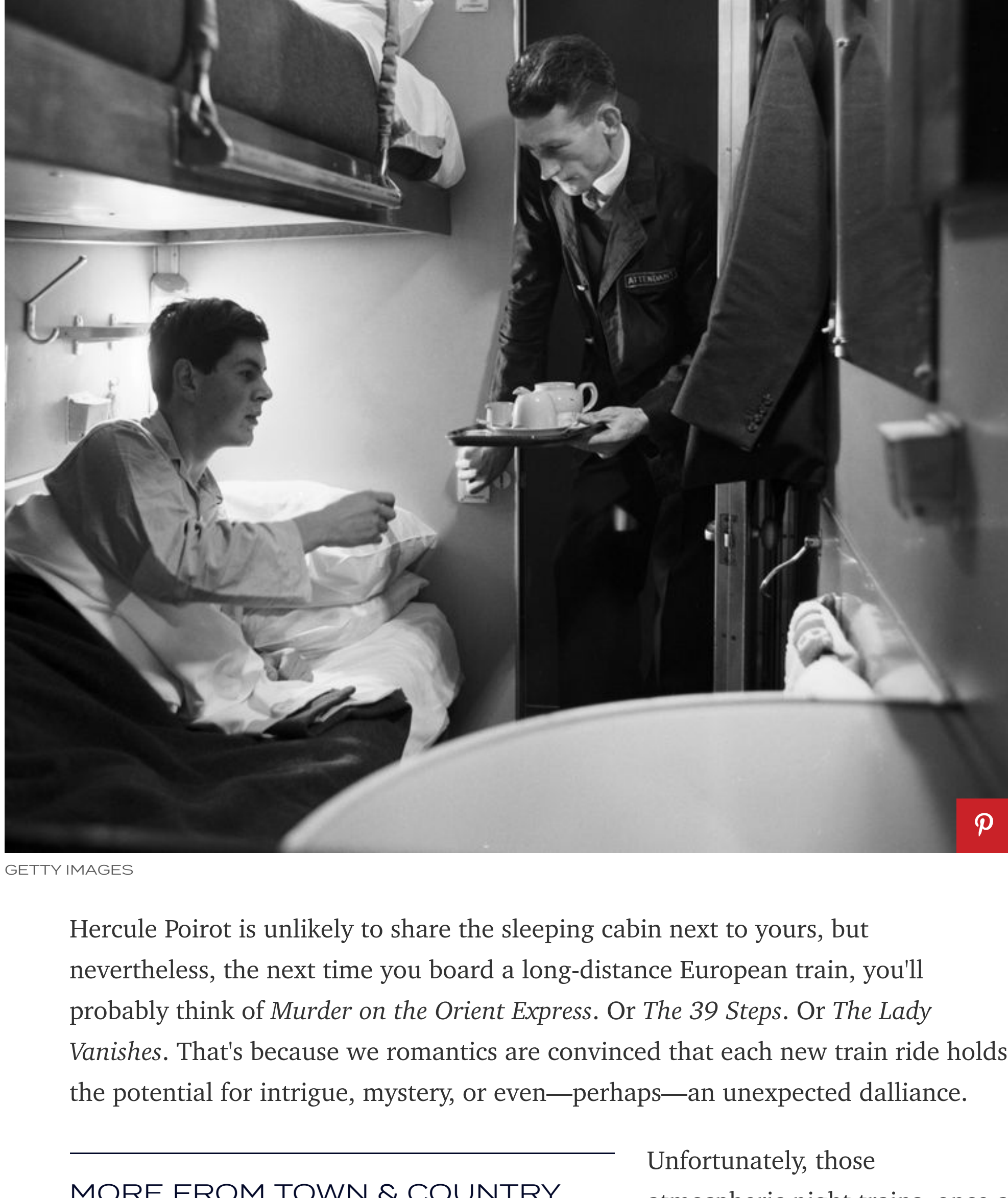


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A Lament for the End of Europe's Night Trains

Changing travel patterns threaten a legendary mode of transport, but the romance lives on—for now.

BY MARK ORWOLL — NOV 18, 2016



GETTY IMAGES

Hercule Poirot is unlikely to share the sleeping cabin next to yours, but nevertheless, the next time you board a long-distance European train, you'll probably think of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Or *The 39 Steps*. Or *The Lady Vanishes*. That's because we romantics are convinced that each new train ride holds the potential for intrigue, mystery, or even—perhaps—an unexpected dalliance.

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Unfortunately, those atmospheric night trains, once a staple of long-distance Continental travel, are fast disappearing. To think that such a mode of transport—iconic, celebrated, even revered—may soon be nothing more than a nostalgic novelty is nothing less than a travesty. All of which is why on a recent Eurail Pass trip through Portugal and Spain,

I've chosen to travel from Lisbon to Madrid via the **Trenhotel**, a deluxe sleeper service operated by Renfe, the Spanish train company.

It's a warm, autumn Wednesday evening. My travel companions and I prepare to board the sleek rolling stock of the Trenhotel *Lusitania* at Lisbon's Oriente Station, a modernist, airy terminal designed by Santiago Calatrava. The train has pulled in right on time, as European trains generally do, and we board in an unnecessary roistering bustle, as European train travelers generally do. I search out my sleeper, only to find a large French family encamped in my reserved space. The Frenchmen should have known better; their assigned roomette is in the next car back. No big deal, except for the fact that I don't speak French and they don't speak English. But the car attendant soon sorts it all out and gets everyone pointed in the right direction.

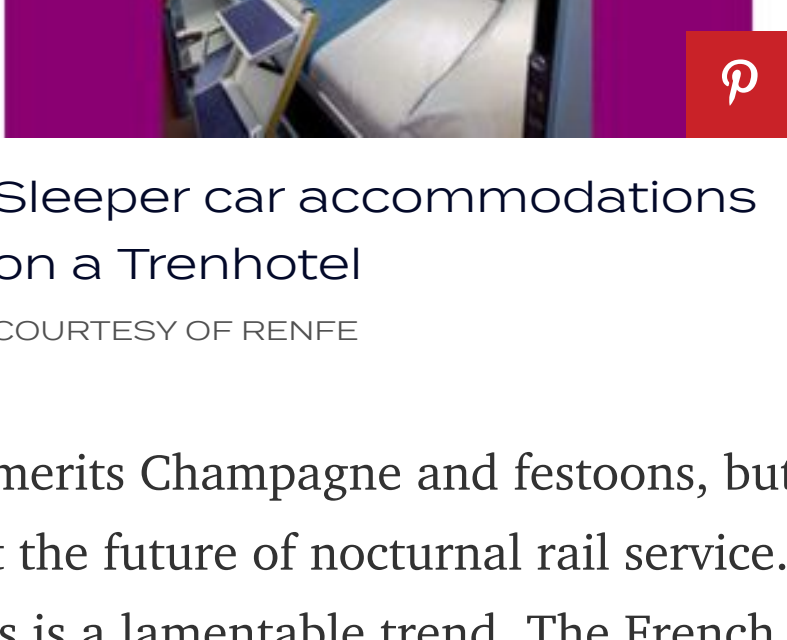
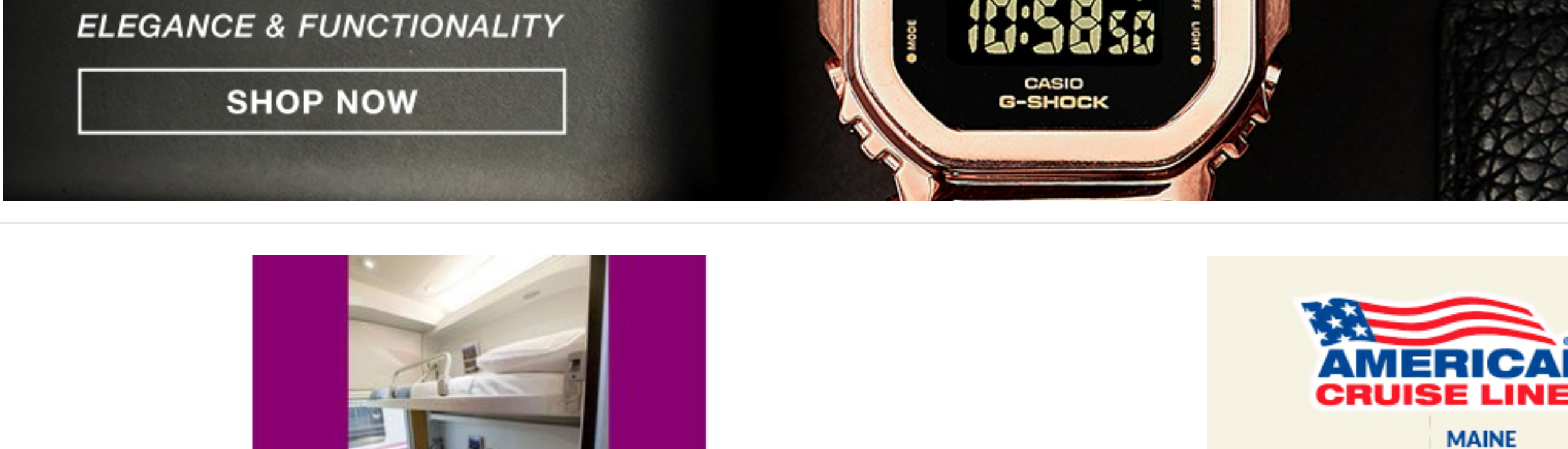
I drop my bag on the floor and look around my new home. I adore railroad sleeper cars. (This from a man who never uses the word *adore*.) I love the efficient use of space, the coziness, the seats that transform into berths, the privacy. I rode in my first sleeper, in Mexico, nearly 40 years ago, an antiquated American Pullman that had been decommissioned and sent south of the border for secondary service. Since then I've traveled in sleepers from New York to Orlando on the *Silver Meteor* and from New York to Chicago on the *Lake Shore Limited*, but this ride is my first in a European wagon-lit.

When I'm in a sleeper I feel as if I'm in a Bond movie, as if some secret plan is afoot.

It's dispiriting to consider that overnight trains are vanishing from European timetables. I've always loved the concept of taking a sleeper to save money on a hotel and waking up in the city center instead of arriving at some distant airport. But cheap intra-European flights and super-fast day trains are diminishing the need for sleepers.

Flash forward two weeks. I'm chatting with Nadine Koszler, a spokeswoman for Eurail, about the decline in sleeper trains. *How can this be happening, I ask? It doesn't make sense.* Nadine shrugs, not unsympathetically. "Some people don't sleep well on a train and can find it tiring," she says. "Plus it can be a bit cramped compared to a hotel room." *Hmm... This is more honesty than I want. Come on, Nadine, help me out.* "But for a younger generation especially, it's a good way to save money. It's a very efficient way to travel." *Okay, that's more like it. Keep going...* "The Austria-Switzerland route that closed is reopening." *Yes!* "I know that within Europe there's been a lot of lobbying against the closing of the night lines."

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Sleeper car accommodations on a Trenhotel
COURTESY OF RENFE

I realize none of this merits Champagne and festoons, but I'm glad to hear any optimistic news about the future of nocturnal rail service. And yet the dwindling number of night trains is a lamentable trend. The French government in 2016 announced a drastic cut in its *Intercité de Nuit* service. In the fall of 2016 Germany's Deutsche Bahn announced it would cease operation of its comprehensive City Night Line service (though, thankfully, Austrian Railways is taking over some of those routes). Other night trains have devolved into basic daytime service or have been eliminated altogether. Irrespective of the bad news, when I'm in a sleeper I feel as if I'm in a Bond movie, as if some secret plan is afoot.

With that, after settling into my compartment, I wander over to the café car. The trouble is that the café car looks like a 1950s Times Square luncheonette, not unlike the sad, stark coffee shop in Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, but without the charm—overlit, Formica-like countertops, uncomfortable stools mounted in place, nothing sexy or noir-ish or Hitchcockian about it. And yet, we do what we do with what we have. One of my traveling buddies has ordered some food—a selection of cheeses, some sausages, and a beer—and I join him with a beer of my own, the Portuguese lager Super Bock.

Soon our little space becomes a snug haven; the distant lights roll past and the *bungla-bungla-bungla* of the train wheels plays a soothing chorus to our conversation. COMPLETE STRANGERS settle in along the counter, various languages compete with one another, and the empty beer bottles and wine glasses pile up faster than the attendant can take them away. At one point the café car is two deep (there isn't enough room for three).

You're surrounded by people you've never met, whose patois you don't savvy, whose ultimate destination on the train or in life is utterly unknown to you.

People you've never met, whose patois you don't savvy, whose ultimate destination on the train or in life is utterly unknown to you, are reaching over your shoulder to pay for their drinks, placing a hand gently on your back so as not to lean against you. A small discordant polyglot brotherhood begins to blossom in that warm compartment as you sail across the Spanish frontier. You set down your third (and now empty) bottle of Super Bock and realize there are only four or five people in the once-crowded café, and so, reluctantly, you toddle off to bed.

My compact domain is maybe seven feet long by seven feet wide, including an en suite bathroom. My lower bunk is down and the bed made up; the upper bunk is folded against the wall, almost unnoticeable. The bathroom is as trim as a head in a cabin cruiser, no wasted space, with a sink, a toilet, and even a shower with surprisingly good hot-water pressure. There are plenty of lights, including a powerful bedside reading lamp. I lie in my berth and try to focus on *The Rough Riders*, a memoir by Theodore Roosevelt, but my eyes keep drifting to the moonlit landscape rushing by.

It's all very cossetting: the soft swaying of the train, the rhythmic clacking of the wheels, the cozy little room. But ultimately it's time to fall asleep, so I turn off all the lights except the powerful reading lamp; I can't find the switch. Even after three beers I should be able to find a simple light switch, but it simply isn't there. So I take an extra pillow and push it in front of the light and try to ignore it. The pillow slips out of place in the middle of the night and the glare wakes me, so I turn on all the lights and systematically turn them all off again. This time the reading light goes out.

And so do I.

Until 7 a.m., that is, when a hearty knock wakes me. It's the conductor, alerting me and the other sleepers that we will arrive in Madrid in the next hour or so. I'm already packed, so I slip on some fresh clothes and walk to the diner, where I find one of my travel pals.

"They don't have a full breakfast menu on this train, for some reason," he says. "All they have is toast and sausage. That's disappointing."

I think about it for all of five seconds. "Not really." Then I look at the man behind the counter. "Toast and sausage," I say. "And coffee." The server says, "Anything else?"

"Nah," I reply. "I'm fine with toast and sausage." And at that moment, not a truer word was ever spoken.

How to Book:

Overnight accommodations on European trains are usually booked by paying for a seat, then purchasing a sleeper-cabin upgrade. Prices vary depending on the number of people in the cabin and the luxury level (for example, whether you have a private WC and shower or just a washbasin). You can book the Trenhotel *Lusitania* on the **Renfe website** or get help from **Eurail**, whose Eurail Pass network extends to more than two dozen countries and is particularly useful when taking multiple train trips and, especially, trips in adjoining countries.

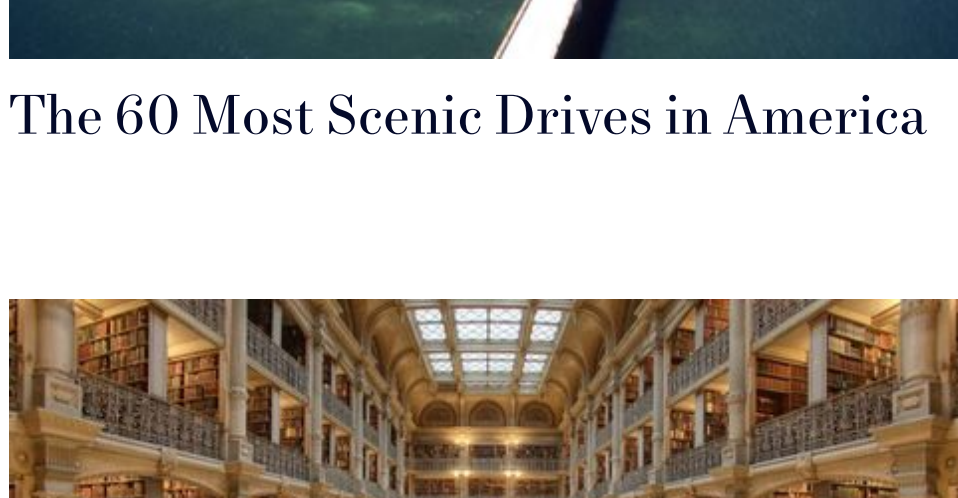
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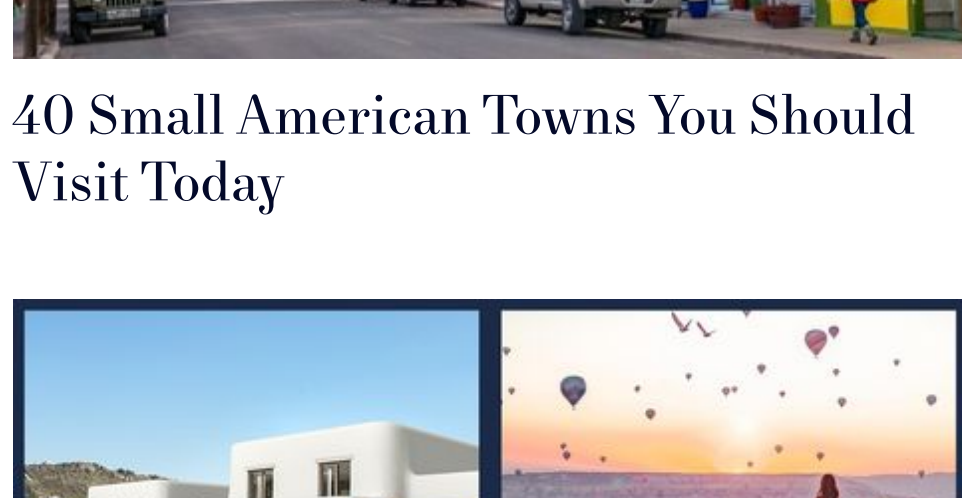
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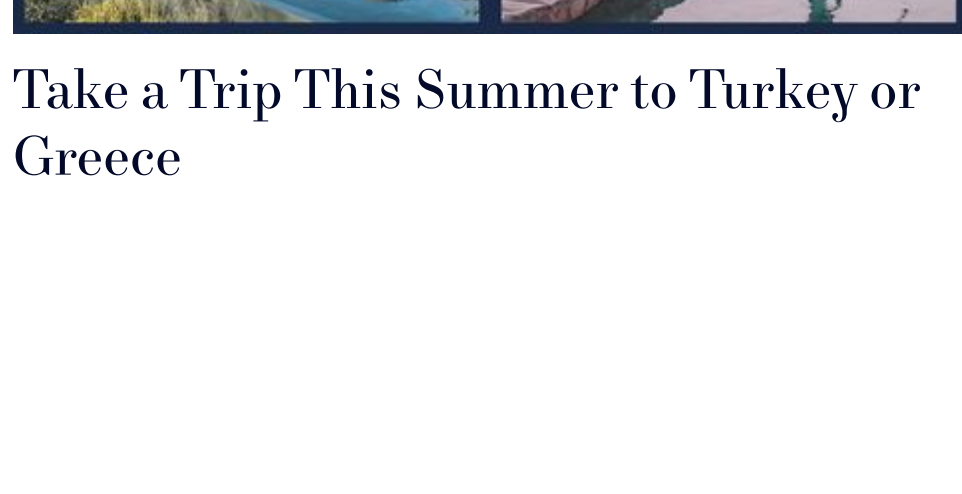
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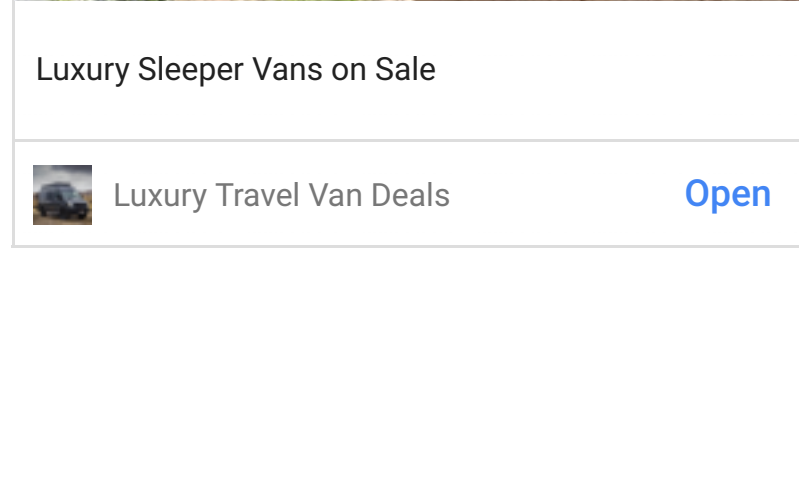
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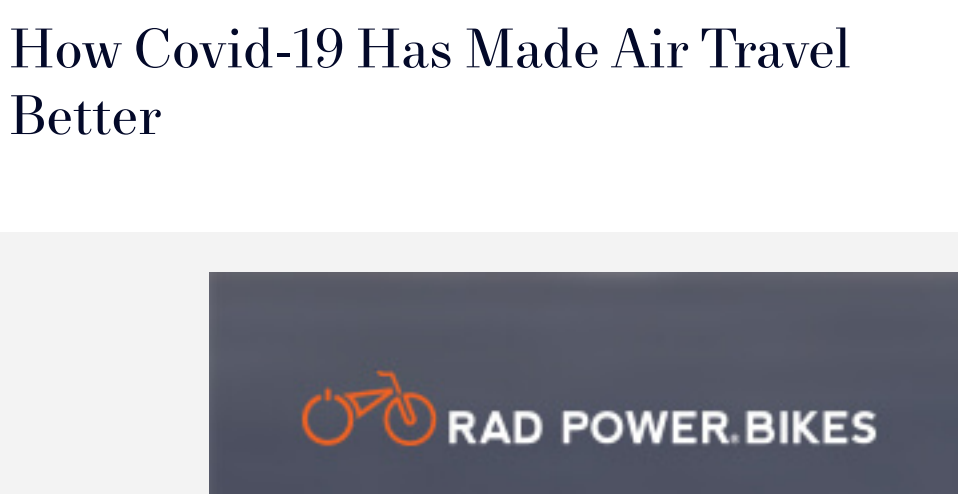
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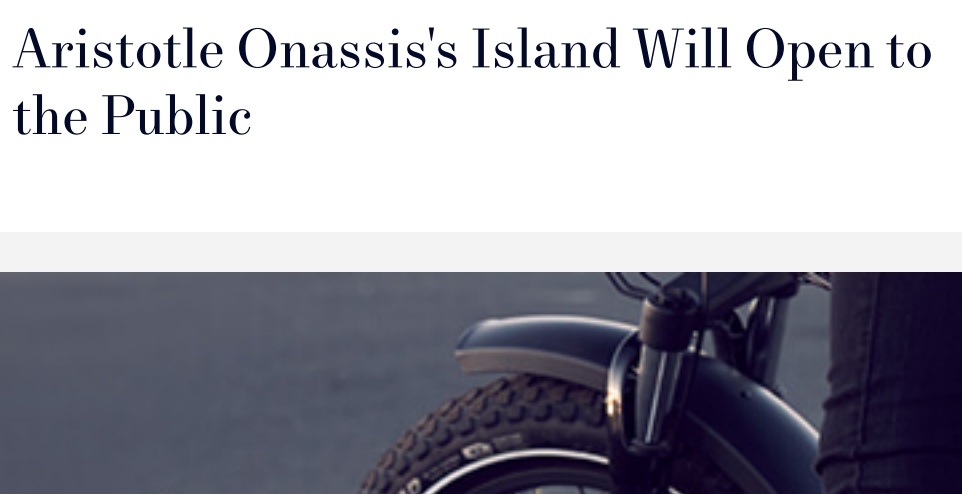
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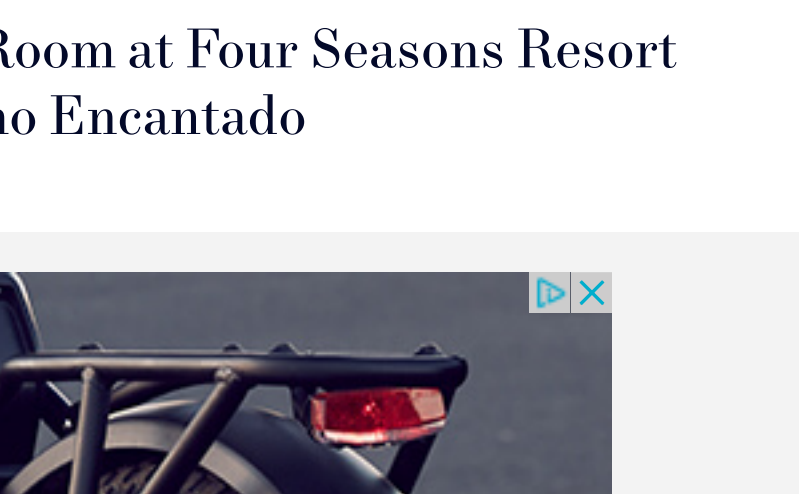
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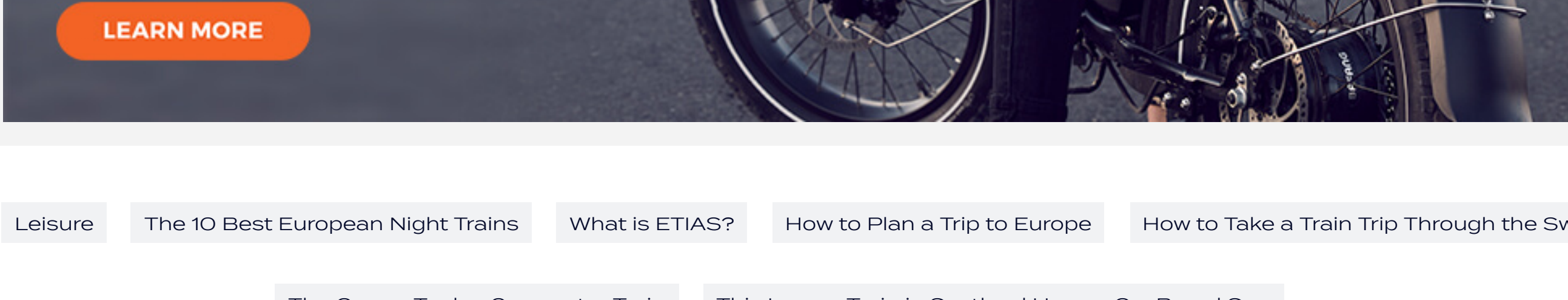
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