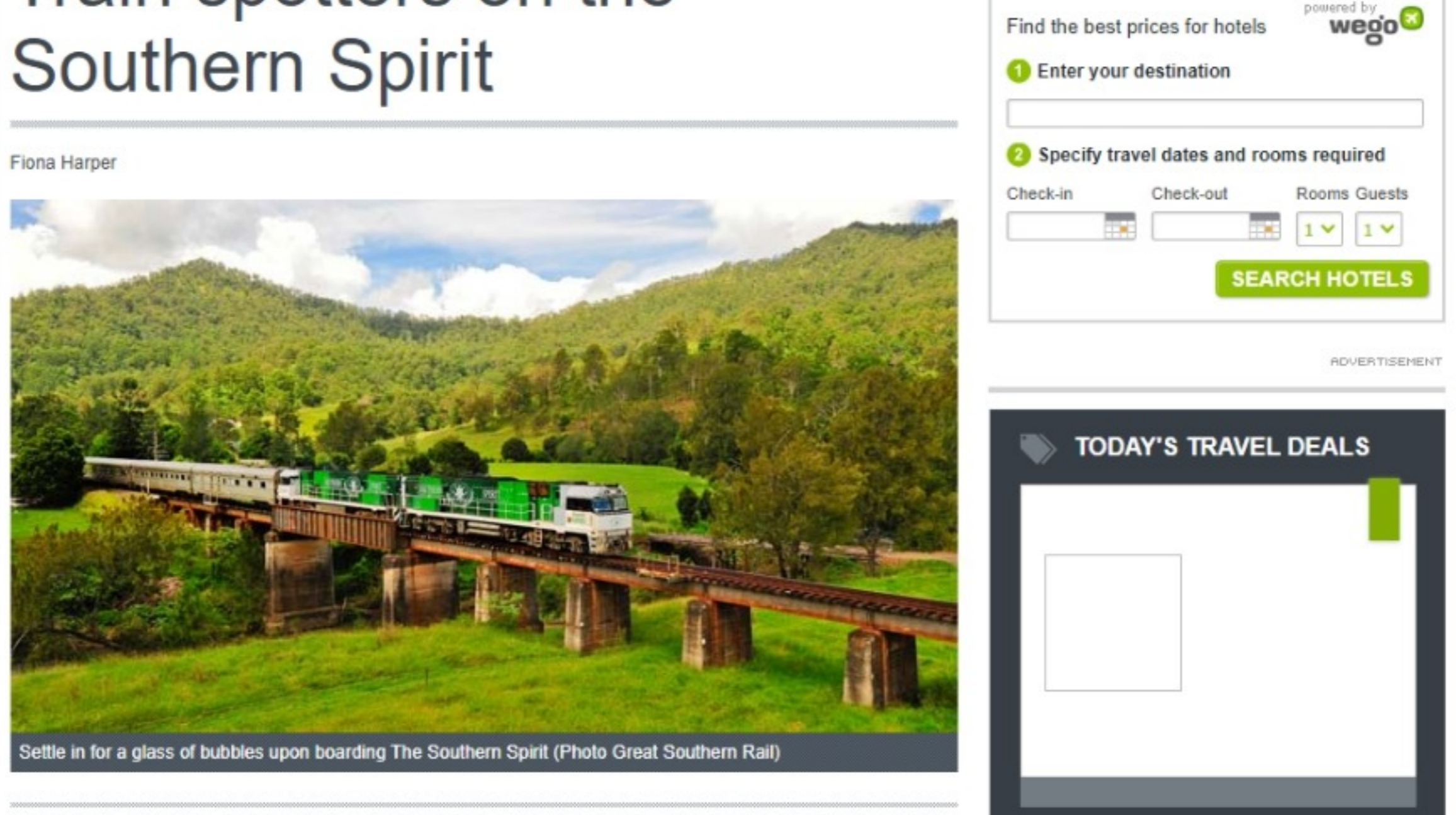


Train spotters on the Southern Spirit

Fiona Harper



Settle in for a glass of bubbles upon boarding The Southern Spirit (Photo Great Southern Rail)

"Gunzel on the bridge," my friend points out as our train passes beneath a highway flyover. I whip my head around in time to spot a stout camera-toting bloke above us, his lens pointed trackside as our train gains momentum.

Known as trainspotters, trainiacs, anoraks, and in British slang 'gunzels', I soon learn they have a knack of popping up in the oddest places as we travel between Brisbane and Adelaide. As I settle in for a chilled glass of bubbles in the Outback Explorer Lounge upon boarding The Southern Spirit, I discover that many of my fellow passengers are, indeed, gunzels themselves. The Southern Spirit, which runs just a handful of services over the summer season, offers highly-credentialed bragging rights amongst serious rail buffs.

Conversation quickly leads to stories of other train journeys ticked off 'must do' lists. Many have travelled aboard some of the world's iconic rail routes through Canada, Africa and Europe as well as the legendary Australian trains, the Indian Pacific and Ghan. The Southern Spirit differs from many of these in that rather than being merely a point to point train, it's a more leisurely type of rail cruising. Daily whistle-stop tours to enjoy highlights along the route are co-ordinated with our schedule to provide enticing diversions beyond the train itself.

Whistle-stop tours
Oozing an alluring mix of beachside funk blended with well-heeled style, Byron Bay is our first whistle-stop, with coaches whisking us away as soon as we de-train. From high atop the Cape Byron cliff overlooking the beach, the water is clear enough to see ripples in the sand beneath the surf. There's enough time to poke around trendy boutiques or swim in the surf before dinner. Our first dinner onboard is not actually onboard at all, as we dine downtown in Byron before retreating to Southern Spirit in time for a nightcap. Damian, my affable 30-something cabin steward, has read my mind and left me a miniature of Baileys alongside a handful of chocolates to send me off to sleep. Not that I need much help, as the train gently lulls me into a semi-conscious state, encased as I am amid crisply starched linen.

Day two and The Southern Spirit pulls into Coffs Harbour station right on the water, throbbing with burly fishermen unloading their catch dockside. Some of us opt for a brisk power-walk to stretch our legs, taking the path beyond the marina and up to the summit of Mutton Bird Island. Confined as we are onboard, it's a relief to get some blood pumping into idle legs.

"Damian, my affable 30-something cabin steward, has read my mind and left me a miniature of Baileys alongside a handful of chocolates to send me off to sleep."

Fiona Harper

More about Trains:

- > Why trains beat planes
- > Let the train take the strain
- > Trip tips: The Ghan
- > The world's greatest train journeys
- > The Legendary Ghan

Topics:

- Trains
- Eco and nature
- Melbourne
- Adelaide
- Brisbane
- Byron Bay
- Australia
- New South Wales
- Queensland
- Victoria
- South Australia

appetite for our tour through the Hunter Valley the following day. Further whistle-stop explorations include the Taronga Western Plains Zoo at Dubbo, Albury-Wodonga on the Murray River, with the Grampians National Park the last stop before pulling into Adelaide

Life onboard

Onboard our easily slip into a regular pattern, much of which revolves around eating, drinking and socialising. After dinner there's usually a tightly contested game of Scrabble underway in the lounge, while others retreat to their private cabins. Operated by Great Southern Rail, accommodation onboard is in either luxurious Platinum Service or not-quite-so-opulent Gold Service cabins. The main differences between the two are mostly to do with cabin size and amenities, plus the inclusion of special luxuries for Platinum travellers (think turndown nightcap and chocolates, Natio bathroom products, fluffy bathrobes, and tea or coffee served in bed each morning). Naturally limited by carriage width, both are somewhat compact, though making exceptional use of limited space. All cabins have ensuite bathrooms, and this is where the real difference lies between the two. Platinum guests have swanky, spacious showers with glass screens along with a regular vanity basin and toilet. Gold Service bathrooms are, how to put it ... let's just say compact. Clever almost, given that both the toilet and hand basin fold down from the wall. Concealed when not in use, the floor space is then utilised as a shower stall with wrap-around shower curtain. Not for the bibulous, to be sure, but perfectly adequate. And lets' face it, how much time do you really need to spend in the bathroom?

Sleep with me

During the day, cabins are set up for lounging, with sofas or lounge chairs the perfect spot to curl up with a book, or to watch the landscape brush past. At night, usually while we're at dinner, cabin stewards transform each cabin into a cosy sleeper, with beds folding down from behind concealed walls. Crisp, fresh linen and fluffy blankets make for a cosy, comfy night time retreat. An added luxury for couples in Platinum Service is the option of a dreamy double bed to stretch out in. Naturally, panoramic windows in all cabins bring the great outdoors up close and personal, whether lounging on your sofa or reclining in bed.

With little to do but kick back and relax, I spend endless hours gazing out the window from a supine position. After a while I begin to recognise trainspotters trackside. With binoculars or cameras, sometimes both, slung around their necks, train timetables in hand, I can almost feel their hand-wringing angst when we run behind schedule. On online forums intense discussions ensue about which trains have been spotted and where, inciting speculation about train schedules and whether trains are running on time. Or not.

As we depart Melbourne's Southern Cross Station, one particularly passionate gunzel called George, well known amongst train crews, waves enthusiastically from the platform as we roll out of town. He looks absolutely chuffed. Sure, I could have flown the short distance between Brisbane and Adelaide in just a couple of hours. But, as a raw trainspotter still building the required street cred to consider myself a gunzel, it was never really an option.

More information

Great Southern Rail website [www.gsr.com.au](#)
The Southern Spirit operates between Adelaide and Brisbane between November and February each year (next train departs from Adelaide 5 Nov 2011).

Have you climbed aboard any of the world's most famous train journeys? Tell us about them below.

Related: [World's greatest train journeys](#)
And: [Let the train take the strain](#)
And for those with a young family: [Train trips with kids](#)

results by **bing** [More results from Bing: web | videos | images](#)

User comments

WRITE A COMMENT

Email: *

Nickname: *

Location: *

Subject: *

Comment: *

Maximum characters 1000 * Indicates required field

[PREVIEW](#) [SUBMIT](#)

- Comment guidelines**
- Avoid using:** Personal attacks, HTML tags, Offensive language
 - Irrelevant comments, Personal information, Text in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS
- [See full comment guidelines](#)

HOTELS | **FLIGHTS**

Find the best prices for hotels [Powered by wego](#)

1 Enter your destination

2 Specify travel dates and rooms required

Check-in Check-out Rooms Guests

[SEARCH HOTELS](#)

TODAY'S TRAVEL DEALS

[View deals](#)

MORE TRAVEL DEALS

[View deals](#)

NEWSLETTER [Powered by wego](#)

Get the best travel deals
Up to 75% off [SUBSCRIBE NOW](#)

WORST THINGS ABOUT FLYING

From screaming babies to loud drunks — these are the most annoying things about flying.

LATEST BLOG

Aussies spend up on overseas travel

ninemsn Shopping

Pentax K-30 White Digital SLR... \$844

Pentax K-30 Black Digital SLR... \$825

[View more products](#)

POPULAR SEARCHES

- Cheap flights
- Best travel deals
- Travel Australia
- Things to do on the Gold Coast
- Thailand holidays
- Cheap accommodation
- Melbourne hotels
- Last minute flights
- Places to stay in Sydney
- Last minute hotel deals

TRAVEL AT A GLANCE

Cars [Berlief Continental](#) [Sell your car fast!](#) [Latest car reviews](#)

Careers [Teaching Courses](#) [Online Courses](#) [SEEK iPhone app](#)

Real Estate [Properties for sale](#) [Search for properties](#) [Visit our blog](#)

RateCity [Compare and Save](#) [Home loans](#) [Credit Cards](#)

eHarmony Dating [Review matches free](#) [Meet singles](#) [Success stories](#)

Travel Deals [Escape the everyday!](#) [Island getaways!](#) [Retreats for couples](#)