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To cite this article: Duncan Light, Alexandru Dragan & Remus Crețan (12 Feb 2026): On the slow train: tourists' experiences of deceleration, *Mobilities*, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2026.2628110

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2026.2628110>



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Published online: 12 Feb 2026.



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On the slow train: tourists' experiences of deceleration

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines slow mobility and deceleration in the context of tourism. It focuses on a heritage railway in Romania, which travels through mountainous scenery at an average speed of 17 km/hour. Using methods from mobile ethnography and go-along interviews it explores passengers' experiences of travelling slowly. Passengers did not appear to be deliberately participating in slow travel as an act of countercultural opposition to the prevailing cult of speed. Instead, motives for taking the journey were more about curiosity and trying something different while on holiday. While they were not necessarily seeking deceleration, many passengers found the slow journey enjoyable and rewarding, allowing them to disconnect from everyday pace and rhythms. Passengers responded to the slow pace in various ways, including avoiding their mobile phones, paying greater attention to the environment surrounding the train, and engaging in various forms of introspection (including nostalgia). However, some passengers found the experience of deceleration challenging and unwelcome. The slow train journey did not exist in isolation but was interlocked with other forms of (mostly faster) movement, both on the day of travel and during the wider holiday in the region.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 April 2025
Accepted 2 February 2026

KEYWORDS

Slow mobilities; slow travel; rail travel; deceleration; embodiment; Romania

Introduction

The contemporary world is characterised by rapid travel, and speed has come to be 'coded with particular ideological and moral significance in the cultural imaginary' (Molz 2009, 270). However, mobilities scholars have long recognised that not all movement is rapid. Consequently, there has been growing attention to what are variously termed 'slow mobilities' (Fullager 2012, 1), 'laid-back mobilities' (Bærenholdt et al. 2004, 137) and 'unhurried mobility' (Wilson and Hannam 2017, 26). Slower forms of mobility are not defined by absolute velocities but instead are relational and need to be understood in contrast to their faster equivalents (Cisani and Rabbiosi 2023; Molz 2017; Vannini 2014).

In some circumstances, while there may be a desire to travel quickly, movement can be impeded by factors such as waiting (Bissell 2007), deceleration (Molz 2017; Vannini 2014), stickiness (Cresswell 2014) or friction (Wilson and Hannam 2017). These issues can hinder mobilities

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(but can sometimes also enable them) and force a reduction in pace (Cresswell 2014). In other cases, slow movement is less a passive response to friction and more a deliberate choice (Vannini 2014). Embracing slowness can be a form of opposition to the ‘cult of speed’ (Molz 2009, 271) that characterises everyday life (Clancy 2014; Fullager 2012; Kaaristo 2024; Vannini 2014). In this sense, the choice to move at a slower tempo can represent an intentional search for deceleration (Hu, Xue, and Guo 2025; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Rosa 2013), something that O’Regan (2012, 128) has termed ‘resistant mobilities’. Travelling slowly creates the opportunity for distinctive sensory and affective experiences (Fullager 2012; Vannini 2014) and has the potential to allow a distinctive ‘way of being’ in the world (Molz 2017, 21). However, embracing slowness may not be something that comes naturally to some individuals, so that there are new skills and competencies associated with deceleration that need to be understood and learned (see Mertena, Kaaristo, and Edensor 2022).

One of most significant contemporary examples of the embrace of slowness is slow travel (Conway and Timms 2012; Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010; Klarin et al. 2023; McGrath and Sharpley 2017). This activity is a particular form of demand-led tourism (McGrath and Sharpley 2017) which reflects the desire of tourists for alternative forms of holiday experience that are not underpinned by rapid mobility or frenetic activity. Instead, slowness is valued for offering more meaningful experiences and a deeper encounter with place. One component of slow travel is the embrace of forms of movement, which are physically slow (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010). These include walking, cycling, the use of local trains or buses, and canal boats (Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Indeed, within slow travel, journeys assume particular importance: they are not merely a means to reach a destination, but, instead, can be a valued element of the holiday experience in their own right (Conway and Timms 2012).

In this paper we focus on tourists’ experiences of a slow rail journey which connects the towns of Oravița and Anina in western Romania (Figure 1). This line opened in 1863 for the transport of high-quality coal from the Anina mine to the Danube for onward transport to Vienna and carried passengers from 1869 (Merciu et al. 2022). Building the line was a considerable engineering challenge: the 34 km (21 miles) route rises 339 m in height along a sinuous route which required the construction of 14 tunnels and 10 viaducts (Merciu et al. 2022). The frictions imposed by the terrain meant that trains always had to travel slowly (and indeed,

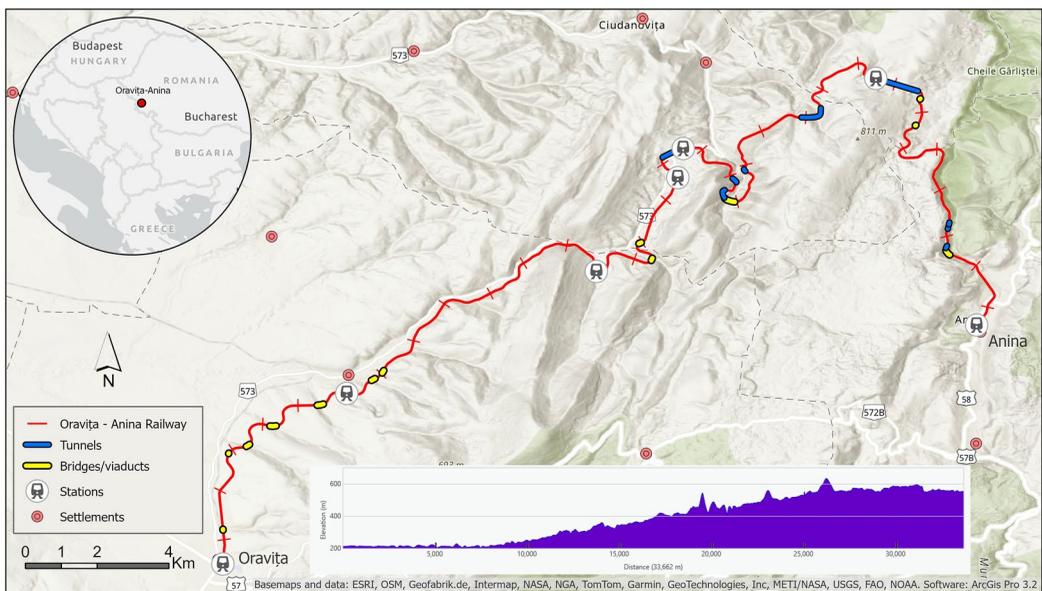


Figure 1. Location map of the Oravița-Anina railway.

specially articulated locomotives, which could cope with the tight curves, were purpose-built for the line). For more than 140 years, the railway transported coal but in 2007, the Anina mine was closed by the Romanian government following an explosion in which 7 miners were killed (Anon 2006). With the loss of freight traffic (and reduced commuting associated with employment in Anina) the closure of the line appeared likely. Certainly CFR (the state-owned railway company) – which was struggling to adapt a socialist-era railway network to the conditions of post-socialist neoliberal restructuring – appeared intent on closing the unprofitable route (Deoancă 2020).

However, closure was delayed by the activism of both the local population and the local county council (Merciu et al. 2022). The potential of the line for tourism had long been recognised (Turnock 2000) and there were growing efforts to repurpose it as a visitor attraction. As the profile of the line increased (partly driven by social media) the number of tourists also grew steadily, attracted by the prospect of a slow journey through spectacular scenery. Consequently, the line has been revived through its transformation into a tourist railway (Halsall 2001; Peira, Lo Giudice, and Miraglia 2022). By 2021, the number of tourist passengers was estimated at 50,000 (Merciu et al. 2022). Today, the train makes one return journey from Oravița to Anina (taking just over 2 hours) on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, travelling at an average speed of 17 km/hour (10.5 miles/hour). Passengers are almost exclusively tourists (mostly from Romania) and, although the line is open to everybody, the single daily journey (along with a short stay in Anina) means that it is rarely used for commuting or shopping. The line has been branded as an industrial heritage railway (Bhati, Pryce, and Chaiechi 2014; Merciu et al. 2022). Passengers travel in recently refurbished miners' coaches dating from 1914 with wooden seating (Merciu et al. 2022). Both the single diesel locomotive which operates the line and the two/three coaches have been repainted in a green and yellow livery (Figure 2).

In this paper, we focus on tourists' experiences of travelling on the Oravița-Anina line. We conceptualise the journey as an 'island of deceleration' (Rosa 2013, 83; see also Husemann and Eckhardt 2019) which affords passengers an experience that is out of the ordinary. The aims of this paper are threefold. First, we examine the role and importance of slowness within a journey undertaken on a tourist railway. In particular, we explore whether passengers were purposefully seeking a slow experience (as part of an ideological rejection of the contemporary cult of speed) or if deceleration was something more incidental to their requirements. Second, we consider passengers' experiences of travelling slowly, focusing on the ways in which they responded to deceleration. This includes consideration of the under-researched sensory and embodied dimensions of slow transit (Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Third, following recent calls to pluralize mobilities research – which has largely focussed on Western/Global North contexts (Sheller 2023) – we contribute to broadening understandings of slower mobilities through a focus on a south-east European, post-socialist context.

Travelling slowly (by train)

Slow travel

Slow travel entails deliberately stepping away from the prevailing emphasis on speed. It is characterised by movement over shorter distances, a desire to minimise carbon consumption, and an emphasis on the quality of the travel experience (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010). Slow travel is a form of tourism demand that is linked to specific needs and expectations of tourists. As such, it is differentiated from slow tourism which has a more supply-side emphasis, focusing on a product that can be offered to tourists (Conway and Timms 2012; McGrath and Sharpley 2017). Slow travel is a distinct way of thinking about travel experiences (McGrath and Sharpley 2017) that has its origins in broader trends of slow consumption and consumer deceleration (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). It can be associated with a



Figure 2. The Oravița-Anina train in August 2024.

particular ethical stance towards travel and holidaying (Molz 2009), particularly a desire for less carbon-intensive forms of transport (Klarin et al. 2023). Consequently, some slow travellers reject air (and sometimes car) travel (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010). However, participants in slow travel vary in the importance they attach to the environmental impacts of their holiday-making: 'hard' slow travellers prioritise low-carbon holiday-making, while 'soft' slow travellers are more focussed on slow experiences with any environmental benefits being an additional bonus (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010, 85; Manthiou, Klaus, and Luong 2022). In whatever way it is practiced, slow travel is a predominantly European phenomenon and is largely undertaken by affluent middle-class tourists (Conway and Timms 2012; Dickenson and Peeters 2014) for whom deceleration has become a new form of status symbol (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019).

By its nature, slow travel is underpinned by a conscious and tactical rejection of speed (Clancy 2014; Molz 2009; Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025; Vannini 2014). As such, it has been identified as a countercultural movement (Cisani and Rabbiosi 2023; McGrath and Sharpley 2017) that seeks 'intentional deceleration' (Rosa 2013, 85; see also Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, Hu, Xue, and Guo 2025). The embrace of slowness involves conceptualising time in different ways (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010), and the opportunity to experience alternative forms of pace and temporality which are differentiated from everyday life (Hamilton and Alexander 2017; Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Vannini 2014). Participants in slow travel have little concern with getting to the destination as quickly as possible and then rushing to take in all the sights

(Dickenson and Peeters 2014; Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Instead, the focus is on a less commodified tourism experience and a more immersive and mindful engagement with people and place in the destination (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010; Fullager 2012). Those who undertake slow travel seek to be a participant in (rather than an observer of) the places they visit (Molz 2009).

The value attached to slowness of pace includes journeys to the holiday destination, but equally important are journeys *within* the destination (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010; Cisani and Rabbiosi 2023). Indeed, in some cases, the journey can be more important to the traveller than the destination (Hamilton and Alexander 2017). Consequently, the mode of travel is central to the slow travel experience (Conway and Timms 2012; Klarin et al. 2023; Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Thus, slow travellers often deliberately walk, cycle or use other forms of slow transport that afford them a sense of ‘embodied deceleration’ (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, 1150). In this context, a range of studies have examined the experiences associated with slow forms of travel such as walking (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019; Rabbiosi 2021), cycling (Fullagar, Wilson, and Markwell 2012), canal holidays (Kaaristo 2024; Kaaristo and Rhoden 2017), backpacking (O’Regan 2012), and campervan travel (Wilson and Hannam 2017). Furthermore, interactions with the infrastructures of transport are also of central importance within slow travel (Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Nevertheless, much slow travel will be multi-modal (Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025) so that tourists will combine different modes (and paces) of transport to reach a destination (Mertena and Kaaristo 2024). As such, not all the journey may be slow, and faster and slower forms of travel may be combined within a holiday. One example is driving to a destination to take part in a hiking holiday (Oh, Assaf, and Baloglu 2016).

The importance attached by slow travellers to the mode of transport means that they may purposefully seek out transport experiences that are explicitly slow. Some destinations offer such experiences in the form of heritage transport (such as old buses, trams, trains or boats). This infrastructure is no longer used for its original purpose but instead has been repurposed to provide distinctive experiences for tourists. Heritage forms of (slow) transport represent ‘islands’ or ‘oases’ of deceleration (Rosa 2013, 83) that stand outside everyday experience. As Rosa argues, in some cases, such islands have somehow survived (or been excluded from) wider processes of social acceleration. In other cases, they have been purposefully recreated as a form of ideological resistance to pace and acceleration. The relative rarity of such heritage transport enhances its appeal to tourists who are seeking slow experiences.

Slow railway mobilities

Mobilities scholars have unpacked the nature of rail travel in some detail. However, the focus has mostly been on regular and everyday rail travel (such as commuting) in which the journey is a means to an end, and speed is usually a priority. Some research has focused on visual experiences of rail travel (Larsen 2001), while others have examined the multisensory and embodied nature of travelling by train (for example, Jensen, Scarles, and Cohen 2015; Johnson 2010; Mertena and Kaaristo 2024). The individual and social practices and performances associated with rail travel have also received attention (Mertena and Kaaristo 2024) along with the related issue of the skills and competencies that need to be acquired to negotiate travelling by train (Löfgren 2008; Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020). There has also been attention to the distinctive socialities associated with rail journeys, given that this is usually an experience characterised by the copresence of other people (Bissell 2010; Hannam, Butler, and Paris 2014; van Melik and van de Schraaf 2020).

However, slower rail mobilities have received less scrutiny. There is an established literature on railway heritage and its relationship with tourism (for example Banerjee 2023; Bhati, Pryce, and Chaiechi 2014; Halsall 2001; Henderson 2011; Peira et al. 2022). This body of work has

tended to focus on resources and infrastructure, particularly the ways in which historic railway resources can be developed and exploited for tourism to support local economic development. While this research implicitly acknowledges the slow pace of much railway tourism, there has rarely been attention to the experiences of passengers travelling on tourist railways.

Dickenson and Lumsdon (2010) argue that the relationship between slow rail travel and tourism takes two broad forms. The first involves regular, scheduled trains that happen to move slowly. Their speed may be a consequence of friction imposed by the age of the track or locomotive so that travelling fast is simply not possible or safe. In other cases, the terrain through which the train passes (particularly in mountainous areas) imposes friction and necessitates slow movement. These are 'ordinary' trains, although when they run through attractive landscapes they may be sought out by tourists seeking a slow experience. The second form are those railways which are purposefully intended to be visitor attractions. For example, in the UK there are over 100 such heritage railways (mostly featuring passenger coaches hauled by steam locomotives). These have mostly been created (or recreated) through the activities of local railway enthusiasts, and their primary source of income is from visitors (Halsall 2001). In this case, their slow speed results from friction imposed by legislation: to permit a less stringent safety regime from that of mainline railways, maximum speeds are often restricted (to 40 km/hour in the case of the UK). In cases like these, the slow journey is usually integral to the traveller's experience (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010).

The limited research into the experiences of slow rail travel suggests that it is qualitatively different from faster forms of rail travel (Dickenson and Lumsdon 2010). First, slow rail travel involves alternative experiences of time and pace (Halsall 2001; Roy and Hannam 2013). Many slow rail journeys literally represent 'heritage on the move' (Hannam, Butler, and Paris 2014, 173) and this affords passengers a sense of travelling back in time and experiencing a slower order of things (Halsall 2001; Hamilton and Alexander 2017; Roy and Hannam 2013). Many tourist railways are deliberately intended to evoke the atmosphere of a past era (Henderson 2011) and consequently slow rail travel can evoke sensations such as nostalgia (Peira, Lo Giudice, and Miraglia 2022).

Second, the slow pace of tourist/heritage railways affords passengers different forms of sensory experience. In particular, passengers have the time to pay greater attention to what they are seeing, both on and off the train. A slow railway journey allows for greater connection with (and immersion in) the landscapes outside the train. As Roy and Hannam (2013, 591) argue, slow railway journeys 'allow a close visual engagement with the landscape but one which is not blurred at all... images are serialised but thick and rich in detail'. Third, as with slow travel more broadly, travelling on a slow tourist railway can privilege the journey over the destination (Hamilton and Alexander 2017). The slow pace of the journey is an experience that is valued of itself. Indeed, the experience of travelling on a slow train can eclipse that of the eventual destination, something that has been described as a 'destination-in-motion' (Hamilton and Alexander 2017, 2101). Finally travelling on a slow train is sometimes characterised by different forms of sociality. This appears to be a less atomized and more sociable form of rail travel. Indeed, sharing the journey with others can be a valued component of the experience. There may be a shared sense of occasion and a buzz associated with the journey (Hamilton and Alexander 2017), representing a form of affective atmosphere that is very different from everyday rail journeys (Bissell 2010).

In summary, recent research has argued that some tourists seek experiences of deceleration and slowness as a tactical choice, underpinned by opposition to the accelerated pace of everyday life. As a distinctive form of slow transport, tourist railways offer such an encounter with deceleration characterised by a different temporality and distinctive forms of embodied experience. This paper explores these issues through focussing on passengers travelling on the Oravița-Anina railway. In particular, we examine the motives of passengers for taking the slow journey with particular attention to the importance of deceleration within these motives. We

also consider the ways in which passengers responded to deceleration with reference to both their cognitive and sensory experiences of slowness, and the practices that they adopted during a slow journey.

Materials and methods

This study uses methods from mobile ethnography (Sheller and Urry 2006). This approach has considerable potential for understanding rail travel (Schweitzer and Povoroznyuk 2020) and has been adopted by other researchers studying rail mobilities (Mertena and Kaaristo 2024; Roy and Hannam 2013; van Melik and van de Schraaf 2020). A form of 'ride-along' (Kusenbach 2003, 464) was employed in which a researcher accompanies people who are participating in a particular form of mobility to understand it from their perspective (Watts and Urry 2008). To understand the experience of travelling on the Oravița-Anina railway, one of the authors stayed for a week in Oravița in August 2024 to allow immersion in the social environment of the railway. During this time, he took the once-daily journey on five occasions. In the evenings he spoke informally with local people about the significance of the railway.

On the journeys themselves a range of different forms of data were collected. The first was observational data in which the researcher adopted the role of observer as participant (Watt and Scott Jones 2010). On the outward journey the author travelled as a passenger and engaged in similar activities to other passengers (including taking photographs and videos). He also made a point of visiting each coach and noting how passengers were responding to the journey. Details of these encounters were recorded briefly on a mobile phone and written up more fully at the end of the day. For the interviewer, these repeated slow journeys proved enjoyable but also frustrating since he was sometimes impatient for the journey's return leg so that he could begin interviewing.

To explore passengers' experiences, 'go-along' interviews were undertaken (Kusenbach 2003, 455). As Alexander et al. (2020) contend, this approach is particularly suited to understanding leisure activities, allowing researchers access to settings that might otherwise be overlooked. They argue (56): 'the more proximal a researcher can become to the leisure setting or activity, the greater potential there is to glean rich and deep data on participants' subjective experiences that happen in real time'. On the return journey, the researcher introduced himself to passengers and invited them to take part in an interview. This proved an ideal time for interviewing, since the passengers had already seen the scenery and taken their photographs. With the sense of anticipation behind them, many passengers were open to participating in an interview. Participants were sampled on a convenience basis, based on their willingness to participate. Convenience sampling is appropriate when it is necessary for the target population to be gathered at the same time and in the same place (Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim 2016). Care was taken by the interviewer to include passengers from a range of age groups. Most people approached were happy to participate in an interview (although around one in four declined, usually because of family commitments such as attending to children). There was enough space on the train for both the interviewer and participant to sit during the interview, making the experience more comfortable for both. The slow speed was an advantage because participants could concentrate on the interview but also look out of the window to ensure that they were not missing anything. Although the journey was slow, there was a limit to the number of interviews that could be undertaken so that the interviewer sometimes wished for the pace to be slower still. In total, 17 ride-along interviews were undertaken. Two additional interviews were obtained the following day with people staying at the same accommodation as the researcher and who he recognised from the previous day's journey. The characteristics of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. Since all interviews were undertaken in the summer, the resulting sample is likely to be broadly indicative of the railway's passengers, although the findings may not be generalisable to other slow railway journeys.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees.

Participant (pseudonym)	Sex	Age	Nationality
Ion	Male	41–50	Romanian
Ana	Female	41–50	Romanian
Maria	Female	18–25	Romanian
Bogdan	Male	41–50	Romanian
Daniela	Female	31–40	Romanian
Radu	Male	41–50	Romanian
Alina	Female	18–25	Romanian
Sorina	Female	18–25	Romanian
Camelia	Female	31–40	Romanian
Mihaela	Female	41–50	Romanian
Adriana	Female	41–50	Romanian
George	Male	>70	Romanian
Cristian	Male	41–50	Romanian
Lavinia	Female	41–50	Romanian
Sebastian	Male	18–25	Romanian
Andrei	Male	41–50	Romanian
Cătălina	Female	>70	Romanian
Karl	Male	41–50	German
Florin	Male	>70	Romanian

Interviews were semi-structured in nature, with a set of starting questions about demographic/group characteristics; place of residence; reasons for riding the railway; views on the speed of the journey; activities undertaken; and the experiences of the journey. Follow-up questions explored initial responses in more detail, and the context of sharing the journey with participants allowed for relevant and probing questions to be asked (Alexander et al. 2020). Interviews were undertaken in Romanian except for one German tourist who was interviewed in English (which the interviewer speaks fluently). Before each interview, the researcher explained who he was, and the university he represented. He also explained the sort of questions that would be asked, gave assurances about anonymity, and asked for permission to make an audio recording of the interview. All participants were willing to be recorded. The process of data collection was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of West University of Timișoara.

The interviews were transcribed in Romanian (which all authors understand). The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-stage process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the transcripts were read repeatedly to allow familiarity with the data. Second a process of (open) coding was undertaken in which the analysts identified the items of interest in the transcripts. Third, the codes were grouped to form overarching themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure that they were an accurate reflection of the data. Fifth, each theme was given a name. Finally, the themes were reported. To enhance the credibility of the analysis, the data was analysed independently by all authors (Nowell et al. 2017) which was followed by discussion and negotiation of a final set of themes. Seven themes were identified. For reasons of space the following discussion focuses on the first five of these themes: motives for travelling on the railway; the experiences of slow travel; practices undertaken during the journey; sensory experiences; and remembrance and nostalgia.

Travelling slowly on the Oravița-Anina railway

The context of the journey

All of the interviewees were travelling on the railway in their leisure time, and all were travelling with friends or family. Most (17 people) were on a holiday in western Romania, while two people were on a day visit from their home in the local area. This meant that a journey on the Oravița-Anina railway was just one of various forms of mobility that they experienced during their visit to the region. Public transport connections to Oravița are poor,

and consequently all the participants had arrived in the town by car or motorbike. Consequently, their travel was both multi-modal and inter-modal, involving shifts between two or more modes of transport (Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025). Furthermore, on arriving at Anina, many passengers transferred from the train to a minibus, which took them to a local pizzeria. Consequently, within the same activity they experienced different paces of movement, including periods of both acceleration and deceleration. The pace of the train journey was relative to these other forms of mobility. For those who had driven to Oravița, the slow railway journey was 'sandwiched' between motor journeys, meaning that the train component was slower. Conversely, those who had walked to the railway station in Oravița from their accommodation were also undertaking a multi-modal journey but now the train trip was the fastest component. Therefore, a trip on the Oravița-Anina railway does not exist in isolation but instead is bundled with other forms of transport, resulting in different experiences (and paces) of mobility within the same journey (Mertena and Kaaristo 2024; Rabbiosi and Rizzoli 2025).

Motives of the interviewees for travelling on the railway were varied. All were aware before their visit that the journey would be slow and, in this sense, they were taking part in intentional deceleration (Rosa 2013) during their leisure time. However, while they were participating in a slow journey, none of the passengers appeared to be purposefully engaging in slow travel. For example, the interviews revealed no evidence that travelling on the railway was motivated by a countercultural lifestyle choice involving a deliberate rejection of speed. Neither did the interviews indicate that passengers were motivated by concerns for sustainability or a desire for a low-carbon holiday (indeed, the 1980s diesel locomotive is not environmentally friendly). As noted earlier, slow travel and tourism are predominantly undertaken by middle-class consumers in advanced capitalist economies. Conversely, in less affluent parts of Europe such as post-socialist Romania the concepts of slow travel and tourism are virtually unknown. While domestic holiday-making in rural areas is well-developed in Romania, such holidays are predominantly car-based and, while participants may enjoy the slower pace of rural life, they are rarely adopting the ideological mindset of slow travel.

Instead, the most common reasons for travelling on the railway appeared to be a combination of curiosity and a desire to experience something new or unusual - motives which are both commonplace within tourism. Most participants had heard about the slow railway journey and were curious to experience it for themselves. For example, Alina stated: 'I saw short parts of the route on stories, on Instagram, on social media and it seemed fascinating to me, and I decided to bring my friends here'. This reflects the impact of the online publicity that the railway has received in recent years. For many participants, the Oravița-Anina railway was just one among various sites and attractions that they were visiting in the area. As George stated: 'we're happy to have ticked off another tourist sight in our lives'. Many participants related to the interviewer the other attractions that they had visited during their visit to western Romania.

Others were more interested in the scenery of this remote area: 'it's precisely for the wildness and the novelty of this trip that we chose to do this experience... I wasn't looking for comfort, I was looking for wilderness' (Ion). Some passengers were interested in the heritage significance of the railway. For example, Radu stated: 'since it is the oldest railway in south-east Europe, I was delighted to see how exactly this railway was built with the techniques of 1863'. Others had been brought to the railway by friends or family. Cătălina remarked: '[we came] at my husband's insistence; he saw the area last year'. None of the participants described themselves as railway enthusiasts although some had visited other historic railways in Romania and were adding Oravița-Anina to their list. For example: 'we thought we'd do a tour of Romania's *mocanițe* [heritage railways] ... I got them from the internet, there are 12 of them. We take them one by one, wherever we go by train' (Cristian). In summary, these visitors were broadly interested in landscape and heritage and, during their visit to western Romania, they were open to an unusual experience in the form of a journey on a slow railway. However, the slow pace of the

journey was not central to their motivations. As Vannini (2014) argues, deceleration may not always be a deliberate tactic.

The experience of travelling slowly

The journey on the Oravița-Anina railway was predominantly characterised by its slow pace, but the experiences of passengers were about more than just slow physical movement. In a range of ways, this was a multisensory experience and a form of what Husemann and Eckhardt (2019, 1150) term 'embodied deceleration'. For a start, travelling on the railway is a distinctive bodily experience. The condition of the aging track, the gradients, and the tight bends meant that passengers found themselves in a constant (but gentle) swaying motion. They quickly adapted to these rhythms of micro-motion but occasionally there were bigger jolts caused by the condition of the track which could throw passengers around. Furthermore, the distinctive materiality of the heritage carriages had a particular impact on the journey experience (which many visitors admitted was not very comfortable). As Bogdan remarked: 'the wooden benches...they're wooden and your bum hurts, but that's the charm'. Furthermore, the height of the benches required some passengers to change their bodily comportment: 'really, these high benches, I can't even reach the floor with my little legs so you have to sit a little lower' (Ana). The sense of an uncomfortable journey was reinforced by the high temperatures in the summer (Jensen et al. 2015) since not all of the train's windows could be opened. As Maria remarked: 'it's very hot in this train. There's no air conditioning'. Yet, unusually for a tourist experience, bodily discomfort was accepted as an integral component of a slow journey (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). As Sebastian stated: 'It's not very comfortable, but I didn't expect it to be otherwise'.

Other sensory experiences contributed to the experience of deceleration. In particular, the sonic environment of the journey reinforced the sense of slowness. Indeed, a journey on the railway is distinctly noisy. Passengers could not miss the throbbing of the aging diesel locomotive as it travelled uphill. Another pervasive sound was the noise from the train's wheels as they negotiated tight curves. Camelia remarked: 'When we left Oravița...I explained to the little girl [her daughter] that this is what an old train sounds like...the screeching between the iron wheels and the iron rails which, when they rub together, make the sounds they make'. Other sounds were generated inside the carriages themselves. Ion spoke of the continuous 'creaking' noise, which arose from 'the fact that the carriages are old and the railway is old – and the slow speed means that you can't escape it. The fact that we're going slowly and the infrastructure is old, that the carriages are old, makes a specific noise'. On the return (downhill) journey the noise (and smell) of the train's brakes added a new dimension to the journey experience.

Despite the noise and discomfort, most of the participants reported that the slow pace of the journey had been enjoyable and rewarding. A journey on the railway marked a clear (if temporary) break from their everyday lives and reinforced their experience of being on holiday. For example, Radu stated: 'When you want to relax, these trips are ideal. For relaxation. When you have to commute to work every day, then you use faster methods of transport. But for relaxation, it's ideal. You're not rushing anywhere'. Sorina made a similar point: 'I've had a very stressful period with university and I actually felt relaxed. I've taken a break from everything... it's something you don't do every day and it's really been worth it'. These responses suggest how a slow railway journey, undertaken in the context of a holiday, affords an experience which is clearly differentiated from quotidian pace and rhythms. Rather than being wasted time, the slow journey was frequently viewed as a positive and pleasurable experience in itself. For example, Bogdan described himself as 'relaxed. A pleasant fatigue...a pleasant tiredness', while Daniela stated that the journey made her feel 'very good. A state of well-being...including mentally'.

The sense of a break from everyday rhythms and practices was also apparent in other ways. In particular, the mountainous terrain of the Oravița-Anina railway meant that passengers had

no mobile phone signal for most of their journey. Some of the participants found the detachment from the online world disconcerting and had clearly not anticipated the enforced 'technological deceleration' (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019, 1153) that the journey involved. However, many participants welcomed the opportunity to disconnect from their phones. For example, one younger passenger remarked: 'on this train I didn't even feel the need to use my mobile phone. I just took it out to take pictures, but not to sit and look at my phone or play games' (Alina). The absence of a phone signal again reinforced the journey experience as something out of the ordinary, and passengers were compelled to temporarily adopt a form of digital-free tourism (Hu, Xue, and Guo 2025).

The lack of access to a mobile signal also constrained what passengers could do during their journey. Passengers found themselves in a situation which Husemann and Eckhardt (2019, 1155) term 'episodic deceleration', that is, a simplification of experiences and reduction of choices. Consequently, participants had to find other things to do on the journey. Some chatted to their travelling companions (or listened to the conversations of others), while others played cards, or entertained their children. Many also spoke of gazing out of the windows and enjoying the surrounding landscapes. Such a practice is, of course, commonplace in mainline rail travel (Löfgren 2008) but it takes a different form on a tourist railway since the leisurely pace allows passengers to notice things that they might otherwise have missed. For example, Adriana remarked: 'I think it's ok to go slower. You still have time to admire your surroundings, to see things that maybe I wouldn't have seen at speed'. Ion gave a specific example:

I think the reduced speed of 20km per hour is one of the charms of this route...that we can see everything around us. And the fact that we go through many tunnels – there are tunnels that, as we can see, they were made with a pickaxe, they were made by hand.

Conversely, on a faster train the traveller is effectively positioned in a sealed unit which separates them from the world outside. The experience of the 'external' landscape is cinematic in nature, characterised by fast moving images on which the traveller is unable to fix their gaze for any length of time (Larsen 2001). George pinpointed this characteristic of fast train travel:

Here is the point, that because of the speed you forget what you've passed by or you don't notice it; because of the speed you don't have time. So that's literally it. And you don't have time to cast your eyes left and right because the speed is too high.

Therefore, a slow tourist railway allows a 'sensuous immediacy' with the surrounding landscape (Roy and Hannam 2013, 586). On the Oravița-Anina train, the 'closeness' to the surrounding landscape was reinforced by the open doors and windows, the numerous trees which brushed against the train during its journey, and the extremely constricted tunnels whose walls appeared disarmingly close to the windows.

Nevertheless, not every passenger enjoyed the experience of deceleration. Some participants found the journey frustrating. For example, Daniela stated: 'I wish it would go faster, but I don't think it's possible because of the conditions'. Maria gave a similar example:

there were some times when it stopped and there was nothing, only a station, but nobody gets off, nobody gets on.

Interviewer: So did you sometimes feel you were wasting time?

Maria: Yes, a little...when it stops and time is lost.

In some cases, when slowness was considered excessive or unnecessary, it generated impatience and a sense of time being wasted, indicating that such passengers brought attitudes towards pace from their everyday lives to their journey on the railway. Other passengers had become restless, particularly when the train was passing through woodland and there was little to see. For Andrei the journey was 'a little tiring, it's a little bit long if there's nothing on the

left or the right to attract your attention'. For such visitors, the slow pace of the journey was tolerable if there was something to hold their attention but quickly became wearisome in the absence of visual distractions. Cătălina had found the journey so exasperating that she had abandoned it halfway through: 'Tired...I wouldn't repeat the journey. That's why I decided to come back from Anina another way. I'd rather walk back...I took the opportunity to go back by coach with a group that had been organized in advance'. A taxi driver in Oravița told the interviewer that such practices were common and some drivers offer to collect their passengers from Anina after the first leg of the journey. The interviewer estimated that 20% of passengers left the train at Anina and did not participate in the return journey. Clearly, for some passengers the experience of deceleration proved to be too challenging.

Introspection and reflection

Another common response to deceleration (both physical and technological) was introspection and daydreaming. Many passengers reported being lost in their own thoughts, particularly on the return journey. Such experiences are not unique to a slow tourist railway and are also commonplace on faster trains (Löfgren 2008). However, the nature of such introspection appeared to take a particular form on a slow heritage railway. A key to understanding such practices is again the sonic environment of the railway. The journey was characterised by the distinctive 'clackety clack' sound produced by the train as it passed over aging, jointed track which Ana interpreted onomatopoeically as 'I take you. I bring you'. This sound is not exclusive to tourist railways and can also be encountered on mainline railways, although it is becoming less common as jointed track is increasingly replaced by continuous rail. On the other hand, tourist railways almost invariably make use of jointed track and this property underlines the heritage nature of the journey experience. The repetitive rhythmscape (Jensen, Scarles, and Cohen 2015) of the train passing over track joints, combined with the slow speed generates a distinct atmosphere within the carriages to which passengers responded in different ways. For example, Radu stated: 'there's that monotonous noise, the noise of traveling on the track, but at a certain point it induces a state of numbness and drowsiness. It basically relaxes you with that monotonous noise'. Similarly, Bogdan spoke of the journey as being 'soothing... something different from the city or other places'. Other passengers also spoke of the journey making them feel drowsy. While an everyday rail journey can be a stressful experience (Bissell 2010; Löfgren 2008) the rhythms and sounds of travel on a heritage railway can have the opposite effect.

Indeed, Roy and Hannam (2013, 590) argue that a slow train journey 'nourishes the traveller's imagination in a different manner'. The slow pace enabled some passengers to reflect upon the accelerated pace of their everyday lives. One example was Lavinia who stated:

during the journey you can enter into a kind of meditative state... to internalize yourself, to analyse yourself, to figure out what's happening with you, where we are rushing with the time of day, and to step away for a time from monotony of the office, where the whole city is pounding all the time...This is something else!

As Vannini (2014, 117) argues, to slow down affects 'the way that we dwell in the world, and in turn... [are] affected by it'. The combination of being on holiday and travelling on a slow train can create time and space for existential reflection (even if this was not intended before the visit). Indeed, being on holiday has long been associated with a search for existential authenticity. For example, Brown (2013, 183) draws on Heidegger's concept of the *Spielraum* as 'a place in time and space where a hiatus in the quotidian can be made...a reprieve from everydayness, which allows an individual to be thoughtful'. She argues that tourism – in the sense of stepping outside the everyday – can be a catalyst for temporarily achieving a form of existential authenticity. This effect can be reinforced by deceleration. For those facing anxiety or uncertainty in a fast-paced

world, experiencing a slow journey may be one way of achieving a more authentic form of existence (even if such experiences were not deliberately sought before the visit).

In other cases, introspection took the form of nostalgic reflection, particularly (but not exclusively) among older visitors. This is a particular form of imaginative mobility (Sheller and Urry 2006). Imaginative travel is usually considered as a practice of imagining other places (often in an anticipatory context), but it can also involve movement back in time (Hamilton and Alexander 2017). Indeed, the nature of travel on a slow heritage train may be particularly likely to stimulate such imaginative travel. None of the participants mentioned nostalgia as a reason for visiting the railway and they were probably not anticipating a nostalgic experience. Nevertheless, it was clear from the interviews that their journey had stimulated nostalgic and imaginative reflection.

This nostalgia took three forms. The first involved reflecting on the collective past, something which Marchegiani and Phau (2010, 82) term 'historical nostalgia'. This was stimulated by the slow pace and the heritage environment of the railway, which together evoked a different era of rail travel. For example, Daniela stated: 'it's like a journey back in time, you see how it used to be – simpler, not so much technology and they [trains like this] are so slower and more relaxing'. Furthermore, the materiality of the old coaches produced a distinctive 'smellscape' which Bogdan described as 'Wood. Wood in general'. For some, this smell reinforced the sense of the past, such as Lavinia who described the smell of the coaches as 'old – but on the other hand it takes you to another era'. Others reflected on the historical context in which the line (one of the earliest in what is now Romania) was constructed. This part of western Romania was, until 1920, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and many Romanians (particularly those from the former Austro-Hungarian regions) view the empire and its achievements in positive terms. One example was Ion who stated: 'we are impressed that the Austro-Hungarians were able to do something like that 200 years ago... it's a great achievement'. For some, the Oravița-Anina line was a source of national pride.

A second form of nostalgia was more personal in nature and involved passengers reflecting on their own past experiences (Marchegiani and Phau 2010). In particular, the Oravița-Anina railway reminded them of slow railway journeys taken during childhood on similar trains. Mihaela stated: 'I had the opportunity to go with a train that really looked like this one...It was a train very much like this one. That was when I was a child, 30 years ago'. Similarly, Adriana compared train travel as a child and adult: 'In a way it reminded me of my childhood. Nostalgic like that... and a lot of questions'. For others, the journey evoked memories of former employment with CFR (the state railway company). For example, Ana wistfully remarked: 'I worked at CFR...such a camaraderie, I don't know, a team spirit, a spirit of support, of understanding, of collaboration... CFR pensioners are different. They identify themselves. That's part of them'. Here, the slow journey stimulated connections with important moments in personal biographies. While nostalgia is often conceptualised as a reactionary notion, underpinned by a belief that things were better in the past, it can, instead, be an active and imaginative strategy of remembering in a way that grounds personal identities and values (Smith and Campbell 2017). It was this type of nostalgia that appeared to be stimulated by the Oravița-Anina railway. Furthermore, these findings suggest that steam traction (which typically characterises heritage railways) is not required to activate nostalgic experiences: a slow diesel locomotive can have the same effect. On heritage railways, pace and deceleration may be as important for creating introspective experiences as the form of traction.

A third form of nostalgia was focused on the more recent past, and particularly the post-socialist decline of Romania's railway network. Romania's socialist regime constructed a comprehensive railway network, which reached all parts of the country and employed thousands of people. There was extensive movement of both passengers and freight by rail. Since the end of the socialist regime, CFR has struggled with competition from road transport and a decline in the funding for public services (Deoancă 2020). In a bid to reduce losses, many lines have closed, services have reduced in frequency, and many employees made redundant. Some

interviewees reflected on the current state of Romania's railway system such as Cristian who described himself as 'Nostalgic. Compared to what the Romanian railways once were, a second army of Romania once'. Such a way of thinking was not confined to older visitors. One younger passenger made a similar point: 'I thought about how the CFR has fallen. And it's like these are the remnants of something that was... like you look at the ruins of the Romans. The ruins of an empire. And this was at one time the second army, and now everybody's mocking it' (Sebastian). These sorts of response to travelling on the Oravița-Anina railway are grounded in the specific historical and economic circumstances of post-socialist Romania.

Conclusions

In the context of growing academic interest in slow travel, this paper has contributed to understanding slow experiences of travel undertaken within holiday time. Passengers on the Oravița-Anina railway were taking part in intentional deceleration (Rosa 2013) having purposefully undertaken a journey that they knew would be slow. Furthermore, while their slow experience was of relatively short duration, it aligned with the attributes of consumer deceleration identified by Husemann and Eckhardt (2019). First, passengers experienced embodied deceleration. Not only did they were they moving slowly, but their embodied experiences of slowness were reinforced by the distinctive sensory environment and materiality of the train itself. Second, they experienced technological deceleration, through travelling in heritage coaches hauled by an 1980s locomotive but also through enforced separation from their mobile phones. Third, they also had an experience of episodic deceleration; that is, a simplification of options and limitation of choices which compelled them adopt different practices during the journey (such as paying attention to the landscape outside the train). As such, a slow train journey creates an immersive experience with an alternative temporal logic which, in turn, marks a clear sense of stepping away from the accelerated pace of everyday life. In this sense, a journey on the Oravița-Anina railway might, at first sight, appear to be a particular form of consumer deceleration and slow travel.

However, while recent research has argued that a quest for slow experiences in holiday time is a deliberate strategy to counteract the accelerated pace of everyday life, there was little evidence in this study that passengers were motivated by such concerns. These passengers were not purposefully engaging in slow travel (which in any case is little known in Romania) of even the softest kind. For example, they were not motivated by an ideological resistance to the prevailing cult of speed. Neither were they purposefully seeking out a low-carbon form of travel. Furthermore, their encounters with Oravița and Anina were brief and relatively superficial, and did not align with the deeper and more immersive experiences of place which are usually associated with slow travel. Instead, their decisions to travel on the railway were underpinned by curiosity and the pursuit of an unusual holiday experience. In contrast to recent research which suggests that seeking slowness during leisure time is a deliberate choice, these findings indicate that such experiences of deceleration can sometimes be incidental, or even accidental. Indeed, for most passengers a journey on the railway was an interlude, which unfolded in the context of a conventionally paced holiday which was about seeing the sights of the local area. Furthermore, the slow train journey was itself one component of a bundle of faster multimodal mobilities (involving cars, motorbikes, and minibuses) both on the day of the journey and during the wider visit to the region (Mertena and Kaaristo 2024).

Irrespective of the motivations of passengers, these findings have extended previous research which has identified the distinctive forms of experience that are associated with a slow railway journey. Most passengers found the experience of deceleration to be welcome, rewarding and even enriching, although some passengers discovered the benefits of slowness only after the journey had started (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019). In this sense, the Oravița-Anina railway represents an island (or oasis) of deceleration (Rosa 2013) even if it was not deliberately sought

out for this purpose. For many passengers, the journey had a restorative function, marking a temporary detachment from, but also preparing them for a return to, the accelerated pace of their everyday lives (Hu, Xue, and Guo 2025; Rosa 2013). In the context of tourism, such restorative practices are usually associated with full-length holidays, underpinned by the tenets of slow travel. However, a short duration decelerated experience within a conventionally paced holiday can also have the same effect. However, not every passenger was comfortable with a slow experience. Some found the journey challenging, frustrating and even overwhelming. There are individuals who participate in slow journeys but who are apparently unable or unwilling to detach from the pace of their everyday lives. While previous research has often assumed that decelerated experiences are inherently restorative or rewarding, this is clearly not always the case.

A further contribution of this paper is the focus on slow mobilities in a context outside the West/Global North. Some of the experiences of passengers are grounded in the historical and economic circumstances of contemporary Romania, including recent experiences of post-socialism. The Oravița-Anina railway has itself become the focus of tourist interest because it has 'survived' the post-socialist market-driven restructuring of the Romanian rail network. A journey on the railway caused some passengers to reflect on the changing nature of railway travel in Romania in recent decades. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that Romanian tourists can enjoy participating in slow journeys without adopting the underlying motivations and attitudes towards pace that characterise slow travel. It is possible that this finding will be replicated outside the affluent, Western European contexts where slow travel is most often practiced.

While this study has thrown light on the nature of slow experiences undertaken in leisure time, the findings are not necessarily generalisable to other contexts. Therefore, future research could continue to examine decelerated leisure experiences to develop a fuller understanding of the significance of, and meanings attached to, slowness. There is considerable scope to unpick the ways in which slow experiences act as a way of negotiating and temporarily escaping from the broader condition of acceleration within everyday life. The issue of how some individuals struggle with experiences of slowness (an issue which has received limited attention to date) also merits fuller investigation. There is also scope for further research into experiences of slow rail mobilities in a broader range of situations and contexts. This would develop a fuller understanding of slow (rail) travel but also allow identification of which experiences are grounded in specific national or social contexts. The relationship between decelerated leisure experiences and nostalgia is also a promising area for deeper scrutiny to ascertain the ways in which slow experiences may ground identities that are challenged by social acceleration. Finally, there is scope to explore in more detail what happens after an experience of deceleration. This includes both the transition out of a slow experience (Husemann and Eckhardt 2019), but also the longer-term impacts of such an experience. Follow-up interviews with passengers after a slow (rail) journey would elucidate whether a slow journey is a one-off curiosity, or whether it provokes more enduring reflection on the nature of pace and velocity in contemporary societies.

Research ethics and consent

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative social research. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Prior to each interview, the researcher explained his identity, the university he represented and the academic purpose of the study. Participants were informed about the nature of the research, the topics to be discussed, and the voluntary character of their participation. Assurances were given regarding anonymity and confidentiality, and participants were informed that no personally identifiable information would be requested or recorded. All participants provided full oral informed consent to participate in the study and agreed to the audio recording of the interviews. All data were anonymised, and no participant can be identified in any form from the material presented in this article. The process of data collection was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of West University of Timișoara.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our thanks to the 19 people who took part in our interviews. We also thank 3 anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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