

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL nr 25

Welcome to the summer 2023 edition of the bulletin compiled by Trevor Garrod to support campaigners for better rail services throughout Europe.

CONTENTS

1. The European Sleeper is now running
2. Mixed fortunes of Eurostar
3. New stations at Hoek van Holland – at last!
4. Deutschlandticket – and other bargain tickets
5. Action by Back-on-Track – and others.
6. Travel Tips and Travellers' Tales
7. Belgian encouragement for night trains
8. EPF and multimodal travel
9. Experiences with Irish Ferries
10. Other information

THE EUROPEAN SLEEPER IS NOW RUNNING

This new service left Berlin on the evening of May 25th and returned from Brussels the following evening. Back-on-Track members and other supporters were there to see it leave (or ride on it) and to welcome it at its destination. Media interest was widespread for this, the first overnight service between Berlin and Brussels for 14 years.

The train runs westwards on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and eastwards on Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings. You can book it via the website <https://www.europeansleeper.eu/en> .

By June 8th, over 10,000 tickets had been sold and a third bid for crowdfunding in this co-operative announced

News media in Great Britain also took note of the new service, with covering in *The Guardian* and elsewhere; while the prestigious *Financial Times* contained an article on the renaissance of night trains in its weekend travel supplement on April 14th. European Rail Campaign (UK) members Nigel Perkins and Trevor Garrod were among those providing information for the journalist James Martin.

MIXED FORTUNES OF EUROSTAR

Eurostar is carrying large numbers of passengers again between London, Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam and anecdotal evidence suggests that controls at London St Pancras

International are no longer taking as long as they did last autumn. Nevertheless, there were reports of underselling of seats to ensure that the trains left on time.

The Association of European Rail Agents (whose members sell Eurostar and other international tickets) has written to the operator, urging that its medium term planning should involve timetable co-ordination with companies such as SNCF and DB, as well as with night train operators. AERA representatives have also had a useful meeting with the head of the International Rail Team at the Department for Transport in London on this and related issues. They were assured that measures to modernise border controls can be expected after the 2024 Olympics.

Meanwhile, as part of Eurostar's temporary focussing on capital-to-capital journeys, the company has ceased to run through trains between London and Marne-la-Vallee (for Eurodisney). There are also worrying reports that its Amsterdam service will be temporarily suspended during 2024 because of building work at Amsterdam Centraal station. Surely a temporary alternative (such as using Amsterdam Zuid?) can be considered?

On a more positive note, Eurostar has extended its carriage of bicycles to the London – Brussels services, where the machines are fully assembled, boxed or bagged, following a prior revival of this facility to Paris earlier in the year. It is necessary to book a train ticket first and then call or e-mail travelservices@eurostar.com

Of course, if you are cycling in Kent or Hauts de France, taking your bicycle on the Eurostar shuttle is a viable alternative.

NEW STATIONS AT HOEK VAN HOLLAND – AT LAST!

We have followed the developments at this important port in successive issues of this bulletin. The work is now complete, with the RET light rail trains serving a brand new through station at Hoek van Holland Haven (where the through NS platforms towards Strand station used to be) and the extension of the line to a new Strand station that is practically on the beach.

Therefore ferry passengers no longer have to board a crowded replacement bus or make a 500-meter walk to a temporary wooden platform.

There is even now a small tourist information office by the new Haven station. We are told that it sells RET tickets but it is not open at the times when the ferries arrive – so passengers from Harwich still have to use a ticket machine or book their light rail ticket on line.

Incidentally, for passengers arriving at Harwich International Port from Hoek van Holland, although there is no longer a ticket office, there are ticket vending machines

with tickets for all the British network and usually a member of Greater Anglia staff on hand with access to real time information, to give advice and help.

DEUTSCHLANDTICKET – AND OTHER BARGAIN TICKETS

In our last issue we reported on this monthly public transport card which, for 49 euro, enables the user to travel on all regional trains and other modes, and which was due to go on sale from April 3rd. It was indeed launched and within two months 7 million were sold. In fact, 5 million of these were transfers from existing season tickets. Some groups of customers are currently excluded, such as those without smartphones or bank accounts.

For visitors to Germany the Deutschlandticket is not appropriate, but there is still a wide range of local and regional passes, including the LaenderTickets. Page 671 of the summer European Rail Timetable lists these.

A party of British visitors spending a week in Luebeck during May found that the Schleswig-Holstein Ticket suited them very well, especially as it could be used for a group of up to five adults and was valid not only in Schleswig – Holstein, but also for public transport in Hamburg and for trips into neighbouring Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

Meanwhile, Spain has also introduced discounted fares to attract people back on to public transport post-pandemic. For example, the price of the national Interrail pass has been reduced by 90% up to September 18th and there are also special offers for young people.

International rail travel from Germany has also been on the increase according to a report on May 9th. 2019 had been a record year and in 2022 the passenger flows, especially to neighbouring countries, had not just recovered but grown by 30%, especially to France and Austria. Indeed, rail's share of all long-distance travel was up by 3% to 16%

ACTION BY BACK-ON-TRACK – AND OTHERS

In our last issue we mentioned co-operation between Back-on-Track and BEUC (the European union of consumer bodies). It is planned to hold a webinar in early July on night trains and fares. Invitations to take part will be sent to all on the Back-on-Track mailing list when arrangements are finalised.

On June 14th an interim report by Back-on-Track and Transport & Environment called “All aboard – Travelling Europe by Night” is due to be issued, with the full version due to be launched in October.

Bahn fuer alle – one of the bodies associated with Back-on-Track – held a workshop in Berlin on June 1st to consider its draft report on a Europe-wide night train network.

Back-on-Track also monitors closely what others are doing, and has kept its supporters informed about, for example, the return of the Berlin – Stockholm night train on May 30th and a celebratory event organised by the Swedish Embassy at Berlin-Gesundbrunnen station. Members have also been informed about the April meeting of the UIC working group on night trains in Paris (bringing together mainly national operators) and its plan to meet again in Vienna on October 3rd.

Meanwhile, Back-on-Track is also now working with a sustainable development organisation, Focus, in Slovenia and meeting (by zoom) with bodies and individuals in Switzerland and Spain/Portugal to strengthen campaigns there.

TRAVEL TIPS AND TRAVELLERS' TALES

The website of the Association of European Rail Agents (www.aera.co.uk) contains monthly tips to help you on an international journey. Recent tips have included taking a bicycle by Eurostar, buying a rail ticket after landing at London Heathrow Airport, booking RET tickets from Hoek van Holland Haven and using the Schleswig-Holstein Ticket.

On the website of the European Rail Campaign (UK) (www.eurorailcampaignuk.org) are accounts written by members who have made interesting journeys in the past few years. They may give you ideas for trips or tours of your own. Recent postings include “Circuit in Poland” (taking in Krakow, Szczecin and Gdansk); “Corner of Holland”, “Genoa to Nice” over the past decade, the Albula Line in Switzerland and Flanders by train and tram.

BELGIAN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR NIGHT TRAINS

The Belgian Mobility Minister, Georges Gilkinet (who spoke at Back-on-Track’s Brussels Conference last year) gave an interview on June 7th on the theme “Brussels as a hub”, stating “every euro invested in trains brings 3 euros into the economy.”

M.Gilkinet stressed the need for more early morning and late evening trains “so that you can be as free when you take the train as when you have a car.”

He said that he was “very proud” of the recent Belgian Government announcement that night train operators do not have to pay access charges or energy costs for the next 2 years; adding “we want to create a level playing field for night trains against unfair competition of planes and other more polluting means of transport.”

It is like experiencing a breath of fresh air to hear a senior politician saying such things!

EPF AND MULTIMODAL TRAVEL

The European Passengers' Federation has sent an open letter to EU Vice-President Frans Timmermans, jointly with BEUC and other bodies on Multimodal Digital Mobility Services, about which the European Commission is introducing legislation.

The letter emphasises the need to “enable convenient combination and booking of transport options.” Yet it is understood that the EC is considering downgrading this ambition by discarding the central aim of the initiative.

The letter therefore urges the Commission to “keep a high level of ambition”. Solely directing the passenger to different portals of different operators is not enough. Nor does it address the anti-competitive practices of dominant operators.

EU business and leisure passengers and citizens in general want the ability to combine and book all types of offers (including train, plane and coach) in a hassle-free manner, with the aim of attracting more passengers to sustainable transport”

EXPERIENCES WITH IRISH FERRIES

Here is an example of a disjointed multimodal journey which needs to be addressed.

European Rail Campaign (UK) secretary Ian McDonald needed to travel from his home near London to a conference in Cork, in south west Ireland.

He reports that there were no problems with the train journey to the port of Holyhead, but his onward journey by “Irish Ferries” meant boarding a bus to go over a kilometre to a terminal on the edge of the port area, enter the hold of the vessel (which had no separate ramp for foot passengers) and go up three decks to the passenger area.

At Dublin Port, at the mouth of the Liffey estuary, it is necessary to pay for a taxi or a bus for the drive into the city centre. The bus does not serve either of the two main railway stations. If, as in Ian's case, your destination is in the west of Ireland, you then search for a tram stop to Heuston, the terminus for Cork.

The return journey involved a wait for luggage to be unloaded, a lengthy ride through the post to Holyhead station and a dash for the train which Ian caught with just 30 seconds to spare.

The experiences – good or bad - of other readers using this crossing will be welcome and should be e-mailed to Ian at ianfsmcdonald@blueyonder.co.uk .

Of course, 15 years ago there was still a classic rail/sea/rail crossing via Holyhead and Dun Laoghaire for travellers between London and Dublin.

OTHER INFORMATION

The summer edition of the European Rail Timetable has just appeared. Its 674 pages and packed with helpful information – not only timetables but also maps, information about many (but not all) heritage lines, railpasses, public holidays, currency, health requirements, passport and visa regulations and even a simple glossary – so you have no excuse for not knowing the word for “departure” in four other languages as well as English!

The last hundred pages of the timetable summarise rail timetables in other countries beyond Europe – such as the daily passenger train (Monday to Friday) on the Panama Canal Railway.

You can order the timetable via the website www.europeanrailtimetable.eu The printed edition appears four times a year and there is also a digital edition that comes out once a month.

There are associations for rail passengers, and in many cases for all public transport users, in most European countries. Some of these have a wider, environmental, remit as well. You can find out about most of them via the European Passengers’ Federation website www.epf.eu .

EPF is holding its next General Meeting on September 30th in Paris and its first General Meeting of 2024 will be on January 20th in Brussels.

The Back-on-Track network is more specialised, focussing particularly on international night trains. You can find out about its campaigning via www.back-on-track.eu . Central to Back-on-Track’s work are its monthly zoom meetings.

A considerable number of national and regional rail users’ organisations belong to both EPF and Back-on-Track.

Mark Smith is always a valuable source of information and advice on international rail travel. Log on to <https://www.seat61.com> .

Trevor Garrod thanks all colleagues who have provided news and information for this bulletin. He has taken all reasonable steps to provide up-to-date and accurate information but cannot be held responsible for any errors or changes.

Bulletin 26 is due to appear at the beginning of September.

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