

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL number 26

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

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1. MORE NIGHT TRAINS BY OEGB AND DB

The German and Austrian national train operators have announced their plan to double their night train traffic by 2023.

In the December timetable change there will be new Nightjets linking Berlin and Vienna to Brussels and Paris. Initially these will run three nights a week but from October 2024 they are due to increase to seven times a week. A completely new Nightjet service between Hamburg and Vienna / Innsbruck is also planned. There will also be an additional ICE between Berlin and Vienna via Nuremberg and the current weekends-only ICE between Frankfurt and Innsbruck will become a daily service.

On September Back-on-Track Germany issued a press statement welcoming the re-introduction of a Berlin – Paris service via Brussels, recalling that before its withdrawal in 2016 this train was regularly fully booked. The statement called it as “ a sensible complement to the existing European Sleeper service” and pointed out that it would also be attractive for travellers to and from Great Britain; and that it would on average generate 28 times less greenhouse gas than equivalent air travel.

Back-on-Track has long pressed for through international tickets which ensure connections and has reiterated its demand for Value Added Tax to be withdrawn from international tickets. It also urges DB to “take more responsibility for the European night train network.”

2. NEW SERVICES BETWEEN SPAIN AND FRANCE

In 2022 SNCF withdrew services between Barcelona and Lyon and between Madrid and Marseille stating that these were not viable.

This summer, Renfe has started to run its own trains to these two French cities. The Lyon trains could also be useful for travellers to and from Great Britain. Renfe is in negotiations to run a Barcelona - Paris service, which would definitely be more useful.

Passengers who travel from France to Barcelona by French TGV or Renfe high speed train may want to change there to a domestic high speed train. The open access operator Iryo has approximately 30% of the high speed capacity in Spain and can be used for journeys from Barcelona to Madrid, Valencia, Andalucia and Alicante.

The company is working on how its ticketing can be integrated with Interrail and how its tickets might be interchangeable with those of Renfe. It already has an arrangement with Thetrainline.

3. CONTROLS FOR EUROSTAR PASSENGERS

Eurostar passengers are still being advised to arrive 60-90 minutes in advance of the train's departure from London and 45-60 minutes in advance of the departure from Paris Nord.

When Eurostar services began in 1994 we could arrive just 20 minutes in advance.

On September 1st I arrived at London St Pancras International at 09.00 for the 10.31 to Paris, having spent the night in a London hotel to ensure that I caught the train.

Check-in for the 09.31 had been virtually completed, the queue was now very short and check-in for the 10.31 was open. I was through the controls in less than a quarter of an hour.

The Eurostar was well filled – as usual on a Friday. The train left a few minutes late but arrived in Paris Nord on time.

On my return journey three days later I arrived at the Gare du Nord at 14.00, there were plenty of helpful staff on duty, queuing was minimal and I was drinking coffee in the departure lounge by 14.15 awaiting boarding for the 15.12 to London St Pancras.

It would be useful for us in the Association of European Rail Agents to hear of other passengers' experiences, good or bad - when checking in at St Pancras – and indeed at Paris, Brussels, Rotterdam or Amsterdam. Please let me know in time for AERA's September 28th meeting.

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This Bulletin is not confidential. You may forward it to other friends, relatives and colleagues.

4. MORE TRAVEL TIPS AND TRAVELLERS' TALES

In our last issue we mentioned the monthly travel tips now appearing on the website of the Association of European Rail Agents (www.aera.co.uk).

The most recent tips were on small but significant improvements in the bus connections to and from Dublin Ferryport; and travel by light rail to and from Hoek van Holland Haven. The latest Travel Tip is that passengers can now go contactless on RET (The Rotterdam public transport operator) – so

you now save more time and hassle when disembarking from the ferry and continuing your journey by rail.

The website of the ERC(UK) www.eurorailcampaig-nuk.org has added three more travellers' tales –

- (i) On journeys between Sicily and the Italian mainland in bad weather.
- (ii) On using Interrail in central and western Switzerland.
- (iii) On travel back from the Czech Republic to England by rail after suffering a fall.

5. COMMUNITY OF EUROPEAN RAILWAYS AND 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

The CER sent a questionnaire to other international bodies, including the European Passengers' Federation in the early summer. EPF forwarded the questionnaire to all its member associations. These include members and associate members in four non-EU countries because, of course, many of their members use the rail network of the EU.

The European Rail Campaign (UK) responded to relevant sections of the questionnaire. The survey is intended to help CER in its dialogue with the main political groupings in the run-up to next year's elections to the European Parliament.

6. TICKET OFFICES IN GREAT BRITAIN

The British Government has been pressing train operators to close most station ticket offices. A short consultation period in July had to be extended, such were the widespread protests at this proposal, and reports on the internet indicated that 80% of respondents were against the move.

By the time the extended consultation concluded on September 1st, over half a million responses had been received.

Some decision-makers have argued, "But they no longer have ticket offices in Sweden." But in that country it is quite common to obtain a train or bus ticket or reservation from a nearby supermarket. That is not the case in Great Britain.

British travellers to the Continent can, of course, use the internet or a specialist travel agent. UK stations have not sold tickets to the Continent for many years. However, they can sell a Euro High Saver (or London CIV ticket) which gives seamless and flexible travel between one's local station and London, including on the Underground.

Anyone purchasing such a ticket is supposed to show their Eurostar ticket to prove that they are going to London as the first stage of an international journey.

Under the current proposals, if a ticket office has been closed, staff dealing with such a complex transaction would be expected to do it outside on the platform or concourse. Is that what is meant by "improved customer service?"

It is not surprising that so many public transport users' organisations, as well as individuals, have sent in objections to this ill thought out move.

7. BACK-ON-TRACK PLANS

The Back-on Track network held its monthly zoom meeting on August 21st, when colleagues from nine European countries took part in a detailed discussion.

This included how to work with other international organisations to make rail a key issue in next year's European Parliament elections; and how to monitor and influence the EU Transport Ministers' meeting in Barcelona on September 21st/22nd. Back-on-Track now has a Spanish section and they are working on this.

Meanwhile Back-on-Track Belgium updated us on its campaign for a Brussels – Malmo night train and meetings with potential operators and environmental associations.

Member organisations plan to meet on November 18th in Brussels to consider Back-on-Track's work and structure for the coming year. Full information about this network can be found on www.back-on-track.eu.

8. EUROPEAN PASSENGERS' FEDERATION UPDATE

EPF will hold its next General Meeting in Paris on September 30th. The General Meeting is where representatives from all EPF member organisations come together three times a year to consider reports and debate policy.

The following General Meeting will be on January 20th 2024 in Brussels. In addition, EPF holds an Annual General Meeting each spring and a summer conference. When dates and venues for these are confirmed, they will be announced on www.epf.eu. It is also possible nowadays for colleagues to take part in EPF meetings by zoom.

9. ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN RAIL AGENTS

AERA will meet in London on Thursday September 28th and again on November 30th. It is also possible for non-members to take part in these meetings by invitation, either in person or by video link. The September 28th meeting will focus on international night trains, including a guest speaker from The European Sleeper.

10. EUROPEAN RAIL CAMPAIGN (UK)

ERC(UK) will meet by videolink on Wednesday October 25th and then in person on December 8th for its Annual General Meeting, which will be either in London or in Birmingham.

ERC(UK) has been in contact with campaigners in Kent, who have collected 30,000 signatures on a petition calling for Eurostar to resume calling at Ebbsfleet International and Ashford International on some of its trains.

ERC(UK) has also published a new leaflet *Easy Rail Travel to Mainland Europe* including a map showing over 70 major cities (such as Vienna, Florence and Barcelona) within 24 hours' travel by rail from London (by day and/or night train). The leaflet is available by post from Trevor Garrod, free of charge; but please give your postal address and how many copies you would like.

Thank you to everyone who has provided news and information for this bulletin. Trevor Garrod has taken all reasonable steps but cannot be held responsible for any errors or changes.

Bulletin 27 is due to appear in early December. 10/09/23