

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL nr 27

Welcome to the winter 2023/4 edition of the bulletin compiled by Trevor Garrod to support campaigners for better rail services throughout Europe. You may also forward it to other interested people.

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1. RAIL OR AIR BETWEEN LONDON AND AMSTERDAM?

From June 2024 to January 2025 there will still be Eurostars travelling four times a day from London St Pancras International to Amsterdam Centraal. They will carry passengers to Amsterdam and then return empty to Brussels, where London-bound passengers from Rotterdam and Amsterdam, who have travelled to Brussels by other trains, will be able to join.

This is not a joke. It is not as bad as some of us had feared, and the company has given considerable thought to the arrangement, but it is still less than ideal.

Rebuilding work at Amsterdam Centraal next summer and autumn means that there is not enough space to handle the London-bound passengers, given the more intensive post-Brexit formalities that are now required.

This is referred to by some UK politicians as “taking back control” It does mean that for six months rail will be handicapped in its efforts to offer an environmentally friendly alternative to flying on this busy route.

Meanwhile at London St Pancras International the queues for the border controls are not as bad as they were in the autumn of 2022, but passengers are still being advised to check in 90 minutes in advance.

Two recent instances have been reported to us where, to ease the pressure, some of the standard class passengers were directed through a passage, with its own controls, to the Business Premier lounge, from which they were then able to go straight up the travelator on to the Eurostar platform. The Association of European Rail Agents has complimented Eurostar’s front-line staff on this customer-friendly initiative.

AERA representatives are also due to meet the head of the International Rail Team at the Department for Transport in London in early December to discuss these and related issues.

2. CONTACTS WITH EUROSTAR

Three representatives from the European Passengers’ Federation met four Eurostar managers by zoom in October 23rd to discuss the operator’s ticketing and fares.

They were informed that passenger numbers were back to 2019 levels, even though the number of trains was still not quite to that pre-pandemic level. Eurostar were convinced that more connecting tickets would bring more traffic.

They hope to have through fares to and from UK destinations, but not before 2025. Meanwhile, discussions were under way to introduce through ticketing to destinations in France (initially via Paris rather than Lille), Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

Through ticketing to Swiss destinations were the subject of discussions with Lyria.

Then the European Passengers’ Federation (through its associations in France, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany) is due to have its next annual

meeting on January 19th in Brussels with the General Secretary of (New) Eurostar; and in a November zoom call members have already identified issues to raise.

3. NEW SERVICES IN SPAIN AND FRANCE

New high-speed trains continue to offer an alternative to flying as the open-access operator Iryo launches, from December 10th, two new trains between Barcelona and Seville via Zaragoza, Madrid and Corboba. For more information, visit the website <https://iryo.eu>.)

The end of November sees the state operator Renfe also introducing new high speed services from Madrid to Oviedo and Gijon in the north, cutting more than an hour from existing times.

Then on December 10th a new AVLO (high speed low cost) service will connect Madrid and Murcia – initially twice a day with a weekly availability of some 5,000 seats.

These should also help modal shift – as should the latest news from France that from December 10th a night train will be introduced between Paris and Cerbere (on the Spanish frontier) calling at Montpellier St Roch (the city centre station). It is being sponsored by the Region of Occitanie.

4 OVERNIGHT SYNCHRONISATION BELGIUM – GERMANY

This winter OeBB Nightjet trains and The European Sleeper are both offering trains between Brussels and Berlin. They are on different routes but between them give a service five nights a week (and six from late March)

The pattern is:

From Brussels European Sleeper Monday and Friday (and Wednesday from late March). OeBB Nightjet Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

From Berlin: European Sleeper Tuesday (from late March), Thursday and Sunday. OeBB Nightjet Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

That sounds a very sensible use of resources.

5.BACK-ON-TRACK – 25 members of the Back-on-Track network. From 8 countries took part in a day-long strategy meeting on November 18th – about half of them in person in Brussels and half by videolink.

Back-on-Track welcomed the initiative of the Transport Ministers of Belgium, Austria and Luxembourg, together with many MEPs and organisations in sending a letter to the European Commission calling for more night trains, whether in the private or public sector. ([Urgent Demand for a European Night Train Strategy](#))

However, members considered that the latter did not go far enough and a letter to the Ministers and their allies is being drafted, setting out further steps that should be taken and how it should be co-ordinated. A previously presented action paper for the European Elections will be integrated into this work.

Members welcomed the inauguration of new night services around December 10th (when the Europe-wide timetable changes), and many will take part in an Action Wave at stations at this point. This work is being co-ordinated by Nicolas Forien (nicolasforien@posteo.net) and Alexander Gomme (Alexander.gomme@gmail.com)

The strategy meeting also considered the need for a more formal structure for Back-on-Track and a working group of Juri Maier, Peter Baeyens and Nigel Perkins were deputed to draw up draft statutes. These will be discussed in the first two zoom meetings in 2024. The statutes will be only as long as they need to be in order for the network to function effectively.

It was also agreed that the prime aim of Back-on-Track should be to continue to campaign for more international night trains, but that it could also concern itself with cross-border connections in and out of night trains. It will not concern itself with purely domestic services or S-bahn type services.

Looking further ahead, the network proposes to draw up a People' Railway Package for the European Economic Area to be presented to the incoming European Commission in June. The three main challenges to be addressed are unfair competition from airlines; the need for new rolling stock

(perhaps in a pool) and the creation of an open data platform to enable journeys across countries to be booked by train operators and agents.

Back-on-Track is forming a lobbying group to work on these issues.

It has also just formed a Reading Group which studies documents and issues and discussed these on zoom. The group was started by Hibaï Unzueta (hibai.unzueta@hey.com), Howard Osborne and Oliver Walker.

6. THREE WAYS TO CAEN

The French city of Caen, in Lower Normandy, is of interest to English visitors for a number of reasons – going right back to 1066. I took a party over for a 4-night stay there in October. Our reason for going there was not just historic, however, for the city also has an impressive modern tram system.

How to get there? Seven of us went all the way by train – a non-stop Eurostar from London to Paris, one stop on the new RER E from the Gare du Nord to Gare St Lazare and then a two-hour non-stop journey from there to Caen.

However three of the group chose to go by sea, using Brittany Ferries. One chose the overnight sailing from Portsmouth to Ouistreham, arriving in France when it was still dark and having to find his way from the ferry terminal to the nearest bus stop, some 500 meters away. The bus at least took him to a terminal in the square outside Caen station and only a few minutes' walk from our hotel.

The other two took the day ferry from Poole to Cherbourg and had a considerable walk, with their luggage to the main rail station. The days when Cherbourg had a maritime rail station have long since gone. However, our intrepid couple then enjoyed a fast inter-city train (running every hour) from Cherbourg to Caen, arriving just a few minutes ahead of the main party.

A fuller account of this visit is in the Travellers' Tales section of the ERC(UK) website www.eurorailcampaignuk.org.

Trevor Garrod

7. DO WE NEED TICKET OFFICES?

The answer to this question, given by the overwhelming majority of the 700,000 passengers who responded to a consultation prompted by the British Government last summer, was a resounding “Yes.”

Prompted by the Department for Transport, the train operating companies launched a proposal to close many hundreds of station ticket offices and put their redundant staff on platforms and concourses to “assist” passengers. They said that this system had worked well on the London Underground – where the ticketing system is much simpler – and in Sweden (where public transport tickets can be bought in some supermarkets, which is not what was being proposed in the UK).

Station ticket office staff already do more than just sell tickets, and this was just one factor not taken into account in the ill-thought-out proposal.

It is a tribute to the thousands of well-argued protests, including from many local users’ organisations and campaign groups, that in October the Government quietly dropped the scheme.

Of course, there are some things which you cannot do from a ticket office – such as buying a ticket from Norwich to one of its Continental twin cities – Rouen or Koblenz. For that, however, one of the specialist travel agents in AERA (www.aera.co.uk) will be pleased to oblige!

8. RAIL MARKET MOTORING REPORT

The September 27th report from DGMOVE of the European Commission shows that in 2019 there had been an average 3% increase in passenger and freight traffic on rail. When the pandemic started, in 2020, passenger numbers fell by 46% and freight by 8%.

2021 data showed a “promising recovery”. In all but two Member States new freight operators started business and in half of these, new entrants had over 40% market share.

50% of Member States now have competitors in the passenger market.

Of the 201,000 km rail network, about 57% is electrified. 11,500km are classified as High Speed, up 14.5% since 2015.

9.OTHER INFORMATION

European Passengers' Federation meetings: January 20th General Meeting in Brussels; April 27th Annual General Meeting in Milan; June 21st Conference in Warsaw; September 29th General Meeting in Ljubljana

Reminder to members of the European Rail Campaign (UK)

The Annual General Meeting – in person – will be in Birmingham on Friday December 8th from 13.15. It will be in the Old Joint Stock, Temple Row, just a few minutes' walk from Snow Hill station. Members only.

Back-on-Track – Next full meeting, by zoom, will be on Monday January 9th.

European Rail Timetable

The winter edition will appear in mid December. You can order it via the website www.europeanrailtimetable.eu . IT appears four times a year, but subscribers can also receive a very handy *Friday Flyer* every week by e-mail giving the very latest news.

There are also very useful pages summarising services beyond Europe.

Mark Smith is always a valuable source of information about rail services. Visit his website <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 28 is due to appear at the beginning of March 2014.

30/11/2023

