

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL nr 28

Welcome to the spring 2024 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. PASSENGER REPRESENTATIVES MEET EUROSTAR

Representatives of the European Passengers' Federation met senior Eurostar managers in Brussels on January 19 for their annual high level meeting.

They were pleased to learn that passenger numbers on the trains were now comparable to what they were before 2019 (when some routes were operated by Eurostar and some by Thalys).

The company would continue to concentrate on its core routes and develop stations as hubs to which passengers could travel to join a high-speed train. There were no immediate plans to call again at Ebbsfleet International or Ashford International. It was put to them by EPF that a branded bus link (even if operated by a third party) between Ashford, Calais and Lille Europe stations would help Eurostar to keep that

segment of the market. Eurostar were not against this idea but would not run a bus service themselves.

Recent examples were raised of disruptions to services and it did not appear that Eurostar had proper contingency plans to deal with these. Eurostar considered that they complied with the EU rail passenger rights legislation.

Concerns were also voiced about overcrowding at the major terminals, especially with more controls needed for passengers to and from London, and options were being worked upon to expand the processing areas.

EPF's General Meeting the following day agreed to undertake a monitoring and fact-finding exercise to highlight good and bad customer experiences. For example, when the Thames Tunnel was closed by flooding some passengers were advised they could travel by cross-Channel ferry –which was good customer service; but not all of these ferries carry foot passengers – which is not such a good experience.

An EPF TEAMS call is due to be held on February 27th to decide the remit of the monitoring exercise and when it could start.

EPF members were also concerned about the lack of through ticketing and were assured that this would be introduced over all the Belgian and Dutch networks in the third quarter of 2024; and to stations served by ICE /TGV trains in Germany and France respectively. |There are then plans to expand it to British destinations beyond London in 2025. Eurostar acknowledged the challenge of relatively high fares and are launching special promotions to offer passengers access to more affordable fares.

Questioned about arrangements for the Paris Olympics from July 26th, Eurostar said that they had a dedicated team planning for the increased demand, including for example an additional late night train from Paris to Brussels.

Following discussion with EPF in 2023, Eurostar have also enhanced the information on their website informing passengers about their rights to “hop on the next train” .

2. PROPOSALS FOR NEW CROSS-BORDER TOURIST TRAINS

Eric Boisseau reports that a new Alliance transfrontaliere des Alpes du Sud was formed in February, with representatives of France, Monaco and Italy.

It proposes to run a daily return through service between Milan and Nice via the coastal line, probably starting in summer 2024. The operator will be Treni turistici italiani, part of Trenitalia France – which as Thello, used to operate a through service between Nice and Genoa.

Conventional rolling stock will be used, although plans for 2025 include panorama cars and a second inland route via Breil-sur-Roya. Future options also include extending the tourist train further into France, such as to Marseille.

This would certainly fill an important gap in the market.

3. RAIL AGENTS MEET INTERNATIONAL RAIL GROUP

Representatives of the Association of European Rail Agents met civil servants at the Department for Transport in London shortly before Christmas to continue the dialogue started earlier in the year about border controls.

Group travel by Eurostar seemed to be on the increase, and AERA expressed some concern at the large number of retail outlets at St Pancras International at the expense of meeting and greeting area, ticket sales and lack of a recognisable Group Travel assembly point.

We were informed that options were being explored to increase the passenger-handling capacity at the station

Such measures would also be important from autumn this year when the EU's "Entry/Exist System" was due to come into effect. Kiosks would need to be erected at St Pancras for the use of passengers from non-EU countries before going forward to the French frontier police (who are based at St Pancras as it is the Schengen border). For passengers from the UK going to mainland Europe by sea or air, however, these controls would take place at the mainland seaport or airport.

AERA expressed concern that too many complications would deter customers from travelling by rail. Train operators on the Near Continent

could see a decline in business, which would be contrary to the EU's Green Deal agreement.

The meeting also discussed connection and ticketing issues which are covered elsewhere in this Bulletin.

4. POPULAR RAIL TRAVEL IN AUSTRIA – AND SOME SIDE EFFECTS

This report appeared in the Basler Zeitung on December 28th and has been summarised in English by Trevor Garrod. Thank you to Juerg Tschopp for sending the original.

“Austria’s Railways going into crisis.

The OeBB (Austrian Federal Railways) can be rightly proud that they have supported and expanded overnight trains. But they have a problem with constant late running or cancellations.

The popular Vienna – Zurich overnight train has only arrived within 5 minutes of scheduled time on 7 occasions in the past 30 days.

This is not just because of teething troubles with new rolling stock.

East/west daytime traffic is also affected, such as the busy Budapest – Zurich Railjet which has only been on time for 26% of its trips during the past month.

More people in Austria and travelling by rail, the frequencies are better but therefore all available rolling stock has to be used.

The Railjets are nearly 20 years old and need increased maintenance but the workshops do not have the time to do this.

Sometimes international trains from Austria have been terminated just across the Swiss border at Buchs and passengers have then had to transfer to a Swiss domestic train. This happened twice in the past week.

Some new trains from Siemens have been delivered late. OeBB has therefore for the first time ordered some from Stadler.

OeBB had previously sold some of their surplus stock to other operators and have now had to use Swiss carriages for international services to Slovakia, Poland and Hungary.

In theory such long-distance services are attractive for passengers – but they must be more reliable – and when the trains are so far from their home depot that can be a hindrance.

The Basler Zeitung sought an interview with a senior OeBB manager, but none was available”

5. BACK-ON-TRACK DEVELOPS ITS STRATEGY

In our last issue we reported on the November meeting of the Back-on-Track network.

Since then, progress has been made in drawing up statutes to create an international non-profit association under Belgian law. At the February TEAMS meeting it was agreed that “Back-on-Track Europe” will bring together associations that already exist in individual countries and would be full members of the network. But it will also be possible for some individuals in countries without a Back-on-Track association or affiliate to register as “supporters” of Back-on-Track.

The next virtual meeting, on March 12th, will build on these decisions.

Meanwhile, under the Belgian Presidency of the European Union, national transport ministers will be meeting in Brussels on April 3rd.

Back-on-Track is drafting a position paper to issue ahead of that meeting. It will address questions of technical harmonisation, ticketing integration and how to support public and private night train initiatives. Over the past 20 years, the EU has produced and implemented four Railway Packages covering such issues as open access, franchising and passenger rights. The position paper on which Back-on-Track is now working could form the basis of a Fifth Railway Package, or “People’s Railway Package.”

6. THE EUROPEAN SLEEPER SOON TO DRESDEN AND PRAGUE

The European Sleeper is unusual among train operators in being a co-operative, in which customers can buy shares.

During the winter it has run twice a week between Brussels, Amsterdam and Berlin. From March 25th it is due to run again three nights a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) from Brussels and return Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday.

The train is also extended from that date to and from Prague Hlavni Nadrazi, calling also at Dresden Hauptbahnhof.

You can look it up on www.europeansleeper.eu/en and also find its details in Table 78 of the European Rail Timetable (www.europeanrailtimetable.eu)

The operator's website includes a description of "Saxon Switzerland", and the scenic gorge of the River Elbe as the train crosses from Germany into the Czech Republic – and in the spring you will see it in daylight! The sleeper train calls at Bad Schandau and then two stations in the Czech Republic before it reaches the capital, which is also a major tourist destination.

7. EUROPEAN RAIL CAMPAIGN (UK)

ERC(UK) Secretary Ian McDonald has continued correspondence with Damian Green MP, who represents a Kent constituency and has been taking every opportunity to press for some Eurostars to call at Ebbsfleet International and Ashford International. People living in East Kent (some of whom moved there when there was a regular high speed train service to the Continent) are now expected to travel to London and then return on the same route before heading for the Channel Tunnel!

ERC(UK) is producing a new professionally designed version of its leaflet "Save time...Go further... Travel by night" reflecting some of the improvements that have occurred over the past two years. The new leaflet will be available in April. It can be ordered from Simon Hope s.hope41@btinternet.com.

A monthly blog is now compiled and distributed by ERC(UK) Chairman Nigel Perkins. It is sent not just to ERC(UK) members but also to non-members, and you can register to receive it by visiting the website www.eurorailcampaig-nuk.org.

8. FROM SOME WEBSITES :

<https://www.seat61.com> is the website of Mark Smith, The Man in Seat 61. His readership is international and he is a most reliable a source of information and advice. Before moving into seat 61, Mark was employed in the railway industry.

www.aera.uk is the website of the Association of European Rail Agents, which was formed over 40 years ago and whose members – travel

agents and tour organisers – keep upto date with developments in the UK and mainland Europe. Have you looked at their Travel Tips? www.eurorailcampaignuk.org has added more travellers' tales to its website – such as an account of a multimodal journey to Corsica (by train and ferry) and Interrailing in eastern Europe.

9. PROGRAMME OF EUROPEAN PASSENGERS' FEDERATION

On April 27th EPF will hold its Annual General Meeting in Milan. As with all EPF meetings these days, it will be possible to join virtually or in person. The meeting will be at Via Pietro Borsieri 4, near Porta Garibaldi station.

On June 21st the EPF Conference will be held in Warsaw and bookings are already possible on the website www.epf.eu

On September 29th EPF will break new ground by meeting in Ljubljana as guests of its new Slovenian member association.

Then on January 18th 2025 EPF will meet in Brussels.

10. And finally...

Following the February 27th TEAMS meeting, in which colleagues from Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK took part, it was agreed that the EPF office will write to all affiliated organisations. Some of these already pursue individual members' complaints. They will be asked whether these include many about journeys by Eurostar and what conclusions may be drawn.

A possible short questionnaire has been drafted and this may then form the basis of a project of up to six months leading to an EPF report, with recommendations, at the end of this year. Meanwhile we can feature reports of Eurostar experiences in future issue of this bulletin.

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 29 is due to appear at the beginning of June.

28/02/2024

