

How civilised! Another city of trams

By Philip Bisatt

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The 2008 Railfuture visit to Europe was to the city of Bordeaux and its hinterland in south-west France.

A group of 22 assembled at St Pancras for the 12.30 Eurostar to Paris on 7 April. For many this was their first experience of the new London terminus and the fully completed high-speed line.

The train stopped at the new Ebbsfleet station, which generated discussions as to the merits or otherwise of this facility.

Onward travel from Paris was by the 17.20 TGV from the Gare Montparnasse, arriving in Bordeaux at 20.23, one hour ahead of British time.

Bordeaux is an impressive Georgian city, complete with the colossal Gare St Jean, served by Line C of the new tram system.

As the group's hotel was opposite the station, this provided excellent access to the city, with the wider region being reached using the local SNCF network.

For many, the highlight of the visit was a tour of the tram depot followed by lunch with local members of AUTRA (Association des Usagers des Transports Région Aquitaine).

Our guide was Isabelle Taillet of Veolia, which operates the tram system. It was interesting to hear that "the bus must not be the poor relation - it's a network", and that there is a significant "isolation factor" for drivers on a modern tram,



An Alstom Citadis tram in Bordeaux

Picture: Philip Bisatt

especially for those used to driving a bus - hence drivers spend alternate periods on buses and trams.

Bordeaux lost its "classic" trams, which once amounted to 38 lines, in 1958, but a new system has been steadily developed in recent years and, since 2003, an impressive 33 miles of line have been built, with further extensions under way at the time of the visit.

A third rail current collection system without overhead wires is used to reduce visual impact in the historic city centre and some other locations, which after initial teething problems now seems to work well and, aesthetically at least, justifies the higher initial cost.

This Alstom system was pioneered in Bordeaux. The special feature is that the third rail is not normally energised and so is safe to walk on. Very short sections of it

are switched on in succession just as the tram passes over them and switched off as the tram passes.

Many group members used the seven-day ticket giving unlimited travel on trams and buses for £7.50 - excellent value. Indeed, if anything the system may be becoming a victim of its own success, with overcrowding becoming an issue.

Strategic interchanges have been developed, such as Place de Stalingrad, where buses feed passengers into tram routes. It was a refreshing experience to contrast with the lack of progress on light rail schemes in comparable British cities.

Bordeaux is served by a number of SNCF local and regional services, many of which are sponsored by the Aquitaine region.

Routes sampled included those to Perigueux, Bergerac and Le Verdon. We were informed that

extra trains may be provided on the "outer suburban" sections of lines around Bordeaux, where - by British standards - services are currently sparse. The new generation of electric and diesel units seem very good trains, and some of the class 7300 electric multiple units dating from the early 1960s have been well refurbished.

However, there do seem to be problems with external cleanliness, graffiti and provision of water in train toilets.

Another issue for the group was the "bustitution" of off-peak services for engineering works, although the trains reappeared during morning and evening peaks.

Other trips made by members during the week included visits to Bayonne and Biarritz, in the French Basque region, plus the scenic branch to St Jean Pied-de-Port, close to the Spanish border, a line which has been electrified for many years despite carrying far less traffic than similar UK branch lines.

Thanks are once again due to Trevor Garrod and Peter Cannon for making pre-travel arrangements, which turned out extremely well.

We were also well looked after by our French hosts in FNAUT and AUTRA (thanks especially to Fanny Guermontprez, Christian Broucuret and Xavier Lavaud).

And last, but by no means least, thanks to Jim Walker for capably leading the group. Suggestions for next year's visit are Vienna, Munich and Hamburg.

Forget roads, electric rail is the way to the future

Rail campaigners seeking impartial analysis of bus rapid transit (BRT) will find it in a book entitled *Urban Transit: Systems and Technology* by Vukan Vuchic which includes analytical material on trams and trains.

Those seeking data on timetabling, station catchment areas and economics will find them in *Urban Transit, Operations, Planning and Economics* by the same author.

For instance on page 187, figure 4.1 is a graph showing how the volume of traffic drops with increased walking distance from a station.

For regional rail this is by 20% at 400 metres, which illustrates just how much damage is done by moving stations back from the town as at Bradford Foster Square, St Ives, and now, apparently, Lowestoft.

The books, though expensive, are clear, well-bound and comprehensive. The mathematical presentation, whilst intimidating, is in fact little more than railway clerical entrance examination standard and can be easily conquered by anyone with a good pocket calculator and a basic knowledge of



AUTHOR: Professor Vuchic

calculus. Most railway development groups are likely to contain at least one mathematician, while the interested reader can get a feel for the formulae by plugging in his own simple figures.

The photographs are matt in black and white, and would benefit from glossy paper but perhaps there are technical reasons associated with durability, humidity and the vast range of climates from rain forest to Arctic cities in which this book

will be read, for not using clay filled stock.

It has always been a mystery to this reviewer as to why civil servants seek estimates of future oil availability from economists rather than geologists.

Transport Revolutions is one of the first works to give a realistic appraisal of alternatives to oil.

Written by a Toronto transport consultant and the Professor of Political Science and Urban Studies at Simon Fraser, Vancouver, it is comprehensive, well-sourced and hard-bound. The authors' conclusion is that grid-distributed electricity on rail modes and road (trolleybuses) is the way to go.

Conventional aviation will decline, though there may be some use of airships. They believe there should be massive new construction of passenger railways in the US.

Given the current world high price of steel, it begs the question as to why Chancellor Alistair Darling asked First Bus to invent a bendy bus with a funny face, for Leeds rather than lay rails already delivered to the UK.



Vukan R Vuchic *Urban Transit: Operations, Planning and Economics*. John Wiley, New York 2005, £70.

Vukan R Vuchic *Urban Transit: Systems and Technology*. John Wiley, New York 2007, £70.

Richard Gilbert and Antony Pearl *Transport Revolutions: Moving People and Freight without Oil*. Earthscan, London, 2008, £45.