

A better ticket to the Continent

By TREVOR GARROD

The way British Rail deals with would-be travellers to Europe leaves a lot to be desired. RDS has pinpointed a series of minor changes which could make the whole process more civilised.

We believe there should be some fare revisions on trains to the ports, an increase in the number of easily accessible Continental destinations, and more effort by BR to publicise convenient crossings other than by Sealink.

In a new report, *A Ticket to Europe?*, we also call for an increase in the number of stations able to issue international tickets and clear publicity. There should be less "sales talk" on leaflets and more information, including a simple booking form.

In some cases, RDS branches and affiliated users' groups have pledged to work with BR managers and travel agents to publicise Euro links.

Our report was based on a survey of more than 100 RDS members who made trips abroad and we had some useful input from readers of Rail.

About 70 per cent of respondents found BR and travel agents helpful but that leaves a sizeable

minority who were not happy. Station travel centres from Lincoln to Bath and South Croydon to Birmingham New Street were given a vote of approval. But Manchester Piccadilly, Plymouth and Colchester were criticised.

People wanting to book at Ipswich, Taunton and Dundee found the Continental facility had been withdrawn. At some stations, it was only the enthusiasm of individual staff members which made the system work.

Certainly some of the problems result from the financial constraints on BR but there is still a lot to be done cheaply to improve publicity and facilities.

Of course the conclusion of our report is: Rail travel can be the most pleasant, relaxing and safest way to reach mainland Europe. It will gain a tremendous advantage over competing modes following completion of the Channel Tunnel. Let us see a greater effort to promote it. *A Ticket to Europe?* is available for £2.50 post free from sales officer Alan Harwood (address back page).

Euro theme: The links between BR and Europe will be a major theme of the National Conference

of Rail Users to be held on Saturday 2 November at the Assembly Hall, Dr Johnson House, overlooking the new Snow Hill station in Birmingham. Guest speaker will be transport expert Brian Simpson, who is Euro MP for Cheshire East. He will explain how EC transport policy will affect travellers in this country. The conference will also have workshop sessions on issues to be decided. If you have any ideas or want to know more, contact the conference secretary, Edina Lewis, 13 Talbot House, St Martins Lane, London WC2N 4AX

Read on: Thanks to members who responded to the appeal for contributions to *Beyond the Channel Tunnel* by Rail. We still need offers to write descriptions of routes, cities and areas. A synopsis is available from the general secretary to show what we have in mind. The news that the Tunnel shuttle for motorists will not start immediately means that rail has a head start in capturing more of the tourist market in 1993. This provides us with a further opportunity to sell our book promoting rail travel to the near continent.

Driving force: Switzerland is one of Europe's strongest economies. It does not manufacture cars.

Another way under to Europe

Another tunnel in the north of England could become a vital link in Britain's connections to Europe.

A report commissioned by local authorities recommends the reopening of the trans-Pennine Woodhead tunnel which was abandoned two years after Mrs Thatcher took power.

With a combination of ferries and trains, Ireland and England's north west could be connected to northern Germany and Holland via the Humber.

The scheme could revitalise the north, said the report *Green Links to Europe*, from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies.

Freight traffic could use ferries between Dublin and Liverpool, the railway across England, and then ferries to Emden in Germany, and Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Shadow transport secretary John Prescott welcomed the study, saying: "Transport policy in Britain has for too long been fixated on a north-south axis."

"Many of the people I talk to in business want to see better use made of our ports and railways in the north of England."

Taking the east-west route would save up to 30 per cent on the traditional U-turn route to central Germany via Dover, said Mervyn Rowlinson, one of the authors.

The study was sponsored by local authorities in Britain and Germany and port authorities in Dublin, Merseyside and Lancashire.

Undermining the enterprise: With only two years to go to the opening of the Channel Tunnel, the respected *Railway Gazette International* has sounded another alert.

It warns that "Byzantine safety rules" will prevent any locomotive or carriage running in Europe today from passing through the tunnel. Also barred will be all but a tiny proportion of today's European freight fleet, possibly amounting to no more than 3,000 wagons.

Rigid application of frontier controls by Britain will mean that passenger services cannot be integrated properly with either domestic or international services.

A further constraint on BR's response to tunnel opportunities is the legal bar to subsidy of

international or freight traffic, self imposed by government for ideological reasons.

The magazine warns that a handful of domestic InterCity trains will be routed to Waterloo to provide an illusion of connections to the North and West.

Because of security fears, BR will be unable to sell empty seats on the few through international trains for domestic passengers who want to use them for the journey from Edinburgh to Peterborough for instance.

Getting there: BR whisked journalists round Kent in April to see the £450 million improvements it is making to existing track south of London to prepare for the Channel Tunnel opening.

Despite spending £85 million on new signalling and £27 million on bridge, tunnel and platform alterations, the 180 mph class 373 trains will run at an average 60 mph between London and Folkestone.

As a result London to Paris will take three hours 37 minutes, while London to Brussels will be four hours.

The Paris time will come down to three hours when the French high-speed link is completed late, in 18 months time. Britain's high-speed route will not be completed until at least 1998. Only then will Paris be possible within two hours 30 minutes.

BR was expected to present its preferred route for the high-speed link to the Government in April so that the Government could make a final decision.

The axeman cometh: The planned fleet of overnight coaches for Channel Tunnel services has been cut back from 200 to 135. There will be sleepers and reclining seats.

Big brother: The European Community, champion of the anti-social 40-tonne lorry, is still "leaning on" Austria and Switzerland to lift their democratically popular restrictions on juggernauts. Both countries are trying to reduce environmental damage to the beautiful Alps by persuading lorries to go by rail. Swiss Railways will be able to carry 365,000 lorries through the Alps by 1994, an increase on 200,000 on today's figures. In the long term, new rail tunnels are planned through the Gotthard and Lotschberg, at a cost of £6 billion.

Tilt time: Swiss Railways has tested the Italian

tilting train, the Pendolino, as a way of cutting the Bern to Milan journey from four to three hours. The Pendolino might also be used to give three-hour journey times to both Munich and Stuttgart.

Speeding ahead: Spain is planning to start work in two years time on a £3 billion 200 mph line from Madrid to Barcelona to connect with another £800 million new high speed line from Barcelona to the French frontier. Freight will travel at 100 mph. A new suburban rail link is also to be built in Madrid.

Red routes: China is planning to build a 125-mph line between Hong Kong and Beijing at a cost of £2 billion over the next 10 years. It also plans to build 1,000 miles of ordinary lines and to electrify 1,700 miles of existing track.

Flying Hamburger: A new service with a top speed of 170 mph was launched last month between Hamburg and Munich via Kassel.

Partnership project: The French bank Credit Lyonnais is advising the Italian Government on how a combination of state funds and private cash could finance a 500-mile high-speed line between Milan and Naples.

Cars banned: Turin, home of the Fiat motor giant, has banned cars from its historic city centre from 7.30am to 1pm.

Exhausted: Brazil is requiring buses and lorries to point their exhaust pipes upwards, as some protection for pedestrians and cyclists from poisonous fumes.

Fare enough: A train and taxi scheme has been so successful in the Netherlands it is to be extended to 30 more cities, a total of 60. With a £1.60 voucher, rail passengers can use special taxis within the town or city boundaries. Funded jointly by the Ministry of Transport (are you listening Marsham Street?) and Netherlands Railways, it is aimed at improving the flexibility of overall journeys by public transport. Over one million people have used the scheme since it was introduced last year.

Thinking big: California has voted to spend £1500 million on financing new mass transit links, mainly around Los Angeles.

Poor relations: Germany has subsidised the installation of 15,000 private sidings into factories. Britain has 1,000.