

Home thoughts from abroad



Michael Weinberg, the lone figure on the platform, admires a TGV Duplex at Lyon Part Dieu station Picture: Maureen Weinberg

By Michael Weinberg

While on a visit to California to see some relations at the end of last year I took my young nephew, aged 10, on a train trip to the California State Railway Museum in Sacramento.

He'd never been on a train before (except on the Bay Area Rapid Transit) and as kids travelled free at weekends we had an enjoyable Saturday out.

He was very impressed with the train ride, taking just over an hour, as well he should be, the new inter-city trains within the state being very good indeed.

An interesting sequel to this story is that as luck would have it, there was a school trip to "old Sacramento" from my nephew's school, for what passes for a historical visit in the USA!

Teachers were discussing how many buses they'd need to provide, when up pops young nephew: "Why can't we go on the train?"

Teachers look at each other. "Well, why can't we go on the train?"

A quick call to Amtrak, "Sure; when do you want to go?"

And so it transpired that 70 kids plus 10 adults, most of whom had never been on a train in their lives, sampled the delights of rail travel, and by all accounts had a great day out.

One lesson is that rail is never even considered in such a role in that part of the world, but at least where there are services, rail can cope.

I got to thinking what response we'd get here say from Virgin if you wanted to book 80 people, perhaps from Birmingham to York, with their incredibly complex fare structure.

Can you just imagine the

obstacles? For a start an extra 80 people on one service would almost overload one of their tiny trains, especially if it was a Voyager. Then, the fare would be exorbitant unless you booked an Apex and then there wouldn't be 80 Apex seats available on one service, and in any case at the time you want to go, or come back ... Oh forget it! We'll phone the coach company!"

It's a sad fact, but our railways are rarely able to cope with any influx of passengers above what they normally carry, witness Virgin's paralysis at the thought of having to carry football fans to Manchester last season for a cup semi-final.

The old BR would have licked its lips at the prospect of carrying 50,000 people from London to Manchester but entrepreneurial Virgin threw up its hands in horror, to the extent that they actually wanted the match venue changed!

Then I went to Lyon, a couple of weeks ago, on a city break. The first class supplement seemed good value, so booked that.

Eurostar to Lille, was virtually empty in first, and not much better in standard.

Early afternoon TGV direct from Lille to Lyon, was packed in first and standard.

And this is what struck me about French trains; how busy they are.

Standing for a couple of hours just watching the activity at Lyon Part Dieu was an eye opener.

To see a platform able to take an 18-coach train thronged with passengers from end to end and watch a double-deck TGV disgorge hundreds of people and load up with hundreds more on

its way from Paris to Marseilles or Nice is to witness something we only see at somewhere like London Bridge in the rush hour, namely a railway doing what it can do best.

And then to realise this is repeated virtually every hour throughout the day, only reinforces how retrenched our railways have become.

In contrast I had to change at Preston the other day and despite it being a major junction on our busiest main line, only handfuls of people were waiting for the various Virgin inter-city trains, all made up of six to eight coaches and all running late!

Return from Lyon was at midday on a Saturday and again the TGV was packed, including first class, on what is basically a cross-country service.

I hate to labour the point but go to Euston on any day of the week and watch train after train pull out with virtually empty first class coaches. And surely the answer is that our fares, and particularly first class fares are ridiculously high.

I flew to San Francisco for £244 return. Compare that with standard return London to Manchester by rail!

(Editor's note: A London to Manchester standard open return is £164, while the Saver return is £50 but restricted to travel after 10.05)

We want cheap walk-on fares for the vast majority of our services and then we might begin to approach the usage which is the norm in other countries.

Having sped across France at nearly 200 mph, I then had to wait over two hours at Lille for my onward connection to Waterloo. Such is the price we

pay for having to check in 20 minutes before Eurostar departures.

Oh yes, there was an earlier train to Waterloo, I watched people boarding and watched it go out, but they wouldn't let me get on it because my seat was booked on the next train, because of the wretched 20 minute rule. To add insult to injury the Eurostar I did get terminated at Ashford because of a fault, so we were told.

In fact the fault was on a London-Paris service, so they commandeered ours to take the stranded passengers on to Paris. "a train will be waiting to take you on to Waterloo" said the train manager. We had to wait for the next scheduled Eurostar - another hour's wait.

There were many very unhappy bunnies waiting at Ashford that night.

Is this how Eurostar plans to meet the challenge of the budget airlines?

Football crazy

When Norwich played Birmingham City at Cardiff on 11 May, 32,000 people wanted to travel from Norwich. Eventually, the railway industry agreed to run one train, accommodating 500 people.

Barbara Castle

Former Labour transport minister Barbara Castle died in May, aged 91. In 1966, she authorised nearly 1,200 miles of railway line for closure. She made her mark after Ernest Marples (Conservative) in 1964 authorised the closure of 991 miles of railway and Tom Fraser (Labour) in 1965 authorised the closure of 1,071 miles.