

# Fast trains – slow tickets

## By train to Toulouse

with Julian Langston

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I enjoyed a group holiday in southern France in September. Most people were going to fly to Toulouse, but I wanted to see how viable it would be to go by train for myself and anybody else who was interested.

The result was that eight people flew and six went by rail, though one person decided she wanted to go by train and fly back. This is how we got on.

### Booking

The decisions about transport arrangements were made five months before the September trip. The fliers booked their tickets, Bristol to Toulouse, immediately, using the internet. The cost was about £130.

It became clear that train tickets could not be booked anywhere near this far in advance. A lot of research was needed so they could be booked quickly and cost effectively when they became available.

The earlier tickets are booked, the cheaper they generally are. Eurostar bookings can be made four months in advance, other trains three months, though for some reason, tickets cheaper than Savers on the Cardiff to London route are not available until a week or two after more expensive tickets.

The rail travellers decided to stay overnight in Paris in both directions and in Toulouse on the return journey.

This meant that through internet tickets couldn't be booked from London to Toulouse as there was no way of specifying the desired connecting train – the system decides that for you.

Also there was no way I could find to buy an integrated ticket from Cardiff to Paris. Therefore it became clear that most trains would have to be booked separately.

First to become available was the Eurostar booking: London to Paris return. The cheapest normal price available for this on line is £59.

However, one of our number was only going by train one way. So how much is the cheapest Eurostar single? £149! Incredible!

In the end she booked a return through a travel agent (not easy to find one who'll do this in Cardiff) which entailed paying commission.

They advised that despite the dire warnings from Eurostar that it could not be used for a single journey, it would be OK if she didn't try to make another Eurostar journey within the next few weeks.

I decided to book the remaining tickets as singles. There were several reasons for doing this. The chief benefit is that each ticket can be booked as soon as they become



READY TO GO: Kevin, Rhona, Sian, Bob and Stella at London Waterloo

Pictures: Julian Langston



PARIS: The TGV from Toulouse with Rhona, Bob and Sian

available – if returns are booked, the outward journey cannot be booked until the return is available, increasing the chances that the cheaper tickets will no longer be available.

Following First Great Western's fare reorganisation this summer, there is no price penalty for doing so (the same is true in France). Therefore, a total of five bookings were made.

I used the trainline website for Cardiff to London, Eurostar's for London-Paris and Rail Europe's for Paris-Toulouse.

The total cost was about £150 per person, but for some journeys, travelling first class cost little more, so for an additional £15, we were able to ride in style between Cardiff and London, and between Toulouse and Paris.

### The journey

So far the fliers had the easier time by far. But what of the journey itself? Neither fliers nor rail trav-

ellers experienced any problem, though the Cardiff to London train at the start arrived almost half an hour late.

No other train was delayed by much. It was pleasant to set off on our holiday in style, using the First Class lounge in Cardiff Central and free trolley service on the train, not to mention the extra space.

The Eurostar journeys were uneventful though enjoyable as it was my first experience of the high speed line through Kent.

We took the classic route from Paris Austerlitz to Toulouse, via Orleans, Limoges, Brive, Cahors and Montauban, returning by TGV via Bordeaux to Paris Montparnasse (first class). The timings were convenient and although the classic route takes a little longer (six hours as opposed to five on the TGV), the scenery is more interesting with views of the tangled forests and gorges on the western side of the Massif Central

where ancient villages and chateaux peep out from among the trees.

Some long, curved viaducts gave splendid views. Both these journeys were very enjoyable, with plenty of space to relax and watch the countryside go by.

I had taken my GPS and could monitor how fast we travelled. The acceleration of the diesel high speed trains between Cardiff and London appeared noticeably inferior to that of the electric Eurostars and TGV.

Eurostar reached 156 mph in Kent not rising to the full 186mph until well after Lille.

Indeed, the Eurostar never quite seemed to reach line speed, leaving it to the TGV to be fastest on our journey, at 188mph.

### Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed our journey by train, not least because it allowed us a couple of evenings in Paris and time to look around Toulouse, none of which the air travellers had.

The longer holiday was, of course more expensive, but the travel itself at about £30 more than the air travel was comparable. The train journeys in France were comfortable and gave a much better sense of the country than air travel ever can. It felt a civilised way to travel.

While the journey was enjoyable and relaxing, the same cannot be said for the booking process, which took a lot of time and energy to come up with a practical and affordable solution.

The rail industry (not just in Britain) has a lot to learn from airlines if it seriously wants to compete. Granted we're not comparing like with like here, but having tickets available further ahead wouldn't hurt. Would I do it again? Definitely.