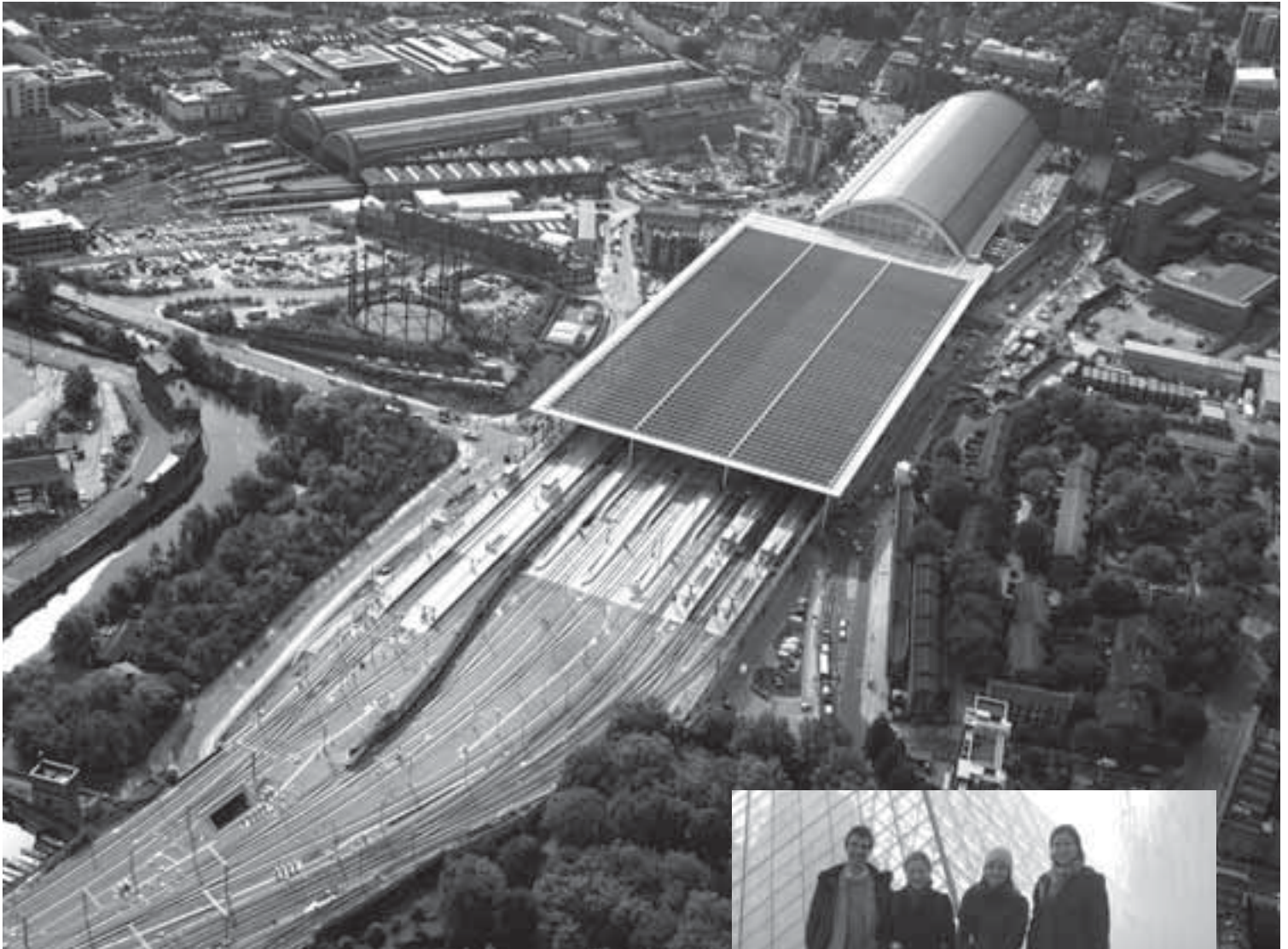


It's easy to fall in love with Eurostar



Eurostar at St Pancras Picture by Michael Walter/Troika for London & Continental Railways

By Jess Fitch

of the Campaign for Better Transport

"Ladies and gentlemen, we've just reached our maximum speed of 186 miles per hour."

As the announcement came over the loudspeaker, all eyes turned to the trees and pylons flashing past the window and a cheer went up.

Five representatives from Campaign for Better Transport including director Stephen Joseph, Tara Melton, Dominic Geyer and Estelle Taylor were among the environmental campaigners packing the first ever service from St Pancras International station to Paris.

Eurostar's choice of passengers for this historic trip was a reflection of the company's green ethos.

Travelling by train from London to Paris already produces 10 times less CO₂ per passenger than flying, and Eurostar is committed to reducing these emissions by a quarter by 2012.

Campaign for Better Transport believes the Government should include high-speed rail as an environmentally preferable alternative to flying short distances. But we learnt on our trip to Paris that its

green credentials aren't the only benefit of international train travel.

The beautifully restored St Pancras International was a truly impressive start to our journey.

The awesome glass roof and sky-blue paintwork give the building a light and airy feel, and the modern features such as touch-screen displays contrast effectively with the cleaned-up original brickwork.

The check-in process was speedy and civilised, though the wait between check-in and boarding seemed long for lack of caffeine. Decorators were seen putting finishing touches to the as-yet-unopened coffee shop.

The train set off on the UK's first high-speed rail line to the sound of popping champagne corks and a small orchestra playing Elgar.

The completion of High Speed 1 has knocked 20 minutes off Eurostar's journey times, and we were enjoying the breathtaking views from the top of Notre Dame in what seemed like no time.

The London-to-Paris rail link is not without issues, fares being one. Tickets start at £55 return, but quickly rise into hundreds



HELLO PARIS: Stephen Joseph, Jess Fitch, Tara Melton and Estelle Taylor at the Louvre

Picture: Campaign for Better Transport

of pounds if they aren't booked soon enough in advance, which may seem steep in comparison to the artificially low cost of budget flights.

This issue will remain so long as Government continues to favour flying. The aviation industry currently pays no fuel tax or VAT, and landing fees are unrealistically low because they're cross-subsidised by retail sales from airport shops.

Aviation won't be included in the Climate Change Bill, despite it being the fastest-growing source of Britain's CO₂ emissions.

And the Government continues to support a massive programme of airport expansion, including a third runway at Heathrow where over 100,000 flights a year currently

take off to destinations that could easily be reached by train, such as Paris, Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Our trip on the Eurostar proved what we already knew: that aviation is not as vital to the economy or to people's quality of life as the Government assumes.

Around 45% of European air journeys are currently 300 miles or less in length. Rail is a fast, convenient and enjoyable alternative to these journeys and others that are longer.

Perhaps instead of green campaigners, Eurostar should have invited politicians on its inaugural trip to the City of Love. Perhaps then Government would end its romance with the aeroplane and begin a new affair with the train.