

railwatch

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The new hard nose of high-speed rail

Three years from now, trains like this will be speeding across Europe taking advantage of the European Union's open-access rules.

The Italian company Nuovo Trasporto Viaggiatori was created by four Italian businessmen to compete with state-owned Trenitalia.

An order for 25 Automotrice à grande vitesse trains was placed with Alstom in January.

The AGVs, a development of France's highly successful TGVs, will be running services on the Turin-Milan-Naples-Salerno, Rome-Bologna-Venice and Rome-Naples-Bari routes.

NTV will be the first operator in the world to use the AGV, which already holds the world railway speed record. One of the businessmen behind NTV is Luca Cordero di Montezemolo, who is chairman of the Ferrari car company. The

trains will be equipped with internet connections, on-demand TV, and will travel at a cruising speed of around 190 mph on existing Italian high-speed rails.

The EU's transport commissioner, Antonio Tajani said: "The Commission will support initiatives that allow the market to be freer."

The EU rules will be changed officially in 13 months time – on 1 January 2010. Just how long it will take for European high-speed trains to venture through the Channel Tunnel and on to London St Pancras is not clear yet.

In October, French state railways SNCF announced it was taking a 20% stake in NTV.

It has also been reported that Germany's Deutsche Bahn asked for permission to run to London but safety rules, technical differences between trains and vested interests could prevent it. At least

Britain's high-speed line from Folkestone to London has been built to accommodate trains from across Europe. Interest is booming around the world in high-speed rail which could finally be coming to America. California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has said the state must build a network of high-speed rail lines.

The plan was approved in theory in July but work is continuing on how to fund the lines. A crucial public vote on funding takes place in November.

Earlier plans for high-speed rail for Texas, serving Houston, Dallas and San Antonio were killed off. Airlines were said to have been influential in the decision.

Argentina could be the first American country to build a high-speed rail system with the first 440-mile line from Buenos Aires to Cordoba. China's Beijing-Tianjin high-speed line opened this year and work

has started on the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed line which is now expected to open in five years time.

In Britain we are still talking, although an official inquiry into the potential benefits of high-speed rail services is under way in Scotland. The Scottish Parliament's transport, infrastructure and climate change committee is carrying out the review.

In England, the importance of high-speed rail was revealed when Eurostar axed services to Ashford, Kent. Some of those trains are now being restored, thanks partly to Railfuture campaigning.

In France, Air France-KLM is investigating replacing some more flights with high-speed rail and is considering ordering a fleet of AGV trains for services between Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam and London.

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