

Rail's winter warmer



Picture: DB

FUTURE: The ICE could be running to London but not yet

By John Friedberger

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Travel by rail across national boundaries in Europe has, for far too long, been almost prohibitively expensive.

But recent initiatives such as the formation of Railteam and work by the European Passengers Federation are starting to make a long-distance rail journey financially competitive with air and much more enjoyable.

We decided to spend the New Year in Vienna. On the days my wife and I wished to travel, air fares were quoted from about £300 to £700 return although on other days it is possible to get much cheaper flights.

An InterRail global pass (senior), allowing any five days travel in 10, costs £210 or £315 (first class) and covers most rail travel in 22 countries (but not in one's country of residence).

Exceptions are Eurostar, Thalys, night trains and some others requiring advance reservations. Details of these and all aspects of international rail travel are explained on the www.seat61.com website and careful planning is advised.

If travelling to London St Pancras by national rail it is important to ask for a "London International CIV" ticket as this allows a discounted rail card to be used on early morning trains, is cheaper than most normal fares, includes the Underground and gives the passenger compensation rights should a connection be missed.

We hoped to catch a Deutsche Bahn high-speed train which was scheduled to leave Brussels Midi 13 minutes after our Eurostar's arrival from London, although this connection is deemed too tight to be in Thomas Cook's European Rail Timetable.

In the event we were about 10 minutes late but we could see the white German ICE train on a nearby platform. We dashed

down the escalator, through the concourse and reached the ICE just in time to leap aboard.

This experience highlights a problem with connections from Eurostar at Brussels Midi.

Had we not caught the 14.25 ICE, the alternatives would have been to take a succession of three local trains, changing at Liege and Aachen, wait three hours for a Thalys and pay a supplement, or wait four hours for the next ICE.

Both Belgium and Germany had lying snow, although none had fallen that day. For some reason our train was delayed near Liege and Aachen and arrived in Cologne about 35 minutes late.

After a pleasant overnight stay in a comfortable hotel next to the station, we took another ICE3 six-coach train to Vienna.

ICE3 trains are spacious and comfortable. From one of the first class carriages it is possible to look forward through the driver's cab and the second class 2x2 seating also has sufficient leg-room. Our 10-hour journey took us through varied and interesting snow-covered countryside.

For our return to Cologne we chose to use a EuroNacht sleeper, leaving at 19.48. The bunks were adequate if somewhat cramped and we had a reasonable night's sleep before a good breakfast was brought to our cabin at Koblenz.

The cost of 110 euros each was more than a good hotel and, unlike Caledonian sleepers, there is no bar or buffet so it is advisable to take a picnic supper as the journey takes 13 hours.

A further ICE3 took us pleasantly to Brussels. Again it was delayed between Aachen and Liege but a new high-speed line is under construction.

We then took a spacious Belgian Railways IC train for a night in Bruges before returning next day on Eurostar to St Pancras.

LOCAL ACTION

Severnside

By Nigel Bray
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■ ■ Backing for Bristol suburban railways

Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways produced a Christmas card charting the growth in usage of the Severn Beach line, notably since the enhanced service subsidised by Bristol City Council was introduced in 2008. Railfuture is supporting FoSBR's campaign for the subsidy to be renewed in April as this could result in additional trains being incorporated in the franchise.

■ ■ Electrification essential in era of peak oil

In its response to Wiltshire County Council's draft local transport plan 3, which covers 2011-26, the branch welcomed the plan's awareness of "peak oil" and we took the opportunity to re-state the case for Great Western electrification. For the same reason, we asked for new housing to be sited where it could be served efficiently by public transport.

In contrast to the Gloucestershire draft LTP3 (which was mentioned in *Railwatch* 126), Wiltshire's proposed public transport hubs include railway stations. Moreover, bus services linked with trains are to be treated as part of the county's strategic bus network. In welcoming this policy, the branch has asked for any smart ticketing scheme to include rail travel.

We applauded the statements in favour of an enhanced service on the Melksham line, adding that the 2010 Great Western route utilisation strategy considered this to be feasible. We share the council's concern about overcrowding on the Cardiff-Portsmouth and Bristol-Weymouth routes. In our view these would benefit from an electrification cascade of relatively modern Turbo diesel multiple units. We support the concept of a rail-to-road freight interchange at Westbury and the potential for use of sidings at the nearby cement works. The plan is light on commitment to spending on rail projects. We pointed out that nearly all the stations opened in the past 30 years have been funded substantially by local authorities. We said this would be money well spent because of benefits accruing to the local economy and, unlike road schemes, would not be based on the assumption of abundant petrol.

■ ■ Extra rail capacity needed

Somerset County Council's *Future Transport Plan* covers the same 15-year period. Its rail strategy is based on a policy of getting the best out of the existing network, including development of timetables to attract more users. In response, the branch said that, sooner or later, improvements to timetables would require additional capacity in trains and infrastructure.

For example, the Bristol-Weymouth line has no service suitable for office hours in Yeovil, which is designated as a major centre of growth in the county. We have asked the council to join forces with a local economic partnership, to work up a business case for more rolling stock and possible redoubling of Castle Cary-Yeovil Pen Mill. The other main growth area is to be Bridgwater-Taunton-Wellington and we have therefore renewed our calls for better train services at Bridgwater and reopening of Wellington station.

We emphasised the need for easier physical interchange between rail and bus, particularly at Taunton, and for safeguarding former railway routes which might be candidates for reopening in the long term. Other suggestions included the use of a Parry People Mover to link the two Yeovil stations and for an expanded Exeter-Paddington semi-fast service to call at Wellington, Langport and Somerton.

