

Battle over national rail card in Germany

The Germans have enjoyed a national rail card for years. But now the BahnCard is the centre of controversy after the rules were changed for the "better" at the end of last year. It was made cheaper to buy but did not give such good discounts. Joachim Kemnitz, of the German rail campaigning group PRO BAHN, explains some of the issues which Britain has not yet even attempted to get to grips with

The BahnCard is a personalised card, in form and size like a credit card, issued by DB AG to be presented during ticket checking.

The card normally has a photo on it. If it has no photo, you are required to present your identification card with the BahnCard.

The BahnCard is valid for one year and good for discounted transport in all DB-operated trains.

Special conditions apply for the use of non-DB operated trains.

Mostly, BahnCard discount is available for inbound and outbound traffic to and from DB.

Usually no BahnCard discount is available for transport within the area of other operators.

Theoretically, the BahnCard is accepted for long distance and regional transport, but in practice its use in regional transport is limited.

For regional transport we in Germany have a lot of what we call Verbunden (to some extent comparable with British Passenger Transport Executives).

In a Verbund there is a common tariff and single ticket for all modes of public transport (regional trains, S-Bahn, Underground, tram and buses).

About 60% of DB's regional transport is within Verbunden; their special tar-



186 mph trains on busiest route

Travel times between Frankfurt and Cologne were cut by an hour when Germany's latest 186mph new ICE 3 trains, left, began running last year. Unlike Eurostar in Britain, the £4billion new line is integrated into both the national and European rail network and also serves Frankfurt airport.

The trains can run on four different voltages, to allow cross-border operation into Belgium, Holland and France.

Frankfurt airport was originally conceived as a "drive-in" but greater environmental awareness made the idea outdated. In the front coach of the

ICE 3, passengers (right) can sit behind the driver and a glass partition and see ahead through the train's windscreen.

There are 110 miles of new high-speed track – built alongside the A3 autobahn and running close to Frankfurter Kreuz, Germany's busiest road junction.

The new line has 30 tunnels and 18 major viaducts which makes the route 30 miles shorter than the traditional line which follows the Rhine.

Sensible, environmentally aware car drivers are already switching to the transport mode of the future, high-speed rail.



iffs are applicable also for DB trains and 40% of regional transport uses the DB tariff.

Within the Verbunden there are special conditions for the acceptance of the BahnCard.

Mostly, it is accepted only from a minimum distance onwards, sometimes there is no acceptance (for instance, in Berlin and Brandenburg).

So the use of the BahnCard for regional transport is limited.

In local transport you cannot use the BahnCard (with some small exceptions).

The old BahnCard was sold until 14 December 2002, but DB adverts say the new

BahnCard is better. The old BahnCard cost £93 for second class and £186 for first class.

Partners (spouses), senior citizens (over 60) and juniors (up to 25) got the card at half price.

The card gave (and still gives) to those who bought it before 14 December) a discount of 50% for all regular-priced tickets.

With a BahnCard First you can buy tickets for either first or second class. There are about 3million BahnCards in use.

If they were as popular as the Swiss national half-price rail card is in Switzerland there

would be 22 million BahnCards in Germany.

The Swiss use the railway three times as much as the Germans and the Swiss card gives more advantages in regional and local transport.

One of the drawbacks of the old BahnCard is that you could not combine the BahnCard discount with other discounts.

For instance there was no partner discount for two to five people travelling together. Without the BahnCard, the first person of a group up to five pays full, all others half the price.

Nor was there a BahnCard discount for Savers and Super-Savers (flat fare tickets for long distance travel, with some restrictions to prevent business travellers from using them).

The new (better?) BahnCard came into being on 15 December 2002, at the same time as DB's new Plan and save pricing system.

The new Bahncard costs £40 for second class and £100 for first class.

There are now no reductions in the price of the card for old people and juniors.

Partners get a partner card

Twice as big as Britain

The German network is nearly double the size of the British one, about 22,350 route miles (36,000 km).

It sees about 1,000 long distance trains per day, all but two operated by Deutsche Bahn AG (DB AG; German Rail plc). The two exceptions are: One each way Gera-Berlin-Rostock, operated by Connex and a sleeper each way Berlin-Malmö, operated by Swedish State railway (SJ) and the German GVT organisation.

About 29,000 regional trains, 92% operated by DB AG. The other 8% are operated by about 30 other operators, including some subsidiaries of Connex.

This number includes the S-Bahn trains (regular interval inner and outer suburban trains in the metropolitan areas of Berlin, Hamburg, the Ruhr, Frankfurt Main, Stuttgart and Munich). There are also 7,000 daily freight trains.

tions, the BahnCard discount becomes less than 25%.

Example:

Regular fare: £100.

Plan and Save 40%: £40

Remains: £60

25% BahnCard discount: £15

Ticket costs: £45

So in this case, the Bahncard gives an advantage of £15, only 15%.

There is also a choice of whether to buy the NetworkCard (NetzCard) or the BahnCard.

The network card gives free travel for one year in DB trains.

The price of the NC has not changed with the new pricing system. It costs £2,233 for second class and £3,293 for first class.

Old pricing system and old BahnCard:

For travelling more than 1,000 miles per year it was worthwhile to buy a BahnCard.

For travelling more than 25,000 miles per year it was worthwhile to buy a Network Card (thresholds are calculated for second class).

New pricing system and new BahnCard:

For travelling more than 950 miles per year it is worthwhile to buy a BahnCard.

For travelling more than

16,150 miles per year it is worthwhile to buy a Network Card.

A passenger travelling 15,534 miles per year and unable to use the conditioned pre-booked Plan and Save tickets – pays 44% more a year within the new pricing system.

So there was a storm of protest from this type of passenger against the new system and the BahnCard with only 25% discount.

ProBahn is campaigning for a BahnCard with at least a 50% discount but unfortunately there are two groups within the organisation.

One says the BahnCard with 50% reduction must cost the same as before while the other one would accept that this BahnCard "Gold" is for frequent travellers and may cost more than before.

That makes it more difficult to form an effective campaign.

DB AG has declared that it will ride out this storm of protest as there are a lot of other passengers who gain benefits from the new system.

We have to see how frequent users react over time and what we can do.

If they largely react as angrily as our members, there may be the chance for DB to extend the sales period of the old BahnCard and save face.

The credit card option

Some years ago, the US-based Citibank – a partner of the Visa credit card organisation – offered the option to combine the BahnCard with a Visa card.

Citibank committed itself to the issue and administration of all BahnCards which was an enormous saving for DB AG. But only 300,000 out of 3million BahnCard users took up the option of the combined card, partly because of bad marketing during the introduction phase.

As the DB sales organisation first asked would-be customers for all data (including income levels) only needed for a credit card, even when the Visa-option was not asked for, the consumer protection organisation was unhappy. Even when this excessive request for data was finally stopped the BahnCard with Visa

option had got such a bad image that Citibank could win only 300,000 customers for it.

As there was not sufficient credit card business Citibank cancelled the agreement with DB as soon as possible, after two or three years.

So DB had to carry the cost of administering the issue of the cards. To cover this higher cost they increased the price of the BahnCard.

I mention this episode as, with good marketing, there may be chances for co-operative branding or sponsoring for a national rail card to keep their administrative costs down. A bank which knows the national market may be needed as a partner.