

Second chance for Euro sleepers

A small group is researching the viability of a new overnight passenger service between London St Pancras and the Continent, that would start in 2008-9.

The group has established working relationships with the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, Eurotunnel, RailNet Europe, the International Union of Railways, the European Union's DG-TREN, the Strategic Rail Authority, the Rail Regulator, and the Department for Transport.

It has also been in contact with rolling stock manufacturers and has produced a security strategy that complies with the UK requirements for running trains through the Channel Tunnel. This required correspondence with around 10 different UK bodies!

The group's proposal is to run high-speed sleeper electric multiple units (possibly double-deck to make use of the UIC-C gauge) from St Pancras International to a variety of destinations up to 1,500 miles away, and to run either refurbished or new loco-hauled stock to destinations up to 600 miles (possibly attached to other trans-European overnight services).

The true niche for these services seems to be that they should leave in the evening, after work, and arrive at around breakfast time (before work). This is a niche not currently serviced by either the airlines or other high-speed rail services.

The main practical problems involve negotiating access around overnight maintenance blockades and the difficulty of designing traction that can interface with any number of signalling systems, without interfering with any others. Of course, much of the infrastructure the group is planning to use is still under construction. The maintenance problem may be offset by the

fact that all high-speed lines are bi-directional, so it should be possible to bypass all but the major blockades.

The signalling problem is a more serious issue, though it may be possible to fit the traction with a universal "aerial" or pick-up that is fed to a computer that analyses the signals and then determines which system they belong to and what the signal means.

While preliminary market research suggests that such a service is sustainable, until all the costs are understood the groups does not know exactly; hence the research.

Our research suggests that a one-way ticket to Zurich in a shared compartment should not cost more than £100. The service the group is researching is not seeking a subsidy.

Currently the research is split into five main areas.

- Route suitability using RailNet Europe to interface with the 12 national infrastructure managers.

- Security.

- Rolling stock specification, involving both infrastructure managers and rolling stock suppliers.

- Service specification

- Marketing/branding.

In designing new rolling stock the group is looking at the total package. The group has a wide experience of the different sleeping cars of the past 50 years and it is interesting to note what conditions equate to a good night's sleep and an enjoyable journey.

The group's research is at a critical stage. It is looking for partners to help in furthering the research to its logical conclusion, and possibly take it on to the next stage.

Michael Guerra is the secretary of the group. In the accompanying article, he outlines the possibilities.

By Michael Guerra
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Imagine standing beneath the refurbished Barlow roof at St Pancras, having just finished dinner in the Midland Grand Hotel.

In front of you the train indicator shows the numerous odd destinations for your train which include: Chur via Basel and Zurich; Venice via Lausanne and Milan; Stockholm via Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Malmo; Seville via Barcelona, Madrid and Cordoba.

The train is due to leave at 21.30 from platform five, and the time is 21.00. Through the glass wall the dark blue train appears to disappear into the night beyond the old arched roof.

You take the escalator down one level to the departure area where a few cafes are still open. You walk up to the ticket barrier, insert your ticket and proceed to passport and security control.

The train is available for boarding so you make your way to the travelator where staff check your ticket and wave you up.

The gleaming dark blue articulated cars fill your

field of view and people are milling on the platform reading the destination displays by the doors of each car, being welcomed by smiling train staff.

You find your car, and then your compartment, which is on the upper deck. Your luggage slides under the already made-up bed. You still have time to take a walk outside, so leaving your luggage and locking your berth behind you with your ticket's magnetic stripe, you take the stairs down and out on to the platform.

The train is the full length of the platform - 440 yards, and consists of four separate sections: the rear one, your one, is going to Spain, the next to Italy, the third to Switzerland and the front to Scandinavia.

You look back along the train while the driver prepares himself for departure. Ahead of him the glistening ribbon curves eastwards to the tunnel.

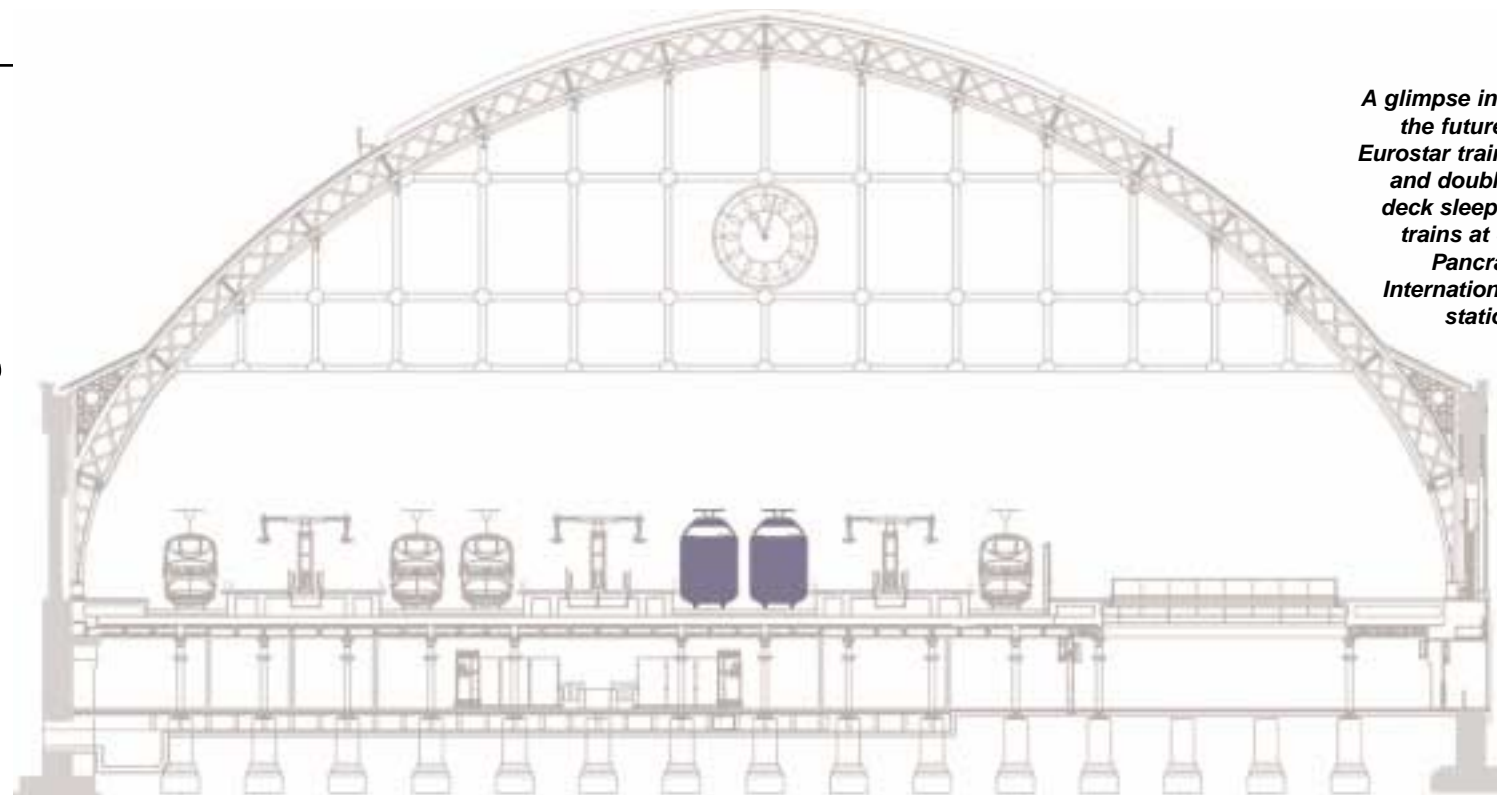
You retrace your steps to your compartment, lower the blind, take a quick shower, and then change for bed. You turn off the main light, open the blind and look out into the station.



Eurostar's £200million plan to run Nightstar sleeper trains to mainland Europe was abandoned in 1997 despite the fact that a fleet of 30 carriages had been built.

The plan was to run night trains from London to Amsterdam, Dortmund and Frankfurt, as well as from Swansea, Plymouth, Glasgow and Manchester to Paris.

Some compartments had their own shower and toilet while there were also reclining seat "sleeperettes" for the budget traveller. The coaches - pictured - were eventually sold and are now being operated in Canada by VIA Rail.



A glimpse into the future? Eurostar trains and double-deck sleeper trains at St Pancras International station

There is a clunk of the doors, the sound of brakes being released, and a small ding-dong noise in the corridor.

Slowly the train pulls out into the night, curving over the freight terminal, over the East Coast main line and into the tunnel to Stratford. There is a knock at the door which is opened by the uniformed conductor who checks the tickets and asks at what time you wished to be woken, and if you would like to take a full breakfast in the diner, or a continental breakfast in the compartment.

Your journey is to Seville, the end of the line. As you reach Stratford after a few minutes the train slows, comes to a stop for a minute and then continues, having picked up the dozen or so businessmen from Docklands.

It is raining again, restricting the view out so you lower the blind and read the card introducing you to the facilities of your Grande Classe compartment.

There is a small shower with a flip-up toilet assembly inside. There is a hanging space for a couple of jackets, a small basin with glass and bottle of mineral water.

There is a small sway as the train continues to curve and accelerate towards Ebbsfleet. Ebbsfleet passes in a flash and you turn on the small flat-screen display that pivots from the side of the berth.

It takes a little while to get used to the headphones (so as not to annoy the neighbours) and you settle down for one of the movies on the 10 channels or watch the progress of the train via the traincam. The Chunnel passes before the end of the first

act and the train slows for Lille Europe. The train is now stationary at Lille Europe, and it is being split into four. The sections follow each other at five-minute intervals, the front turning north towards the Belgian border where it will cross Germany into the Netherlands, stopping in Amsterdam to change drivers at around 03.30.

It will then reach Copenhagen at 06.00 for the first set-down, then off over the Øresund to Malmo and Stockholm, arriving at 11.00. The next section runs on and eventually connects with the line to Mulhouse, setting down in Basle at 06.00, Zurich 07.00, and Chur at 08.00.

The Italian section circumnavigates Paris and joins up with the Sud-Est to Dijon via the TGV route to Lausanne at 06.00, then through the Alpine tunnel into Italy for Milan at 08.00 and arriving in Venezia Santa Lucia

at 09.30. The last Iberian section follows the line down to Marseille, Narbonne, cuts inland to the new sub-Pyrenean tunnel into Spain passing through Girona and arriving in Barcelona at 07.00, then via Zaragoza Delicias into Madrid Atocha at 09.20, finally via the AVE line to Cordoba (10.50) arriving in Sevilla Santa Justa at 11.30.

You are woken for breakfast as the train passes Zaragoza, the sun already high above the Aragon plain. You dress while listening to the World Service and then pad along to the next car where a hot and cold buffet breakfast is ready. You dine until Madrid where half the passengers alight. Emerging into bright spring sunshine you are grateful for the tinted windows and the gauze blind.

A couple of hours later, after climbing off the Meseta into

Andalucia, you arrive in Sevilla, with plenty of time to explore, find your hotel and enjoy your stay. You step off the train into the heat, with the sights and sounds of debarkation; luggage trolleys, chattering, children falling behind.

Your train is a little dustier, the windscreens showing signs of insect encounters. A new driver climbs down from the cab (probably changed at Atocha), and talks to the train manager before wandering off to find his next AVE back to Madrid.

■ If anyone is interested in our project, either in submitting thoughts or ideas, or wishing to help in a practical or financial way please write to: Michael Guerra, Secretary, London Direct Sleeper Group, 6 Nash Close, Welham Green, Hatfield, Herts AL9 7NN

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Why Nightstar was never going to succeed

There is of course the Nightstar question. Having had years to investigate this, and having talked to some of those involved in that project it is hardly surprising that it was not going to succeed.

The reasons are many but can be outlined as the following. The service was ill-conceived, running trains from a number of stations in the UK to a number of stations in Europe was always going to make the number of possible combinations of trains a shunter's nightmare. We have simplified the service, yet we are able to serve many times the number of destinations within Europe than Nightstar.

The rolling stock was too heavy, required too much power and was too small. The UK gauge meant that the cars were always going to be smaller than the classic sleeper. The high

specification (especially electrical with its numerous loco interface variations) and steel construction meant that the cars were far too heavy and required too much power.

Stock built from aluminium extrusions, with greater insulation and reduced lighting and heating loads would have meant a car of around half the weight/passenger with a lower power requirement, further simplified by not having to interface with other traction.

Security: It soon became apparent that European Infrastructure Managers were not keen on investing in secure passenger areas, or secure sidings, when the market was too small.

We have come up with a practical alternative that precludes the use of major infrastructure investment and increases the flexibility of the service.