

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL 23

WELCOME to the winter 2022/3 edition of the bulletin issued by Trevor Garrod to support campaigners for better rail services throughout Europe.

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EUROSTAR – CONSULTING AND LOBBYING

Eurostar is to merge with Thalys – creating one high speed train operator between London, Amsterdam, Cologne, Paris and indeed beyond.

The merged company, being referred to as "New Eurostar" has agreed to hold a high level consultative meeting once a year with passenger representatives from France, the UK, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands who have been nominated by the European Passengers' Federation. To prepare for this meeting, EPF will hold a zoom call for its member associations on December 14th to focus on priority issues.

"New Eurostar" will also consider study groups on particular issues which could meet, in person or virtually, in between annual meetings. These might go into details on such issues as ticketing or connection policy. The target of the new operator is to increase overall usage by 50% by 2030.

However, the outgoing CEO of Eurostar, Jacques Damas, wrote to the British Government on September 26th outlining the current problems faced by the company.

These included the lack of any state-backed loans (whereas airlines had received £7bn); Brexit which increased the time needed to process passengers and reduced the capacity at terminals; and changes in travel habits plus the high UK access charges compared to those in France.

M Damas concluded, “unless UK charges are reduced, then at best the business will find itself indefinitely locked in to the present position of having to focus on driving high-yield from a limited customer and service base.”

Both the Association of European Rail Agents (www.aera.co.uk) and the European Rail Campaign (UK) have written to the previous and new Secretary of State for Transport.

A reply has been received from the Department for Transport stating “we expect a continuing conversation with the French in the coming months” over border controls; but that they “could not get a commitment from the operators that in response to reducing charges they would increase their service levels on the HS1 Network.”

Lobbying the British Government on behalf of actual and potential users of Eurostar must obviously continue.

NIGHT TRAIN PROGRESS AND CAMPAIGNING

Travelski will this winter again run a London – Bourg St Maurice train using Eurostar stock.

“The European Sleeper”, which had hoped to be operating between Brussels and Prague via Amsterdam and Berlin this year, now aims to start in 2023.

The Belgian Government announced on November 15th that it would give financial support to night trains.

In Sweden, Trafikverket is to invite bids for the franchise and for 16 locomotives and 99 coaches to overnight services between Stockholm and Norrland, to start operating 2027-8.

The Danish transport authority has now given a green light for sleeping cars on the Stockholm – Hamburg night train.

From December 11th the OeBB Nightjet between Munich and Venice will also serve Stuttgart.

The Back-on-Track network is discussing joint projects with Transport & Environment and with BEUC (the Europe-wide federation of national consumer associations). Meanwhile, Back-on-Track Belgium has organised a second poster contest to encourage people to consider using night trains, and the entries will be judged during December. Watch this space....

In previous issues we mentioned the leaflet "Save Time...Go Further...Travel by Night" published last May by the European Rail Campaign (UK). There are only 90 copies left - but you can obtain some by contacting Trevor Garrod (tgarrod21@gmail.com) or downloading it from www.eurorailcampaignuk.org

EUROPEAN PASSENGERS' FEDERATION

On Friday January 13th EPF will hold an event in Brussels to mark its 20th anniversary. For more information see www.epf.eu

Meanwhile, EPF has studied the Agreement on Journey Continuation and passengers' rights if they miss a connecting service. This was announced on October 24th by UIC, CER and CIT, which bring together train operators.

This is a joint agreement by the state operators of France, Germany, Spain, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. It does not include Eurostar or Thalys.

In the event of a missing connection, passengers are allowed to board the next available train if they present confirmation of delay. The Agreement is described as "part of the steps to improve customer experience in international journeys."

EPF has studied the document and considers it needs to go further. A response is to be sent in early December.

BUSY DAYS IN FLANDERS

A group of 13 members of the British associations Railfuture and European Rail Campaign (UK) spent three full days in Belgium in early October. After

travelling there by Eurostar (and experiencing the long queues at London St Pancras International), they changed to a domestic train from Brussels to Antwerp and stayed at a hotel within an easy walk of that city's impressive central station.

One day was spent exploring Antwerp – its art, architecture and cuisine – using its tram and metro network operated by De Lijn. The group were able to benefit from a 3-day ticket valid on all the public transport operated by this company – including the trams in Ghent (where they spent a day) and the renowned Coastal Tram from De Panne to Knokke. The visit also included the TOO Noordzee museum (www.ttonoordzeevw.be at De Panne, run by volunteers who also gave us a ride on their historic trams.

De Panne station is also worth seeing for anyone interested in public transport. It is shared with NMBS (the Belgian State Railways), the coastal tramway and an hourly bus service across the border into France. The historic TOO Noordzee tram is also able to run into De Panne interchange on charter trips such as the one organised for the British visitors – who also thank their Belgian friends in Vlaams Reizigers Bond (REBO) for their assistance in organising this enlightening and enjoyable visit.

A fuller, illustrated, report can be on www.eurorailcampaignuk.org

SEAMLESS STENA?

In some previous issues of this bulletin we have commented on the Harwich – Hoek van Holland ferry service, operated by Stena Line, which has many positive features. For example, it carries foot passengers on both the day and night sailings

This contrasts with DFDS who, in a letter to one intending passenger recently replied, " Our ferries are not physically suitable for foot passengers."

However, since the conventional railway from Schiedam to Hoek van Holland was converted to become part of the Rotterdam metro, ticketing has become more of a challenge. On the vessel, it is no longer possible to buy a Dutch Railways ticket or an RET ticket for the metro and there is no information on onward travel by public transport.

The secretary of the Association of European Rail Agents wrote to Stena Line pointing this out, while acknowledging that it was possible to find this information by searching on the Stena Line website. The company have said they would consider producing a leaflet to be available on the ships.

For a longer article on this matter, please visit the AERA website (www.aera.co.uk)

Meanwhile, it will be interesting to hear the experiences of readers using, or wanting to use, services of other ferry companies as foot passengers and whether the shipping services are well integrated with trains or other public transport..

FORTHCOMING EU PRESIDENCIES

In January the EU Presidency passes to Sweden for six months and then for the second half of 2023 it passes to Spain.

Back-on-Track has been researching what the priorities of each of these Member States may be concerning rail transport.

It appears that the Swedish Government will prioritise security for citizens (and therefore border controls on trains) and speeding up the climate transition; whereas the Spanish Government may be more interested in cross-border connections and open access rail services..

Both nations' Transport Ministers, of course, should be asked what, during their Presidency, they will do to implement EU plans and studies on the "Green Deal" and the December 2021 Action Plan to boost cross-border traffic.

MARYLEBONE – UPS, DOWNS AND UPS

Marylebone (pronounced "Marli Bone") is the only London terminus to which the lines are not electrified.

Built in 1899, it was threatened with total closure in 1983 but is now a busy 6-platform station serving some places it was never intended to serve.

It was the London terminus of the Great Central Railway main line from the North of England, built to a larger loading gauge and part of a grand project by Sir Edward Watkin to run trains from Manchester to Paris via a Channel Tunnel.

Today's travellers, of course, can catch a Eurostar from one of three European capitals to reach London St Pancras International (in another European capital) and make a short trip on the Underground to Marylebone to catch fast trains to Birmingham or Oxford.

The closure of most of the Great Central London Extension in the late 1960s left Marylebone as a quiet 4-platform terminus behind the Great Central Hotel (by then repurposed as 222, Marylebone Road, headquarters of British Rail).

It was only served by ageing diesel suburban trains.

However, Marylebone was saved from closure by a vigorous campaign and the line was then modernised so that it could also compete with the M40 motorway then being constructed.

In 1999 the campaign body now known as Railfuture held a large conference at Bicester to showcase the progress made, and future plans, by Chiltern Trains (as the operator was now called) and the East/West link which crossed it at this bustling market town.

Enhancements to the rail network have now enabled trains to run from Marylebone to Aylesbury Vale Parkway, Birmingham Snow Hill (itself closed and turned into a car park in 1972 but since rebuilt and reopened) and Oxford via Bicester Village shopping centre.

Marylebone station has gained two extra platforms, from one of which I recently caught a fast, modern, comfortable diesel multiple unit to Birmingham for a meeting: OK, there was no catering (which there would have been on the competing West Coast Main Line from London Euston), but I knew that and had a continental breakfast first at one of the four refreshment outlets at the bustling Marylebone terminus.

Moral of the story? This London station was saved and given new roles by a citizens' initiative, modest investment and – very important – imagination! Two inspirational railway managers – Chris Green and Adrian Shooter – also

deserve much credit for the rejuvenation of this alternative route from London to Birmingham.

Trevor Garrod

MORE INFORMATION

Many rail services in Europe – inside and outside the EU – are due to change on December 11th. The European Rail Timetable is a unique source of information about them. Log on to www.europeanrailtimetable.eu to order the winter timetable and/or subscribe to its very information Friday Flyer.

Log on to www.aera.co.uk to reach the specialist rail agents and tour organisers who are members of the Association of European Rail Agents and a link to The Man in Seat 61.

To find out more about international rail campaigns log on to www.back-on-track.eu . Also very informative is the website www.epf.eu which includes details of all the public transport users' organisations affiliated to the European Passengers' Federation in most European countries.

It is planned to issue the next Bulletin of European Rail Travel at the start of March.

Trevor Garrod has made every effort to include up-to-date information in this bulletin but cannot be held responsible for any errors or changes to the information in it. Feedback is welcome to tgarrod21@gmail.com

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