

BULLETIN OF EUROPEAN RAIL TRAVEL nr32

WELCOME to the spring 2025 issue of the bulletin compiled by Trevor Garrod to support campaigners for better rail services throughout Europe.

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THE EUROPEAN SLEEPER – TO VENICE AT AT LAST!

In a number of previous issues of this bulletin we have followed the progress of The European Sleeper (www.europeansleeper.eu/en) - an open access operator initially linking Brussels, Amsterdam and Berlin, then extending to Dresden and Prague, with plans also to go to Barcelona.

It was therefore with great interest that we welcomed their initiative this year to operate a seasonal train from Brussels to Venice.

For the first round trips, in February, the night train was not allowed to cross into Italy, for technical reasons, and so passengers had to be booked on to a normal Inter City train between Innsbruck and Venice. However, The European Sleeper was able to sign an agreement with Treni Turistici Italiani for one of their locomotives to pull the sleeper through the Brenner and down to the Adriatic. Therefore the services scheduled for March 4th

and 12th, and the return northbound services are able to operate as through trains.

We look forward to reporting more services on this route when they are announced.

BACK-ON-TRACK EUROPE

Back-on-Track Europe has been formed as an international non-profit association under Belgian law, bringing together campaigns in several European countries. Its statutes were agreed on December 20th in the presence of a notary in Bruges by representatives of Back-on-Track Germany, Back-on-Track Belgium, Back-on-Track Switzerland and the European Rail Campaign (UK).

The statutes (which are in French, and here translated) state:

“The aim is to promote -

- (i) a sustainable transport policy which minimises the negative effects upon the environment and climate particularly of motor and air transport, which is currently harmful to the climate and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.
- (ii) Improvement of the quantity, quality and accessibility of all international rail services and night trains.”

Further national Back-on-Track groups or affiliates have been formed, or are being formed, in Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Italy and Spain; while in France Back-on-Track works closely with Oui au train de nuit ; there are also contacts in the Netherlands and Portugal.

Back[-on-Track meets every month by zoom and also has two specialist groups (on Policy and Communications) which feed into the main body.

The Policy Group has drafted a paper proposing an EU-initiated network for night trains, the final version of which is due to be agreed at a meeting on April 8th. It will then be used to stimulate dialogue with decision-makers at European level.

Back-on-Track has also started planning an autumn conference in Berlin.

Details will be announced in due course on the website www.back-on-track.eu .

EUROSTAR ISSUES

On January 17th the European Passengers' Federation held its annual high-level meeting in Eurostar. Here are key points from the meeting.

1. Positive outlook for Eurostar - recovery has been encouraging reflecting growth in demand for high-speed international train travel. Investment in 50 new trains and improved passenger comfort. Expanding the network will be on hold until new trains become operational.

2. Terminal capacity and Entry/Exit System implementation – upgrades are under way at stations, including upgrading major hubs. Eurostar is working on biometric systems and facial recognition technology to streamline UK border controls. All terminals should be able to handle the busiest days in the year, which are Fridays in summer.

3. Ticketing – Eurostar plans expansion of point-to-point ticketing and through-ticketing options. Resuming the sale of connections between London and continental destinations remains a priority.

EPF raised concerns about the refundability of Interrail tickets for the London route, suggesting alignment with continental practices. While Eurostar acknowledged this, no immediate changes were confirmed.

4. Communication during disruptions – Eurostar recognised the need for improvement. Templates are being streamlined to provide clarity and faster response time when there are incidents.

EPF welcomed Eurostar's willingness to address the issue and offered to check and give them feedback.

5. Inclusive travel and accessibility – EPF raised concerns about the draft Accessible Travel Policy which could unintentionally create problems for some passengers. Eurostar has already made some changes based on initial customer feedback and also increased the number of dedicated staff.

6. Planned disruptions – EPF emphasised the need for better handling of planned disruptions, particularly because of construction work. Eurostar promised to minimise passenger inconvenience by offering re-booking options and alternative transport wherever possible. EPF will continue to monitor this situation.

Eurostar tickets to “any Belgian station” This has been a very useful supplement, for example for a passenger going from London to Namur or Liege. This summer the standard add-on is to be replaced by a supplement based on the distance from Brussels to the Belgian station – so that a journey from London to Knokke or Arlon will cost more than a journey to Mechelen or Leuven. This change is being introduced at the request of NMBS/SNCB, not by Eurostar.

Eurostar stops at Stratford, Ebbsfleet or Ashford. None of these so-called “International” stations has been served by Eurostar since before the pandemic. It means that passengers from Kent have to travel into London then out again if they want to go to the Continent.

An informal group “Bring Back Our Eurostar Trains” has produced a detailed report putting the case at least for Ashford International to be served again and, following a meeting with the relevant Minister, it appeared that the problem is who pays for the UK Border Agency and Police aux frontieres staff.

Representatives of the European Rail Campaign (UK) have participated in zoom calls with the campaigners in Kent.

EUROPEAN PASSENGERS’ FEDERATION IN LUXEMBOURG AND SWINDON

Annual General Meeting This year EPF will hold its AGM for the first time in the Grand Duchy, on Saturday April 5th. The venue will be the Ibis Hotel at Luxembourg Findel Airport, which also happens to be the new terminus of the tramway, and so members arriving by train will have a 20 minute ride through the 19th century station quarter, the old city and then the modern European quarter on the Kirchberg. The extension to the airport was opened on March 2nd.

The meeting will run from 09.30 till mid afternoon, ending by 15.00. For colleagues not in a hurry to leave Luxembourg there will be a tour of the capital using (free) public transport. There is also a tram and bus museum which will probably interest those staying on till Sunday.

All EPF-affiliated associations may send representatives to the AGM and further information will be sent direct or can be found on www.epf.eu

Annual Conference In our last issue we announced this event, which is open to everyone, whether or not they belong to an EPF-affiliated body. The venue will be in Swindon, on the Great Western Railway from London towards Bristol and Cardiff.

You can now book for the conference on www.epf.eu . It will be all day on Friday June 13th and on Saturday June 14th and optional excursions will be offered after the conference closes at 14.00.

The EPF website also gives you up-to-date details of the programme and advice in how to get to Swindon.

EU projects EPF is multimodal and also takes part in a considerable number of mobility projects funded by the European Union. There are links to these on the EPF website and you can also read more about them on EPF's e-newsletter.

SWITZERLAND TO LONDON BY GETLINK?

Our Swiss colleague Juerg Tschopp has sent a cutting from the Basler Zeitung of February 24th with the headline (my translation, TG) "Direct trains are becoming more likely."

The French company Getlink, which operates the Channel Tunnel announced on February 20th agreement on a declaration of intent with HS1 between the Tunnel and London St Pancras. Getlink chief Yann Leriche stated, "We want to offer attractive possibilities for environmentally friendly journeys to France, Germany and Switzerland." The aim was to offer train journeys of six hours maximum. Everything below this limit was considered as competitive with the aeroplane, especially as railway stations were in city centres whereas airports were not.

A Swiss Federal Railway spokesman as optimistic that a journey time of five hours on a direct train from Basel to London was possible, while further reasons for optimism were the successful Franco-Swiss co-operation with the Lyria trains and the interest of new operators in using the Channel Tunnel. This left border controls as the main hurdle to overcome.

REPORT FROM EUROPEAN RAIL CAMPAIGN (UK)

In April last year we printed 2000 copies of our quality leaflet "Save Time...Go further...Travel by Night Train." In just under a year, 95% of our stocks have been distributed. We have therefore decided that our next priority is to bring out an updated version. This has now been sent to the printer.

The new version stresses the importance of checking paper and digital sources of information, such as the European Rail Timetable.

Once the night train leaflet has been reprinted, we shall then forge ahead with our new leaflet on journeys with one change of train, as described in the last issue of this bulletin.

Incidentally, recent experiences have shown us that campaigners against airport expansion are also interested in our leaflets. And why not? They show a rail alternative to quite a lot of short-haul international flights.

The 2024 leaflet is available on our website www.eurorailcampaig-nuk.org and the new one will also be there in due course.

TRAVEL AGENTS EXPERIENCE GHENT

At the end of January, members of the Association of European Rail Agents (who are principally travel agents or tour organisers) held their Annual General Meeting in the Flemish city of Ghent. Thanks to sponsorship from Eurostar, Belgian Railways, Visit Flanders and Visit Ghent they were also able to learn more about this city, which is less well known to British tourists than Brussels or Bruges.

A varied two days included outward travel by Eurostar Standard, back by Eurostar Plus; second class rail from Brussels to Ghent and first class back; a walking tour of the historic city centre and a fascinating boat trip.

The city of Ghent also offers backing for organisers of conferences, and we stayed at the impressive Marriott Hotel.

For more information see www.visitgent.be and www.gentcongress.be

MORE NIGHT NEWS IN BRIEF

New night train rolling stock is to be ordered in France. It is expected that 180 new carriages will be ordered for existing services, and an option to reach up to 340 new carriages which would enable new services to be introduced. The new services promised by President Macron are Bordeaux – Nice; Paris – Barcelona; and Metz – Nice / Barcelona / Bordeaux.

The order also includes locomotives, which could be bimode to simplify usage of the many services which need alternative routes in the event of overnight engineering work but the alternatives are not electrified.

The first deliveries are expected in 2030, hopefully in time to replace old rolling stock on routes to Briançon and Nice for the Winter Olympics

The contract is a leasing contract with a Rolling Stock Company and will be for 15 years with a possible extension.

Uncertainties in Sweden The Public Service Obligation for the Stockholm – Hamburg night train may end, as the Government is not in favour of it. On the other hand, the PSO for the Jamtland train may be extended from Are/Duved across the border to Trondheim in Norway. The Norwegians are ready to pay a PSO but a decision is needed from Trafikverket in Sweden.

Oslo –Copenhagen The idea of a night train between these two capital cities is still alive. Progress is awaited from the Norwegian Transport Ministry. Meanwhile, there will probably be a daytime direct service Oslo – Copenhagen – Hamburg operated by the Norwegian and Danish Railways from summer 2026.

The next issue of this bulletin is due in early June. Trevor Garrod has made every effort to include correct information but cannot be held responsible for any errors or recent changes.

08/03/25

