

24009 In Europe, Trains Are Full, and More Are on the Way

NYTimes.com January 4th, 2024

Paris to Venice. Barcelona to Amsterdam. Brussels to Bratislava. European cities could see a flurry of new rail connections in the next few years, as governments and private investors respond to climate concerns and strive to keep up with strong demand for cross-border passenger rail traffic.

Patience is required: Some new connections will take a year or more to start operating, and there will be the occasional inconveniences.

The route that passes under the English Channel could also have some slow-building changes in the works. Eurostar has had a monopoly on passenger rail traffic under the Channel for nearly 30 years. But the Channel Tunnel is open access, and competitors are lining up to offer additional services between Britain and the continent.

It's all part of Europe's ongoing rail renaissance, which is being driven in large part by strong interest from passengers.

"For long-distance travel, trains are full — and we have more demand than supply. This is true for day trains as well as night trains," said Alberto Mazzola, the CEO of the Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies.

He attributed the rise in demand to passengers' concerns about the climate as well as trains' increasing price competitiveness with flights. For example, on Thetrainline.com, a popular platform for train bookings in Europe, a round-trip rail journey between Paris and Geneva in late January starts at 63 euros, or about \$69, including luggage. On Google Flights, the cheapest round-trip ticket is 148 euros, not counting fees for checked luggage or airport transfers.

"The big problem that we have is lack of infrastructure," Dr. Mazzola said, noting that train stations are the biggest bottleneck, followed by capacity on the lines themselves. Governments, including in Germany and France, are making major investments in infrastructure, he added, although these projects could take several years to bear fruit.

But passengers are ready to go. Across the European Union, passenger rail transport saw a 50 percent jump between 2021 and 2022, landing at nearly 245 billion miles traveled — just five percent shy of 2019 levels. Based on feedback from rail operators around Europe, Dr. Mazzola expects to see the trend continue when 2023 data are released.

"The demand for sustainable railway travel is really booming," Eurostar Group CEO Gwendoline Cazenave said, adding that by 2030, Eurostar aims to transport 30 million passengers every year across its network — which includes stops in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, as well as Britain and France.

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