



VCD Bahntest English
summary

2021/22

Europe by Rail: A User's Guide

Editorial

In December 2021, T&E member organisation VCD, Germany's environmental transport association, published its 18th Rail Test. It examines current areas of concern on railways, provides useful tips for passengers and offers suggestions for policymakers and rail operators.

The focus of this latest report is trans-European travel – the low-carbon way! After all, you only have to compare greenhouse gas emissions to see which means of transport is best for the climate: while long-distance rail produces greenhouse gas emissions of just 50 grams per kilometre per person, travelling by car results in 152 grams and flying contributes a whopping 284!¹

What's more, the EU has declared 2021 to be the European Year of Rail, while the previous year saw the announcement of a "TEE 2.0" (Trans Europ Express 2.0) plan for new long-distance European rail services.

Of course, we're all itching to go travelling again, and the summer holidays will be upon us again soon enough. So why not take the train?

If only there weren't so many issues with ticketing and passengers' rights! Booking cross-border long-distance journeys via national rail operators' websites is often very laborious and sometimes even impossible, as the 2021/22 VCD Rail Test shows. Large independent booking platforms, which trawl various rail operators to find the cheapest fare for a given journey and also offer ticket sales, can make it easier for passengers to plan their journey, though sometimes national operators' sites offer even cheaper fares that are not available via these platforms.



Thanks to the EU's passenger rights reform, continuous ticketing is set to finally be made easier from 2023. That's progress, but it's not a substitute for a Europe-wide travel platform we so desperately need – here, policymakers still have much to do. The same goes for the expansion of cross-border rail infrastructure and for the funding and procurement of the requisite rolling stock for the proposed TEE 2.0 network. There is then, a long way to go before trans-European rail travel offers us a pleasurable experience throughout, from when we book our tickets to the moment we arrive.

Happy reading!

Bastian Kettner
VCD spokesperson for rail, public transport and multimodality

Information

You can find detailed results from the VCD's survey of six journeys between German and other European cities in its original German report, entitled *Europa per Bahn*, at www.vcd.org.

¹Umweltbundesamt, TREMOD 6.21 (Nov. 2021): <https://t1p.de/8wk3g>, accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

Table of contents

Passenger rights4

Night trains make a comeback.....6

Finding the cheapest fare7

What needs to change9

Passenger rights: what is the status quo?

Your train is running late and you risk missing your connection – it's a scenario many rail users will be familiar with. But passengers should also know their rights, especially on long cross-border journeys. The EU-wide rules are as follows:

- Compensation can only be claimed from the rail operator that issued the ticket.
- If the train is more than 60 minutes late, you are entitled to have 25% of the fare reimbursed.
- If the train is more than 120 minutes late, you are entitled to have 50% of the fare reimbursed.²

If, however, you miss your connection and the connecting train is provided by a different operator, then you can only claim reimbursement for the delayed train and not for the entire continuous journey. And if you're booked on a specific service or travelling on trains where reservation is compulsory, then your ticket may no longer be valid and you could find yourself out of pocket. This is something European policymakers have yet to address.

The EU recently agreed a reform of rail passengers' rights, which will come into force on 7 June 2023.³ In future, a rail firm will have to offer a single continuous ticket for an entire journey if all parts of that journey are operated by it or its subsidiaries. The flipside is that, where a passenger's

journey involves multiple operators, the situation remains unsatisfactory. We are therefore no closer to having a genuinely passenger-friendly continuous-ticketing policy.

When it comes to force majeure, passenger rights have even been watered down, with rail users no longer entitled to compensation for cancellations or delays caused by storms. Here, we are likely to see complaints brought before the European Court of Justice (ECJ).⁴

It will, on the other hand, be easier to take your bike on long-distance trains. From next year, operators will have to offer four bike spaces per train, though these will have to be reserved in advance and are sure to get snatched up quickly, not least because the new rule only applies to new or overhauled carriages.

Useful links

Tips on submitting compensation claims:

<https://t1p.de/org9q>

Fact sheet on passenger rights:

<https://t1p.de/hc9r>

List of dispute resolution bodies in case of complaints against operators:

<https://t1p.de/jat1>

What's new

- Rail companies will have to offer continuous tickets if they are the operator on all parts of a journey.
- Compensation can no longer be claimed if a delay or cancellation is caused by force majeure (e.g. severe storms)
- From 2023, bicycle capacity is set to gradually increase on regional and long-distance services as new trains with dedicated bike spaces come into service. The new EU rules stipulate a minimum of four spaces per train.
- People with disabilities who need help boarding or leaving a train will have to give just 24 hours' notice rather than the current 48.



² Cf. European Consumer Centre Germany: Travelling By Train, <https://t1p.de/lo0th>, accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

³ Cf. Regulation (EU) 2021/782 of the European Parliament and Council on rail passengers' rights and obligations, Article 41, 29 April 2021, <https://t1p.de/n45x>, accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

⁴ Cf. "Nicht sehr verbraucherfreundlich: EU schränkt Fahrgastrechte bei Zug-Verspätungen ein", in Der Tagesspiegel, 29 April 2021, <https://t1p.de/y2ze>, accessed 11 Mar. 2022.

Travelling across Europe by bike and train

If you're going abroad by train and taking your bike, you'll have to battle through a baffling array of different rules – at least until 2023, when new passenger rights come into force. Until then, whether your bike is allowed on board will vary according to rail operator, train class, and even bicycle type. That may sound faintly comical, but, for the cyclist, it can mean a great deal of time-consuming and exasperating research.

Passengers with a folded bike or a bicycle stowed in a travel bag can rely on simple rules. These count as luggage and are generally allowed on long-distance trains.

But, it is very different for conventional bicycles. These are only allowed on certain long-distance trains. For in-country travel, the obligatory bike ticket can mostly only be purchased together with a passenger ticket.

For cross-border journeys, a separate international bike ticket is often required. Bear in mind, however, that such tickets are not universally accepted. Moreover, there is a lack of information online regarding which rail operators permit bikes on board and what rules apply where. Travelling abroad by bike and train thus requires careful preparation and detailed journey-specific research.

Tip: if you want to take your bike abroad, plan well ahead!

Deutsche Bahn's online journey planner is a useful tool for those seeking to travel by train and bike – be it in Germany or beyond. If you click "further options" and tick the box under "carriage of bicycles", it will display only those services on which bikes are permitted. In the listed journey options, a small grey bike symbol indicates whether or not cycle spaces are available for a particular journey.

However, you can't actually buy an international bike ticket on the site. So if the various obstacles haven't already put you off, you'll have to either visit the rail operator websites for the countries you intend to travel through or go to a physical ticket office.

You can find more information on bike spaces and other services for cyclists (such as local bike hire) via the national rail operators' websites:

ČD (Czech Republic): www.cd.cz

DSB (Denmark): www.dsb.dk/en

National Rail (UK): www.nationalrail.co.uk

HŽPP (Croatia): www.hzpp.hr

NS (Netherlands): www.ns.nl

ÖBB (Austria): www.oebb.at

PKP (Poland): www.intercity.pl

Renfe (Spain): www.renfe.com

SBB (Switzerland): www.sbb.ch

SNCB (Belgium): www.belgiantrain.be

SNCF (France): www.sncf.com

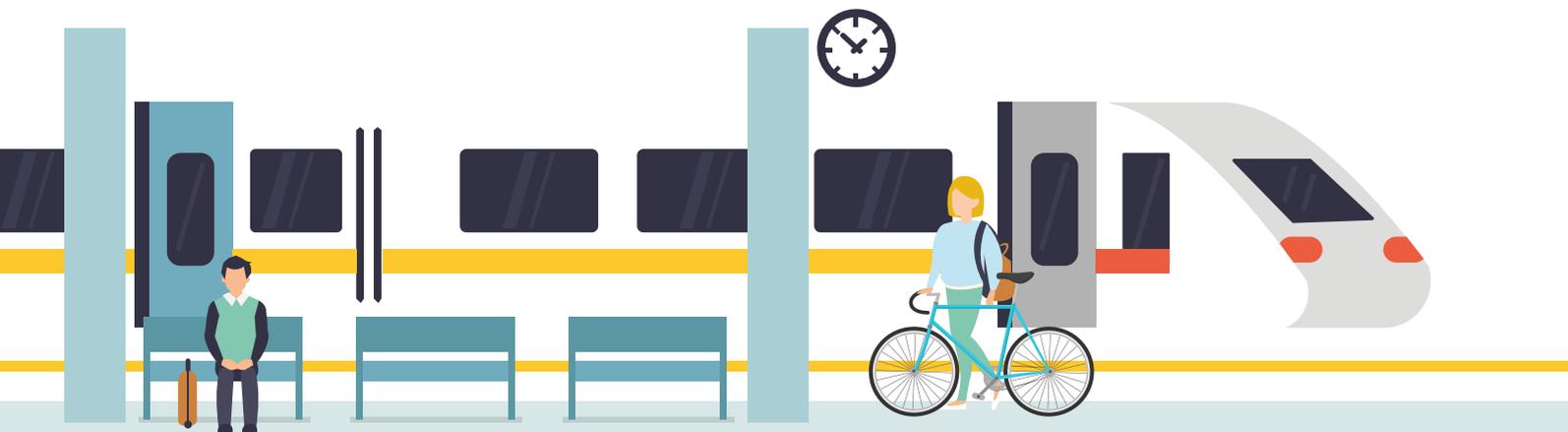
SJ (Sweden): www.sj.se

SŽ (Slovenia): www.potniski.sz.si

Trenitalia (Italy): www.trenitalia.com

ZSSK (Slovakia): www.zssk.sk

Swiss member organisation Verkehrsclub der Schweiz (VCS) also has useful information on its website regarding bikes on trains around Europe: <https://t1p.de/l8sm>



Night trains make a comeback

A sustainable and restful way to travel, night trains allow you to cover up to 1,000 kilometres in your sleep. Until recently, this was a largely neglected niche market, but now sleepers are enjoying a comeback, as increased demand for climate-friendly travel coincides with modern, new-generation services such as Austria's Nightjet, run by the state operator ÖBB and its partners.

With the introduction of its 2016/17 timetable, ÖBB began expanding its night train network, taking over routes abandoned by other rail operators.

Today, both state operators and private rail companies are planning new sleeper services. The following have already been confirmed:

- Berlin – Prague – Vienna – Graz – Ljubljana/Zagreb (from December 2022)
- Prague – Berlin – Amsterdam – Brussels (from summer 2022)
- Berlin – Paris(/Brussels) (from December 2023)
- Zurich – Barcelona (from December 2024)

In September 2020, a concept study published by Germany's transport ministry outlined new night train services that could feasibly be launched in the near future. These would complement the planned TEE 2.0 network and help to further boost passenger numbers.⁵

Did you know?

Midnight Trains has announced plans to run luxury trans-European night trains from 2024. The start-up intends to launch services connecting Paris with ten other cities within a radius of 1,500 kilometres.

Your next adventure?

The site www.night-trains.com, meanwhile, offers maps of the world's night train networks. A key benefit here is that users can select from a list of destinations. Clicking one opens a page showing all the night train routes serving that destination – with timetable information and links to ticket providers.

The 2021/22 VCD Rail Test highlights the need for a Europe-wide night train network; this would encourage more people to travel by train instead of plane or car. Moreover, capacity on existing routes should be expanded as many services are booked up far in advance.

⁵ <https://t1p.de/yzjr>

Finding the cheapest fare

As long as there is no pan-European information and booking system, it's generally worth comparing state rail operators' websites along with independent ticketing platforms such as **Trainline**. Some of these have their own particular advantages and disadvantages. The **PKP** and **Trenitalia** websites, for instance, make ticket purchases especially complicated or even impossible, though in some cases booking via **Deutsche Bahn** or Trainline is also more difficult than you'd expect.

PKP: The Polish state operator's ticketing platform is extremely confusing. You may be able to switch between different languages on its website but, if you select any language other than Polish or English, you can check train times but not buy tickets. And while you can purchase tickets on the English site, it requires much perseverance: fares are only displayed in Złoty; for journeys with changes, you have to buy a separate ticket for each train, even if they're all operated by PKP; and, though fares are often lower than on other platforms, the site's difficulty of use and lack of important information would frustrate even the most patient of passengers.

Trenitalia: The Italian national rail operator's website provides both clearly presented journey details and significantly cheaper tickets than Trainline or Deutsche Bahn, but the devil is in the detail:

After the desired connection has been selected and the passenger is about to book, an inconspicuous sentence at the very bottom of the booking page indicates that the ticket can only be picked up at a ticket machine in Italy by means of a code. It seems like the ticket sales of this operator has not arrived in the 21st century yet.

Anyone wishing to start their journey outside Italy should not book the outward journey via Trenitalia!

DB: While Deutsche Bahn's website allows passengers to find a range of saver fares for travel outside of Germany, there is no guarantee that these are the lowest available fares. For certain routes, it is unable to provide a fare at all, and sometimes other national operators or Trainline will offer different and perhaps more logical journey options. In such cases, comparing the results with the relevant operators' websites may give passengers more ticket options.

Trainline: This ticketing platform for bus and rail boasts that it always offers the cheapest available fares.⁶ For many of the surveyed journeys, this was true, though the fares were mostly comparable with those offered by DB. On the other hand, Trainline can only offer the best available fares for routes serviced by operators with which it has agreements. As a result, lower fares were sometimes available from national rail operators, as was the case with Hungary's MÁV. For certain journeys, Trainline was not able to offer tickets at all, but DB was. This was true of services operated by PKP.

Nonetheless, Trainline is one of the few platforms that finds the cheapest fares from the tickets made available to it by the various rail operators, giving it a distinct advantage over national rail operators' ticketing platforms. For some journeys, there is a booking fee of less than five euros, which seems reasonable given the straightforward purchase process and cheaper fares.



⁶ <https://t1p.de/27ya>

MÁV: For journeys that begin or end in the country, Hungary's national rail operator offers lower fares than other ticket providers – at least for lone travellers. MÁV's family tickets, on the other hand, can work out more expensive as there is also a charge for accompanied children under 15, which is not the case when booking with DB.

SNCF and NS: The fares offered by these two state operators' booking systems are not particularly noteworthy. Often, they work out more expensive than those of Trainline or DB or are broadly similar. It's definitely worth comparing with other platforms before purchasing tickets here.

For travellers who want to visit multiple destinations within a few days or weeks, Interrail's international or single-country passes can be an attractive option. Here too, though, it is always worth checking to see whether individual operators' point-to-point fares or seasonal deals might work out cheaper. More information on Interrail passes is available at: www.interrail.eu/en

How to book with confidence – and get the best deals

- ✓ Plan your trip well in advance: compare different ticketing platforms, journey options, and deals.
- ✓ Be flexible about when you go: mostly, travelling during the week or at night is cheaper than at weekends.
- ✓ Book early, but not too early: for some journeys, tickets won't be available eight weeks in advance. Six weeks is usually sufficient.
- ✓ Always compare fares offered by national rail operators with those available from independent ticketing platforms.
- ✓ Read ticketing platforms' small print carefully.
- ✓ Where possible, book your continuous journey in one go.



What needs to change

Travel information and ticket sales

The survey's examination of various ticketing platforms and their pros and cons underlines the urgent need for a trans-European travel platform, one that would offer timetable information and ticketing options for all forms of public transport. Thanks to cooperation between rail operators, however, continuous tickets can at least be purchased for certain cross-border journeys – these make life much simpler for rail users. In the event of delays or cancellations, passengers are entitled to compensation.

The Polish and Italian state operators' websites underline how far such platforms still have to evolve: making passengers buy separate tickets for each service or neglecting international online ticket sales is hardly paving the way for forward-looking, passenger-friendly ticketing. The EU's passenger rights reform, which comes into force in 2023, may improve matters a little, in ticketing in particular, but given the challenges facing European rail passengers, it is merely a modest first step.

New services and infrastructure

The European Commission and member states have agreed to cut climate emissions by 55% (based on 1990 levels) by 2030. Via integrated regular-interval timetables, something a number of European states have already introduced, they aim to encourage the switch away from road and air to rail. At the May 2021 rail summit, almost all member states' transport ministers signed a letter of intent backing the development of a trans-European network of night and daytime rail services crossing multiple borders. As things stand, however, it's hard to see how these targets can be met – in 2020, for instance, Germany, a key transit country, didn't lay a single kilometre of new track, while route capacities are already exhausted in many places.

The VCD backs the development of a network of long-distance, cross-border services. But achieving this requires not only a massive expansion in rail infrastructure, but also secured funding for network operations as well as for the requisite additional rolling stock. Here, we have yet to see any binding commitments.



European rail travel needs to be made easier and more convenient!

The 2021/22 VCD Rail Test shows that, even in the 21st century, buying tickets for international rail travel can still be an exasperating process. If passengers want to get a full picture of provided services and ticket options, they have to search through a variety of platforms. This kind of overcomplexity makes the desired switch away from road and air to rail seem a distant prospect.

There is definitely room for improvement here. But it's not just ticketing that should be made simpler. We also need frequent cross-border services with attractive journey times and affordable fares if rail is to also be a viable and hassle-free option for family holidays or weekend city breaks.

That's why the VCD is calling for:

- 1.** A trans-European rail network offering regular, high-speed, long-distance services, with guaranteed connections and ample time for changes.
- 2.** The expansion of the night-train network to other parts of Europe.
- 3.** A user-friendly pan-European online platform that allows passengers to buy continuous tickets for travel across borders and across all forms of public transport. Buying international train tickets needs to be made as easy as booking a flight.
- 4.** Compensation entitlement to apply to an entire continuous journey – even if it comprises services provided by different operators.
- 5.** Zero VAT on international journeys – as already implemented by some EU member states, including France and the Czech Republic.
- 6.** Easy-to-use, easy-to-book facilities for carrying bicycles.



VCD Verkehrsclub Deutschland e. V. | Wallstraße 58 | 10179 Berlin | Germany
Phone +49 30 28 03 51 0 | Fax +49 30 28 03 51 10 | mail@vcd.org | www.vcd.org



European Federation for Transport and Environment AISBL

8 Square de Meeûs | 1050 Brussels | Phone +32 2 851 02 02
info@transportenvironment.org | transportenvironment.org



Editors: Bastian Kettner (project leader), Franziska Fischer, Anne Fröhlich,
Alexander Kaas Elias and Magdalena Reiner

Translated from German into English by: Lyam Bittar

Design and Layout: Playground, Cologne

Cover photo: Julia Lavrinenko - istockphoto.com | Photo Editorial: Kyra Hertel, VCD

Illustrations: Playground, Cologne

Reprint only with permission of the publisher.

© VCD e. V., T&E 03/2022