

## Eurostar: A Journey By Track

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

I don't know about you, but as someone who doesn't often travel by train, I get a great sense of excitement when I board a train that's actually heading for another country.

For aeons, the United Kingdom was completely cut off from all the countries surrounding it, with no way of traveling to continental Europe unless you got on a boat -- and then later, when they were invented, a plane. But that all changed in the 1980s, when plans were unveiled for a tunnel underneath the English Channel, the stretch of water that separates the UK from France. It was completed in 1994 and since then, train services have traveled through the tunnel, operated by Eurostar.

We're lucky enough to live in the southeast corner of the UK, which makes Eurostar a great way to travel to the continent. There are three stations now in this country, as a result of a massive programme of work, which saw new high speed rail lines arrive, along with two new stations and the closing of another one.

For anyone who's been to London before, you may have been aware that Eurostar services ran from London's Waterloo Station over to France and Belgium, but that all changed in November 2007, when that station closed and was replaced with a brand new terminus at St. Pancras in the north of London. It's a switch that makes more sense, as St. Pancras is where trains from the Midlands, north of England, and Scotland all arrive. At around the same time as that station opened, so did another one, called Ebbsfleet International, just southeast of Greater London. There's also another station a bit further southeast of Ebbsfleet, Ashford International, which still has Eurostar trains calling at it, although those services are a lot more limited with the opening of Ebbsfleet.

As for the other side of the Channel, the services run to four main points - three in France: Paris, Lille, and Disneyland Paris (perfect for a quick weekend break there!); and Brussels, the capital of Belgium. Travel times vary, depending which station you're leaving from, but from St. Pancras, the average travel time to Lille is around an hour and a half, two hours to Brussels, two and a half hours to Paris or Disneyland Paris, although be warned, there's only one direct service to the theme park each way in a day.

We're located in a fortunate position, almost halfway between both Ebbsfleet and Ashford stations, so we can easily get to either and we've

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taken full advantage of that over the years to enjoy a number of journeys into mainland Europe. One of the reasons we enjoy the Eurostar so much is that it's nothing like catching a plane. For starters, you only have to be at the station and through security checks 30 minutes before your train departs. In fact, there's something to be said for not getting there much before that time, as unlike major airports, there isn't a huge amount to do at the stations, with just a couple of shops and restaurants, which you'll enjoy browse in a few minutes.

Of course, you still have to go through security checks and border controls in the same way that you would at any airport, but the lines are never very long and you always seem to move quickly. Just a few minutes before your train arrives, you'll be called from the waiting area to the platform and you'll find that the carriages are neatly marked out when you get there. This is especially important for the stations en route, such as Ebbsfleet, Ashford and Lille, as the train doesn't stop for long and it's a good way of ensuring everyone is in the right place and able to board quickly before it gets there.

As happens on many trains, there are different classes -- Business Premier, aimed very much at the business traveler, Leisure Select, and Standard. We've traveled in both of the latter two classes and they're both very comfortable. Even in Standard, you'll find your seats are probably at least as big as you're used to in economy class on a plane and probably a bit bigger. In this class, there's no food included in your fare and they don't bring any round to your seat. Instead you'll have to make your way to the buffet car -- and of course, as in any environment where it's the only option available, don't expect it to be cheap!

With Leisure Select, you will get a meal included, either breakfast, lunch or dinner, and that includes free alcohol, plus of course the seats are a bit larger and everything is just that touch more luxurious.

Perhaps the highlight of any Eurostar trip is actually heading through the Channel Tunnel itself. It's probably best here to clear up any misconceptions. You won't see anything as you travel through it -- it will just be exceptionally dark outside with the occasional light. When the service first started, apparently the most frequently asked question they got was "Why can't you see the fish?" so let's just deal with that one now - it's because there are no windows put into the tunnel! The time in the tunnel is around 35 - 40 minutes and to be honest, it's all over and done with before you know it.

Taking a trip on Eurostar is certainly a unique experience and it's opened up a whole new world of day trips, weekend breaks and longer stays for people in France, Belgium and the UK. It's something worth

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doing at least once and the prices are reasonable -- fares can be as low as #60 round-trip (about \$115 at the current exchange rate) and there are often good deals to be found on their website [www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com). So if you happen to be heading for Paris, Lille, London, Brussels or even Disneyland Paris in the near future, it's a mode of transport worth keeping in mind. It will certainly open up new opportunities and new countries to you.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

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