

By Eurostar to Paris and back : the inaugural journey

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By Eurostar to Paris and Back *The inaugural journey*

by Roger Kemp

Ever wondered how you could reach Switzerland within a day without the exhausting ritual of a ferry crossing interrupting the train journey, or enduring the dubious delights of air travel? On Monday 14 November at 08:23 hours, the solution was found. My wife and I had the pleasure of travelling on the first commercial Eurostar service. The concept of travelling vast distances across the Continent overland by rail in a single day became a reality.

We arrived at Waterloo Station at 06:30 hrs in order to sample the atmosphere. Unfortunately, unlike other services, it was not possible to saunter onto the platform as we would have liked to do. The check-in, airline style, started an hour before departure. As soon as the train was shown on the indicator board there was a stampede to the barriers. We inserted the computerised ticket, which also carried compulsory seat reservation, into the barrier control. It was returned after a few moments, the barrier then opened, allowing us to proceed into the departure lounge, located beneath the platforms. After a security check, we waited to board. It was at this point that we realised that seemingly the entire UK Media was travelling with us. We had already been interviewed for BBC Breakfast Television and later, I noted my name in a National newspaper. In addition to this, various celebrities such as Frank Bough, Cliff Michelmores, Jeremy Beadle, Keith Chegwin and Howard Stapleford were travelling on this train, as well as other attention seekers such as a man in a lurid cat suit and another who ostentatiously sported a pinstripe suit and bowler hat.

At 08:30 we were finally ushered onto Platform 24. The train is very long and there are therefore a number of escalators leading to the platforms. We were greeted by more media men and, after a photo session in front of power car 3005, I was finally reunited with my wife at the entrance to our carriage.

My first impressions were favourable. In both First and Standard Class, the seating

followed accepted TGV practice and considering its comparative narrowness when compared with Continental trains, the impression was of seemingly more space than one might have expected. After a fanfare from a brass band and greetings from a town crier, at 08:23 precisely Train 9010 glided smoothly out of Waterloo. Almost immediately it was obvious that London commuter trains would slow our progress. After joining the main line from Victoria, London slowly slipped away. An ITN crew had set up their equipment in the vestibule ahead of us, their array of cables and other miscellaneous editing equipment occupied the space meant for passenger's luggage. Throughout the journey microphones, cameras and reporters were a hazard, but no one seemed to mind.

The journey through Kent was uneventful, save for the odd looks of commuters waiting for London-bound trains glancing up from their newspapers to look at this strange object! After a leisurely stroll through Kent, we engaged the overhead catenary at Dollands Moor. At this point the train at last accelerated and we soon passed two SNCF BB 22000 locomotives assigned for freight services awaiting their next duties. The Shuttle terminal disappeared in a blur and we were then told by the Train Manager that we were about to enter the Channel Tunnel. Although the mood in the train was one of expectancy, at this point the voices were quiet - a hint of apprehension perhaps. The train carried on whizzing through and it has to be said that the ride was very smooth. One passenger managed to balance a £1 coin on the table and it did not fall over throughout the transit. The design of the carriage ensured that claustrophobia was not a problem.

After just twenty minutes we left the Tunnel to a collective cheer from the passengers. Almost immediately we veered away from Eurotunnel's line to its Coquelles terminal and passed through Calais-Fréthun station onto the LGV Nord. We noticed a perceptible kick as the train accelerated to the line speed of 300 km/h, enabling it to show its true power, speeding

through the French countryside. Less than 90 minutes after leaving the Tunnel we arrived on Platform 3 at Paris Gare du Nord to the welcoming French media which competed with our own for attention. The red carpet had been changed to Gallic blue for the occasion! The station announcer even spoke English for the occasion, welcoming passengers on the first Eurostar train.

After duly taking photographs of trailing power car 3006, we made our way to the exit onto the main concourse. This was at the end of the platform and we found ourselves in a *melée* of media people, fellow passengers and a whole group of people who wanted their special guidebook prepared by EPS, autographed by the driver.

We then left the station for the afternoon and in spite of rather gloomy weather which had obstinately persisted all the way, still had an enjoyable time. A leisurely stroll to the Gare de l'Est revealed a 13:41 departure for Bâle CFF - very tempting!

The return train left at 17:09 hrs and we arrived back at the station in good time for the check-in. The view from the first floor balcony provided a wonderful sight of TGVs, Belgian, German and French rolling stock as well as the now rare sight of a CC 41000 series electric locomotive. It was exciting to see, among the other many romantic destinations, London Waterloo shown on the large blue indicator board. We duly checked in at first floor level via the barrier system as at Waterloo. The security here seemed to be more unobtrusive, but the use of dogs was more prevalent.

The train, which was the same as that on the outward journey, was eased onto Platform 5 with 45 minutes to departure. We noted huge vans of provisions being stacked on board. We were asked to board with twenty minutes to our scheduled departure time. This was done by walking over a bridge and down onto ground level once again. It is not possible to gain access to the platforms in the secure area from the main concourse.

We left precisely on time with a tired but happy group of passengers. British Immigration Control was carried out 20 kilometres outside Paris. This was yet another novelty, although

on the Continent this practice is of course, commonplace on international trains.

It was by now becoming dark and there was little to see. Lille Europe whizzed by and it was not long after that when our French train conductor announced the approach to the Channel Tunnel. This was the cue for our train to grind to an ignominious halt. No one appeared to know what the problem was, but it appeared that a Shuttle train had nipped in front and as a result we were being held. We eventually restarted just as the return Eurostar to Paris was leaving the Tunnel. Our progress was good to start with but then we braked hard. This was a prelude to a stop-start journey through. We crossed the French crossover and promptly proceeded on the Down line, crossing back again at the UK crossover. We eventually left the Tunnel about half an hour late and as the route to London is not conducive to high speed running, we were unable to make up the time, despite being routed the quickest way, ie via BTR (now CTR). We eventually reached Waterloo at 19:39. It was an eerie feeling hearing a French conductor announcing our imminent arrival at Waterloo. We were all tired, but had had a wonderful day.

There is no doubt that some minor problems remain with the service but if you want to travel by rail during the day, Eurostar now allows you to make connections which could enable a through journey from, London to Basel, Bern, Lausanne and Genève, as well as many points in Continental Europe to be made and still arrive at a civilised hour. This was impossible until now unless you travelled overnight or broke the journey. Eurostar may be more expensive (the cheapest fare at present is £95 return and is non-refundable) but it is balanced by the saving on overnight accommodation and the ability to pay in Sterling throughout the journey - very helpful if the foreign currency is running out on the way home. It also, at long last, removes the hassle of transfers between trains and ferries. I would therefore recommend travelling by Eurostar to any SRS member, as well as anyone with the remotest interest in Continental train travel which, as far as I am concerned, now begins at London Waterloo!