

European rail travel is on the right lines, so why isn't ours?

Politicians must start signalling their intent to improve unreliable public transport links

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- Neil Drysdale



PUNCTUALITY: A train arrives at the station in Bruges, with the Belgian rail network both comfortable and dependable for travellers.

It was the sort of railway journey that I would never have dreamed of taking anywhere in Britain. Our recent holiday itinerary featured a trip from Ypres to Bruges in Belgium involving a change of trains at Kortrijk (Courtrai), with our service scheduled to arrive in the latter city at 11.50am and our connection due to depart from a different platform five minutes later.

Wherever you live in the UK, from Aberdeen to Abergavenny, this would have been a recipe for frayed fingernails, anxious scrutiny of watches and general frazzle.

Yet, as it transpired, there wasn't even the hint of palpitation.

Instead, after leaving Ypres on a comfortable, smooth-running train, we reached our destination with seven minutes to spare and safely made the connection without any difficulty.

Indeed, that was the story of the whole week with nary a hitch or glitch on the journey.

Every train was on time and they sped to where they were meant to go.

It was the same in Italy, where even a packed platform at Pompeii – one of the most popular tourist sites in the world – failed to spark any explosions of dismay.

If the authorities can manage this in Europe, why is it such a different story here?

As a non-driver, I have always loved travelling by rail, which avoids the threat of being caught up in motorway logjams or sweaty queues at airport check-in desks.

But the reality is that if you can't depend on your train turning up on time, you are never entirely at ease, whether you are planning a holiday or using a commuter service.

That aforementioned experience in Belgium contrasted starkly with a weekend break in the Highlands last winter.

Our Aberdeen-Inverness service pattered along the line as if it was Brian the snail from The Magic Roundabout.

We were a few minutes late for our connection but surely, given the number of passengers heading to other routes, ScotRail would employ some common sense.

Pause for hollow laughter.

Sadly, however, there wasn't much to chortle about as we shivered in a cold waiting room for the next two hours and day turned to night in the Highland capital.

Suddenly, Golspie seemed a long way in the distance. And, of course, while the network apologised for the situation, it was done via a Dalek-style voice on the public address system.

The Scottish Government officially scrapped peak rail fares for ScotRail services this month, which should be the catalyst for an increasing number of customers.

Yet I wonder how it will stack up. Of course, there should be a positive reaction to cheaper tickets encouraging more people to use public transport, which will lower carbon emissions and support those affected by the cost of living.

But there's something about the policy that ignores a basic fact of life. Namely, that rail – and bus – services in the north of Scotland are frequently so inadequate.

If there is a storm, everything grinds to a halt. If there is a signal failure or a points malfunction, it's eeny-meeny-miny-moe whether your journey even happens.

And, if you live in Peterhead or Fraserburgh, you're 30-odd miles from your nearest train.

With a population of more than 19,000, Peterhead is the second largest town in Scotland without a rail service – and now has the biggest fish market in Europe.

Last weekend's Seafest in the Blue Toon was a reminder of how the public will support initiatives and new ideas that provide enhanced public transport links.

You can't blame organisations such as the Campaign for North East Rail and Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce, whose Buchan Sustainable Transport Study made a powerful case for new railway stations boosting regeneration in the north-east.

But where's the political will to do more than just indulge in platitudes?

Yes, these projects will cost a lot of money. But so did revitalising the Borders Railway between Edinburgh and Galashiels in 2015.

Yet the investment could be just the shot in the arm that the region needs.

I've savoured the quality and reliability of trains in Europe, whether in Italy, Belgium or France. Meanwhile, railway expert and author David Spaven has relished his journeys across Germany.

It surely shouldn't be beyond the wit of British transport operators to follow their lead.

David says: "I have often travelled by rail in Germany and their best trains – the sleek inter-city expresses – are streets ahead of what Britain can offer.

"Rail privatisation here was an ideological diversion which cost the taxpayer dear.

"While private operators do play an important role in the German set-up, there has not been the massive fragmentation we've seen in the rail industry here."

I can only speak from experience. And I've travelled across Europe enough to state unequivocally that their rail services are on a higher grade altogether than here in the north.

But who is going to do something about it? If the politicians vying for Holyrood seats next year don't make the issue a priority, maybe we should all start asking them why.

They serve us. Not the other way around.

It's eeny-meeny-minymoe whether your journey even happens.

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