BIG RAIL STORY

One writer, one Interrail pass and a wildly over-ambitious, 37-stop journey to test railway accessibility in Europe. Wanstead-based travel writer **Carole Edrich** presents the third instalment of her *Big Rail Story*

Eurostar trains have their own smell. Business carriages carry notes of clean plastic and electronics. Zoo class whiffs of whatever the indigents have brought in: usually over-strong perfumes, aftershave, crisps, babies and coffee. Aromas become less 'used' and more 'cared for' from one price-point to the next, until you reach the carpeted first class (sorry, Eurostar Premier) which, despite leather headrests and an occasional spendthrift passenger, smells of very little at all.

I am in Business (Eurostar Plus if you're feeling pedantic) and happy to be here because I only recently discovered my first-class interrail pass includes it. I'm less happy about infection risk. Businessmen (or at least men dressed as if for business) are coughing all over. Wouldn't it be poetic if, after taking years to arrange this trip, I caught something nasty on the first day!

Eurostar trains have their own special noise too. Out of St Pancras: judder judder hushed-scream, judder judder hushed-scream. As speed builds, it turns into judder judder shh-shh, judder judder shh-shh – and then when we're at our maximum speed and leaving Essex for the undulating fields of Kent, it goes judder judder wobble judder shhhh, judder judder wobble judder shhhh.

I'm finally on my way. Do I look at the gorgeous golden dawn-lit scenery? Do I make conversation with the people around me? I do not. I do my best to go to sleep. At least I try. Trying to cover nose and mouth without seeming to is – strangely – not conducive. Eyes shut and still trying, I hear the people on my table discussing the inconvenience of shutting down Ashford and the resulting pressure on St Pancras. I realise I've forgotten my hand sanitiser. And (obviously) my mask.



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I'm nearly asleep when Veronique the steward asks if I have any allergies, in preparation for breakfast. It's only the second time in about 100 trips that this has happened. Is it a new thing or have previous stewards not liked me?

I give up on sleep. Decide on coffee before breakfast, unscrew my lovely brand new-for-my-rail-trip LARQ UV flask. And learn that it's possible to overfill. Luckily, the fluid only goes on my jeans and black t-shirt. Unluckily, it's still hot.

Breakfast – such as it is these days – arrives. Then we're out of the tunnel to huge horizons, long rolling fields, quaint French-looking farms and a baby blue sky with gilt-edged cotton-wool clouds.

Two Eurostar trains (I know they're Eurostar because they're labelled; trainspotting innit) pass the other way. Then more farms, tiny parcels of land, picture-perfect compact villages, each with requisite church, orchard, and stands of oak and spruce. The train starts slowing for Lille.

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