

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 fourth instalment of her *Big Rail Story*

Lille Europe Station makes me think of *Blade Runner* with its awe-inspiring architecture. At first glance, it seems pared-down and simple. In reality, it's not. Koolhaas (the area's master planner) created Euralille with an inside-out everything-on-view complexity that he called Piranesian (think stark imaginary jails with high and low angle views of entangled planes). It is corporate ethos as spectacle. Accessibility dwarfed by unflinching utilitarianism. Built with the objective of demonstrating power. The only station that does it better is Westminster. I'm not sure what that says about us.

Approaching Lille Europe, the Chief Steward reminds Disneyland-goers they need to change, just in case they've missed the fact that Brexit stopped direct trips from London. He doesn't mention it's for another station, although the fact is not a biggie. Rather than the stressful dash across a major European city you'd get in Paris, it's a seven-minute straight-line. A properly signposted walk that is only challenging for people with children, luggage, wheelchairs or who struggle to walk. But hey, who's counting (me!).

We leave Lille and the mandatory slew of inner-city graffiti. Through the window are small copses, fields and the occasional road. The train hums as it reaches its Euro-optimum speed, a calming sound destroyed only by the regular rattle of the closest sliding door. I know we're in Belgium when I see the wind turbines of Hainaut turning lazily in lovely bright sun. Hainaut is most likely derived from the Germanic for 'river-land', and yes, kinda, our own Hainault was respelled for a fictitious association with Philippa of Hainaut. My ADHD brain on 'active' goes from borders to phone notifications and I wonder



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why I didn't get a Vodafone welcome message in France.

If you're not in zoo class, your Eurostar ticket entitles you to free tea or coffee from the bar. If you don't like carrying hot drinks on a rocking train, wait until the train's judder-judder-wobble sound turns into a hum. My unflinching sense of direction sends me the wrong way, which I only realise after reaching the penultimate carriage. I turn round, remember to follow the signage, and eventually pick up my tea. Thirty minutes later, Vodafone welcomes me to Belgium.

At Brussels Midi Station, I spend 10 minutes in confusion. Panicking because I can't find Ghent, I suddenly realise I should be looking for Gand-Saint-Pierre (French) or Gent-Sint-Pieters (Dutch) and laugh at myself while rushing to the platform. I flop onto a seat and pretend not to watch the ticket controller eject a party of Australians loudly claiming they didn't know it was first class ('1st' is on every window and door). I just manage to change my Interrail ticket booking before he comes for me.

For relevant links to the places, to read more of Carole's work or to listen to her podcast, visit wnstd.com/edrich