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 second instalment of her *Big Rail Story*

Unless you're in the Eurostar Business Lounge at St Pancras, waiting is a noisy, uncomfortable experience. Before the Thalys takeover, my points would have earned me access. Now that 'frequent traveller' benefit requires 70 trips in a year. That's not frequent travel, it's living on the train! The quiet corner I've waited in since then – the only quiet corner in the waiting area – is roped off. Elsewhere, there's not even wall space to lean on. Proving this level of overcrowding for an £80 article would need applications to seven different authorities. I give up.

They've told us they're planning to turn Channel rail trips into a 'turn up and go' experience, where passengers can arrive 'minutes before departure' without crowding or excessive queues. However, a previous Eurostar CEO said it's only reduced timetables that prevent daily queues as big as the ones at the Channel ports. The new EU Entry/Exit system needs 75 minutes, so 'turn up and go' feels as ambitious as Elmer Fudd catching that 'wascally wabbit' and Mr Magoo finding the right door. Hang on, I can't find their feasibility study either. Add Wile E Coyote catching the Road Runner on a Warner Bros or even Netflix screen.

At this point I realise that my carefully planned minimal luggage (including prized LARQ UV flask and emergency sugar-free lemonade) is way too heavy. When the Paris train leaves I finally score a seat and repack, shoving as much as I possibly can into my wheely bag while hoping I can manage the backpack all the way to my first overnight. ME (chronic fatigue) is such an unpredictable bummer, but I won't give up.

I browse through *Stylist* and see a gorgeous lime-green coat I don't need, and Dior



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Capture Pro-Collagen Shot serum for fatigue that I do, but can't afford. I give up.

I get talking to a man with Parkinson's. With my *Disability Review Magazine* hat on, I ask what might make his trip easier. He says since stress makes things worse, more signage would help. Lack of help lifting big bags onto scanning machines when you're disabled, especially when your belt is in the x-ray tray is also a biggie. He read there'd be enough to do while waiting for the train. Apart from musical chairs for seating and dodgems for refreshments, there is not. He and his wife take organised tours to minimise travel stresses. But Turin by rail entails a cross-city transfer in Paris, and that is famous for its stress. I don't have the heart to say.

Here's a hint. Get on Eurostar first if you want to keep your luggage on the floor near your seat, or last to avoid the crush. Eurostar platforms aren't announced until after trains are disembarked and cleaned, but you can work them out from the lifts staff use 40 minutes before departure. Because I'm first in the queue, I get to put my luggage in one of the very few gaps between back-to-back seats. This isn't rocket science, it's hard-won ME management tactics. Genius? Me?

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