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Running Like a Clock ... and Fast

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By PAUL BURNHAM FINNEY

On overseas trips, many American business travelers do what is almost unthinkable back home: they take the train. And they board in increasing numbers, as high-speed rail service expands in Europe, China and Japan.

“I wouldn’t even consider taking the train in the U.S. except along the Northeast Corridor — and that might be just a commuter train from North White Plains to New York,” said Ralph Smith, who searches the globe for low-cost supplies for the [Tennant Company](#) of Minneapolis, a maker of industrial cleaning machines.

“But trains in Europe run like a clock,” he said. “They’re nice and clean and fast. And the rail staffs are very helpful to Americans who kind of don’t know where they’re going.”

In contrast to the stressful turmoil of airline travel, rail trips, when done right, can be both efficient and civilized, as travelers like Mr. Smith can attest. They can even be cultural when passengers mingle and talk while viewing scenery through picture windows.

“What do you see out the window at 37,000 feet?” French rail executives like to say when they make their pitch.

“Virtually all the big global companies use trains worldwide more than ever,” said Bill Connors, executive director and chief operating officer of the National Business Travel Association, a trade group. “They want travelers to be productive and happy. The train takes a lot of the hassle out of going to airports.”

Railways are introducing services that make it easier to do business while traveling from one city to another.

“Our first-class cars on most high-speed routes are geared to corporate travelers, with trays for laptops, open or private tables for small meetings, and [Wi-Fi](#) we’re installing,” said Fabrice Morel, president and chief executive of Rail Europe, a marketing group.

Speed is of course one of the major allures of foreign train travel. France’s vaunted TGV (Train à Grande Vitesse) streamliners streak along at 180 miles an hour or more. That is about as fast as a commercial airliner on takeoff.

“Europe’s expanding high-speed network is redefining short-haul travel,” said Guillaume Pepy, chief executive of the National Society of French Railroads, the French rail system.

Recently, the French sent a TGV at a record 357 m.p.h. on test tracks. And they plan to begin high-speed service between Paris and Frankfurt in June that will reduce travel time

from about six hours to four on tracks used by both French TGVs and Germany's fast Inter City Express, also known as ICE trains.

China is also getting involved in the speed game. A new magnetic levitation train shuttles between Pudong International Airport in Shanghai and the city's downtown area, accelerating to about 240 m.p.h. during the eight-minute trip. A high-speed line between Beijing and Shanghai is scheduled to open in 2010.

Far more spectacular is the year-old rail service between Beijing and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. "Not much there for business travelers, as yet," said Kelly Flynn of BCD Travel, a business travel management company. "But it's a Chinese first in rail technology."

For trips between Tokyo and Osaka, Japan's business capital, corporate travelers for years have been able to book a seat on one of the many Shinkansen "bullet trains" that travel at 180 m.p.h. This year South Korea is introducing its own bullet trains on the Seoul-Busan business route.

But no region can match the flood and frequency of American business travelers who visit Europe each year: an estimated 4.5 million, according to Rail Europe.

"You just don't fly anymore between Paris and Brussels — they're that close on a TGV-type Thalys train," said Nico Zenner of Travel Bound, a New York travel package wholesaler. "It takes one hour and 20 minutes instead of the old three hours. And it's got everything, including Wi-Fi."

Amtrak's Acela trains and Italy's Pendolinos tilt to take curves, but they cannot match the performance of TGV expresses on straightaways. Those French trains, which become a blur at full throttle, depend on the Continent's 2,912 miles of dedicated track — no freight or conventional trains are permitted — to attain their high speeds.

In riding the rails abroad, business travelers also get a chance to see Rhine River castles, French chateaus, and snow-capped mountains.

"My favorite is Germany or Switzerland," Mr. Smith said. "Several on our sales team recently tacked a sightseeing trip through the Alps on the tail of a business trip."

Not lost in this romance with railways is the knowledge that trains at their best are a sweet revenge for business travelers fed up with time wasted in airport lines.

"The Eurostars, which connect London with Paris and Brussels under the Channel, are arguably the premier business trains in Europe," said Mr. Morel of Rail Europe. "Last year they carried nearly eight million passengers," he said, and about 40 percent were business travelers.

Since its introduction in 1994, Eurostar has captured about 65 percent of the air-sea market for crossing the English Channel, according to the company, which is a joint venture controlled by the National Express Group of England and the French rail system.

“You can take Eurostar to Paris, cut a business deal, and get back to London — a same-day round trip,” said Nicholas Mercer, commercial director of Eurostar in England.

“Eurostar has had a huge impact on our London-Paris service,” Robin Hayes, executive vice president for the Americas at [British Airways](#), acknowledged. “But we still have 10 flights daily between the two business centers.”

In any case, some of the airport-train connections in Europe are models of convenience. “You fly to Frankfurt and just go downstairs below baggage claim and take a train to wherever you want — for instance, Düsseldorf,” said William P. Kinane, vice president of the international division of Guardsmark, a leading security firm.

Typically, Martin Wahoske, corporate travel manager at Tennant, uses all types of train tickets to keep fares down for his roughly a thousand travelers. “We buy Benelux monthly rail passes in first class for 195 euros,” or about \$265, Mr. Wahoske said. “We also use a corporate discount program for ICEs that reduces fares by 20 percent. And after landing in Amsterdam, we’ll save an hour going by train to Antwerp rather than driving.”

With European trains now using airline-style ticket pricing systems, business travelers can take advantage of fares that vary according to peak or nonpeak hours, advance versus walk-up tickets, and other criteria. For instance, fares for the Paris-Lyon TGV express range from 60 to 150 euros, or about \$81.67 to \$204. But for many business travelers, racing through the countryside is not always the point.

“My all-time favorite rail trip was riding the classic, leisurely Blue Train in South Africa,” said Curt Cutter, an international publishing consultant who is based in Boston. “It was a great way to go to a business meeting.”