

## **UCL Sustainable Conference Travel Blog - London to Zagreb and back by Train**

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Last November I was invited to give a keynote speech at conference in Zagreb, Croatia, and decided to try and get there by train. Using the Inter-Rail Planner app I worked out that it would take me 22 hours including an overnight sleeper train from Munich to Zagreb. I bought the various tickets on-line from the train operators in the different countries. The fares came to a total of £443, which was about a half as much more than the cheapest flight. Luckily, the conference organisers agreed.

The night before the trip, I felt somewhat apprehensive. Was I going to make it? What if there were delays? I might be stranded in an unfamiliar European city late at night with nowhere to sleep! What was the overnight train through the Austrian alps train to going to be like? I was excited but also a little daunted as I set my alarm early for the next day.

I took my usual commuter train into London St Pancras before checking in for the 09:00 Eurostar to Brussels. The security, passport checks and waiting lounge felt more like an airport than a train terminal. But once I was on the train, the spacious seats (without seat-belts) and the freedom to walk around made for a very comfortable journey. Without noticing it, we had slid into the Channel Tunnel and left the UK.

After a couple of hours of speeding through misty northern France and Belgium, we pulled into Brussels station. My next train was the 12:25 ICE to Frankfurt, which was already waiting. German ICE trains are particularly plush and spacious. I ate lunch in the buffet car then worked on my presentation as we passed into Germany.

I'd planned my trip such that I could hook up with a friend of mine who lives in Frankfurt. We met in the Hauptbahnhof then walked into the city. A large Christmas Market was set up in one of the squares, so we drank 'gluhwein' and chatted. It was a pleasant way to enjoy the three-hour layover before my next train. This would have not been possible at an airport, given that they're located away from major cities.

I bid farewell to my friend then caught my next train, another ICE at 19:00, bound for Munich. This train was a bit busier than the previous one and I seemed to be the only non-German person in my carriage. We stopped at Nurnberg, half way through the journey before arriving at Munich HB at 22:40.

I was quite tired by now and nighttime Munich main station was cold and unwelcoming. Luckily, my next train, the Austrian railways 'Night Jet' to Zagreb was ready and waiting, so after purchasing a few supplies for the final leg of my journey I got on board. It was a smaller less impressive train than the ICE or the Eurostar; composed of sleeper carriages with no buffet car. I was directed along the narrow walkway to my room or 'couchette' by a guard.

My room had three bunks but it I was the only person using it, so I pushed the other two up to make more room. It was good to open my suitcase and have some space to myself. We departed about 30 mins late for some reason, so it was close to midnight when the train trundled out of Munich station.

The Night Jet was very quiet, with the few passengers in their rooms. I opened a beer that I'd bought from the kiosk and read a book as the train pulled away, before getting ready for bed, closing the blinds and turning in for the night. I woke a couple times during the journey as we pulled into a station somewhere. But I fell back asleep quite easily due to the rhythmic rocking of the train.

At 07:30 the guard knocked on the door and handed me breakfast; a coffee and a croissant. I opened the blind and saw that we were travelling along a wooded valley beside a river. We stopped at a small rural train station and Slovenian and Croatian immigration officials boarded the train to check and stamp everyone's passports. Half an hour later, the train entered the outskirts of Zagreb and pulled up at the station.

I disembarked and walked through the small, empty and rather dated station and emerged into the street, where I was met by my host, the conference organiser. "So you made it" she said.

It was my first time in Zagreb. It looked quite different to London, Brussels, Frankfurt and Munich. The fact that I'd travelled for many hours, and overnight, underlined the fact that I was far from home, somewhere different. This would have been less apparent if I'd flown.

After an enjoyable two-day conference, including a night out with other participants at the Zagreb xmas festival or 'Advent', my return journey started with the Night Jet from Zagreb to Munich. It left at 21:00 and arrived in Munich early the next morning. I'd planned to get a direct train to Paris, but had to re-route via Mannheim due a French train strike, that had just been announced that morning! This made my return journey a little longer, but I made it back to London by dinner time. I had a little time to kill in Paris so enjoyed a walk through the streets of Paris between Gare de L'Est and Gare du Nord, before my Eurostar.

My trip was certainly more of an adventure than if I had flown. I'd spent longer travelling and I'd experienced a lot in such a short space of time. I'd proved to myself that it was possible, with some planning, to get to meetings/research trips within Europe that one would normally choose to fly to. I had not had to put up with the stress of an airport, or be crammed into a plane, or have earache from the flight. Most importantly, my trip had consumed far less energy and released less CO<sub>2</sub>.