



## What we've learned about flying less for conferences

Travelling by train rather than plane when possible is a key way to reduce the carbon footprint associated with conferences. Here are some things we've learned about how it works in practice.

In February 2020, we committed as editors to “[do] what we can to reduce our carbon footprint by using trains rather than planes whenever practical, and [take] advantage of new ways of doing conferences”. We wanted to lead by example in making sure that the benefits of our conference travel outweighed its environmental impact. Of course, this commitment was followed by an unexpected two years of online-only conferences, but in 2022 we finally left London and met the physics community in person again. So far this year, we've used trains to get to events in the UK, France, Spain and Belgium, and have plans for the Netherlands and Germany. Here are some of the practicalities of train travel in Europe — we hope that sharing what we've learned will make flight-free conference travel feel more realistic for at least some of our readers.

First, we acknowledge that not everyone is in a position to book trains rather than flights, especially when trains can be the somewhat more expensive option. Our travel budget is finite, and we've had to strategize to ensure we still meet a broad cross-section of the community, while potentially attending fewer in-person events. Besides travelling, we've also attended and hosted online events — including ones aimed specifically at early-career researchers — and had one-on-one calls with researchers worldwide.

That said, although trains in Europe have a reputation for being expensive, the price comes down if you book in advance or take slower trains. (Interrail passes don't always save money unless you're booking last-minute or need flexibility.) Train tickets also compete well with airfares when travelling between destinations that aren't hubs for budget airlines. For instance, when our editor Ankita Anirban travelled from London, UK, to Les Houches, France, the train cost approximately the same as a flight plus airport transfers.

If you're travelling to continental Europe from or via London, in our experience the Eurostar is usually the most expensive leg and should be booked as early as possible to avoid last-minute high prices (bookings open from up to 330 days in advance). If you're connecting the Eurostar to another train, try and plan your timings so you have a choice of which Eurostar you book, rather than being at the mercy of the cost of one particular train.

You might end up with a few hours to kill in London, Paris or Brussels, but you'll be in the city centre with a good choice of cafes for working or relaxing — and the coffee is better and cheaper than at an airport. And in general, tickets with transfers are often not 'through' tickets, meaning that if you miss a connection you may have to buy a new ticket for the next leg of your journey — it's best to leave plenty of time between trains.

Trains usually take longer than flights, but working on trains is easier and more pleasant than on planes (and many trains offer free WiFi). But as our editor Zoe Budrikis points out, this advantage is curtailed if you get motion sickness in a rear-facing seat; unfortunately, you can't always guarantee to be facing forward. She instead used a sleeper train as part of a trip from London to Barcelona. This option combines travel time with sleeping time and potentially saves the cost of a hotel room. In Europe, shared sleepers (*couchettes*) can be quite cheap if booked in advance, and if you're a woman travelling alone you can often book an all-female *courette*.

While we've had good experiences with rail travel itself, booking tickets can be tricky as journey planners don't always know the best route. A bit of know-how can save a lot of time or money, and we found the advice collated on [The Man in Seat Sixty-One](#) website to be invaluable. On Twitter, the hashtags #flyingless and #flightfree can give inspiration.

A few final tips: trains in Europe don't generally have luggage limits, but conversely, there's no such thing as checking your bag through to your destination — if you have multiple transfers, packing light is a good idea. If you're changing from Paris Gare du Nord (the Eurostar terminus) to Paris Gare de Lyon (terminus for many trains towards Switzerland and Italy), there is a convenient RER link. And a word of encouragement: we've found that flying is stressful and fast-paced whereas travelling by train is relaxed and slow-paced, and can even be fun (when was the last time you said that of air travel?). For us, train travel was an environmental choice, but it ended up also being a gentle way to ease back into travelling after two years at home. So if you're thinking about reducing your conference carbon footprint, why not pick one event to attend by train, and see how it goes?