

LONDON TO PARIS HEATHROW AIRPORT TO GARD DU NORD

LONDON – My husband and I, along with another couple, flew into London’s Heathrow Airport from San Francisco. Pulling our luggage, two small bags each, we worked our way through a confusing maze to the London Underground, popularly known as the “Tube,” where we caught a car on the Piccadilly Line to Piccadilly Circus. It was three weeks and two days before the London Underground bombings on July 7, 2005, but we were blissfully unaware of what was soon to happen. At Piccadilly Circus we transferred to the Baker Line and rode to the Waterloo Station where we boarded a Eurostar Train for Paris.

Our car on the Piccadilly Line was clean with red and blue cushioned seats, gray speckled floors, blue metal poles and white ceilings. There was no graffiti though the windows were badly scratched. Maps of the Underground ran along the ceiling along with florescent lights and advertising cards. I had found it difficult juggling two bags on the escalators, and we also had to climb up a couple of flights of stairs carrying our luggage. It took around forty-five minutes before we arrived at the Baker Line, and I noticed that the passengers, crowded closely into the cars, seemed careful not to make eye contact or chat with other passengers.

The cost of coming in from Heathrow Airport to Waterloo Station turned out to be just a little less than the four of us paid taking a cab on the way back. As there were many people coming in from the airport on the Underground with luggage, it was crowded and many passengers had to stand.

When we arrived at Waterloo, we discovered there was a 4:06 p.m. train to Paris. We tried to move our 5:09 p.m. tickets up, but restrictions and costs were prohibitive. We sat at a bar instead and watched all the people rush around. Small cards next to the ashtrays on the tables informed us that thieves were at work as we sat there.

Eurostar required that we check in at 4:30 p.m. for our 5:09 p.m. departure (17:09). We were in Coach One, Class Two, and my seat was 24. Our coach was beautiful and clean and looked new. The seats were in groups of four with tiny tan plastic tables which could be folded up on each side to make them narrow. Small gray plastic wastebaskets were attached to the wall under the tables. Above each seat were individual reading lamps.

The upholstered seats were gray and brown stripes with a matching tan carpeted floor. The ceiling was gray. Above the seats were hard plastic luggage racks and a little lower, smaller racks with spaces below for jackets or packages. There was also an area for luggage with deep shelves at the end of each car.

I talked to the “Train Manager,” a man named Mustapha who lived in Paris and declined to give me his last name or let me photograph him. Still, he was helpful and told me that the Eurostar runs by 25,000 volt electric lines using the same tracks as the French TGV trains. While the Eurostar runs up to 300 Kilometers an hour, the TGV trains reach 330 K per hour. In the Chunnel Tunnel they must slow to 160 K per hour because of wind problems.

Our train could carry 836 passengers in eighteen coaches including six that were first class. Hot meals were served to those people though there was no dining car included on the train, only snack cars. The hot dinners were provided by caterers from Brussels, Paris and London.

I learned from the Train Manager that we would be spending about twenty minutes in the Chunnel which is the tunnel built below the English Channel connecting England to France. This miracle tunnel, built by England and France, was finished in 1990, then put on the market for sale to private enterprise. It was the successful culmination of a centuries old dream to connect the United Kingdom to the European Continent. The first train ran through it in 1990, and the first commercial train in 1994. Its tenth anniversary was celebrated in 2004.

“Passengers can take a train from Paris to Disneyland in France on Eurostar which takes about half-an-hour, or a direct train from London to Disneyland, a popular route,” Mustapha informed me. “The Eurostar trains are also favorites with English visitors traveling to the South of France or skiers going up to the Alps in winter.”

The configuration of the train I was riding on was as follows: Coaches One through Five were second class and contained from 48 to 58 seats; Coach Six was a bar car; Coaches Seven - Twelve were first class with 25 to 39 seats; Coach Thirteen was the second bar car; Coaches Fourteen – Seventeen were second class and had 58 seats each while Coach Eighteen was second class and contained 48 seats.

The restrooms were roomy, made from a hard plastic and painted gray and white. On some you just pushed a button to open and close the doors. Water and air came down

automatically in the sink to clean and dry your hands. Above the sink was a three-paneled mirror, and the toilet paper consisted of tiny sheets of pink paper.

As I walked through the cars, I noticed some seats were configured like those on an airplane in single rows with trays that lowered in front. I liked my second class coach better with the four seats facing each other as it seemed roomier.

We rolled out of London past red brick and stucco houses. Graffiti was everywhere, but the sun was shining in a blue sky with fluffy white clouds. Out the window I could see green fields dotted with bright orange poppies. We followed a major highway route off and on, crossed a river, and passed through several tunnels. The tracks were in good condition and smooth.

Past the tunnels but still in England, we whizzed by farm houses with red roofs set in rolling hills among fields of sheep and lambs. I noticed that the soft rocking of the train had put many people to sleep. Few passengers seemed to notice the black and white dairy cattle lounging among white spring wildflowers. Most travelers were dozing, reading, working on laptops or chatting with friends.

The train came to a stop at Ashford International, a station which serves Southern England. Many business men in suits boarded in jovial moods on their way to Paris. The ride was still smooth as we passed more fields of sheep. At 6:00 pm we were back following a divided highway with three lanes and a large pay station.

An announcement woke everyone up telling us it was 7:10 pm and we were entering the Chunnel and France where the time was an hour ahead. We adjusted our watches as we raced under the water of the English Channel toward the Continent of Europe. I had ridden a train through the Chunnel once before, but was still amazed we could arrive in France so quickly. When I had sailed across the English Channels on ships years back, the crossing took hours.

Now it took only twenty minutes to pass through the totally dark Chunnel before we found ourselves in the bright French countryside which looked a lot like the English countryside. It was dotted with red roofed farm buildings set among green rolling hills. The ride was still smooth though the train seemed to pick up speed and we felt more of a roll. There were rows of Italian cypress trees, stucco buildings set among yellow wildflowers, distant church steeples, crops of wheat, green fields of onions and Brussels sprouts. The landscape was amazingly tidy. We zipped by more black and white dairy cattle, hay rolled in light plastic, two-lane country roads, and a greenhouse made from plastic.

At 8:00 p.m. it was still totally light outside. By 9:10 p.m. it was still light though beginning to dim as we arrived in Paris at last. Our Eurostar train had not stopped in Lille, France where we planned to board for our return trip to London and flight home.

As we pulled into Paris I counted around fifteen or so tracks of railroad lines at Gard du Nord, a maze of overhead electric wires, and more graffiti. We were back in a heavily populated metropolis and headed into the heart of Paris, one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

For general information on Eurostar: call 08-701-600-052. To book: 08-705-186-186; From outside England: 44-123-361-7575. Internet: www.eurostar.com.