Marathon Man: London-Stockholm in 25 (?) hours

By Henry Posner III

As a frequent traveler from Pittsburgh to Estonia, I pride myself on the variety of routes and transportation modes I use to get there. For example, in 2002 I traveled from Pittsburgh to Tallinn (see IRT No. 149, November, 2002) that included rail from Minsk to Tallinn via St. Petersburg. More recently I completed a trip that would have been impossible five years ago. It involved daylight travel on two of the most important railway engineering achievements of the last century: the Channel Tunnel between England and France and the Oresund Fixed Link between Denmark and Sweden. Additionally, I
completed the trip from London to Stockholm in just over 24 hours, thanks to three different types of high-speed trains: Eurostar, Thalys and X2000.

I planned my trip using the German railway web site; I bought my tickets through a travel agency specializing in point-to-point overseas rail tickets. Planning my schedule was the easy part, taking about five minutes. In contrast, booking my itinerary—specifically, sleeping car reservations—proved to be impossible through Rail Europe. This ultimately led to my use of a specialty travel agency in New Jersey.

I began the rail portion of my trip at London’s Gatwick Airport, where I used the frequent Thameslink train service to London Bridge station. After waiting just five minutes (and this on a Sunday, reflecting the frequency of service), I quickly transferred to Waterloo Station. From there, I would begin my journey to the Continent. Meanwhile, it was necessary to pay approximately $8 for the privilege of leaving my bag for three hours to walk around town.

My Eurostar journey began with an airline-style check-in that included passing through metal detectors, a procedure best described by a phrase used often by the UK’s Modern Railways magazine: “safety fascism.” This is the only time in my life that I have encountered airline-style security on rail, and I hope that it is the last. At least they didn’t make me take off my shoes!

The scheduled departure time was 2:10 p.m., but we were delayed five minutes due to incoming equipment. (We easily made up the time with the padded schedule between London and the Channel Tunnel.) The Channel Tunnel itself is hard to appreciate (imagine sitting in the dark for 20 minutes) but the light at the end of the tunnel was literally the man night train (called DB NachtZug) at 10:30.

Compared to Germany’s earlier night trains, the DB NachtZug retains comfort and basic service levels, while at the same time economizing; it represents a compromise in the face of the eroding sleeping-car market and is probably the best foot forward. My train arrived in Cologne with a split consist of cars destined for Berlin and Copenhagen; in the middle of the night, the Berlin section was taken off and cars from Munich to Copenhagen joined the train.

One aspect of this service that may not last was the provision of a dining car from Cologne. While I welcomed it for its wood-paneled ambience, it was not, as far as I know, advertised as such. In view of the late-hour departure it served more as a bar car than a dining car; this was reflected by the skeleton crew and limited menu. My sleeping car was of the high capacity bi-level design also used by CityNightLine. I found it quite comfortable—I particularly welcomed the shower facilities.

A massive signal failure delayed our arrival into Copenhagen, which was scheduled for 9:59 a.m. The disruption resulted in trains standing still miles out into the suburbs. Under the circumstances, we probably did quite well to arrive at 10:20, but this was too late for my onward connection to Malmö, Sweden.

Copenhagen Station was in complete chaos. Platforms overflowed with passengers being subjected to continuous changes of track assignments and train cancellations. I was therefore somewhat relieved to catch the next regional train, which left for Malmö at 10:50. The comfortable articulated trains easily achieved a
speed of 112.5 mph on the Oresund bridge/tunnel route via Copenhagen airport, completed in 2000 to connect Denmark with Sweden.

My arrival into Malmö was at 11:20 a.m., too late to make my reserved 11:13 X2000 high-speed train into Stockholm. Fortunately, however, this was Europe and not America’s tri-weekly _Sunset Limited_, so there was no problem securing a reservation on the next train, the 12:13 X2000.

With its comfortable seating and tilting system allowing it to use the existing alignment for speeds up to 125 mph, the X2000 turned out to be my favorite train of the whole trip. I was equally impressed by the amount of freight traffic in Sweden, in notable contrast to Western Europe, where freight seems to be barely hanging on.

My arrival in Stockholm was five minutes late—at 4:45 p.m.—26-plus hours after leaving London. But that was more than enough time for my taxi transfer to the ferry terminal and my 6 p.m. departure of Tallink’s _Regina Baltica_ for Tallinn, Estonia. By 6:30, I was enjoying a Swedish cider on the fantail as we led the evening parade of ferries (three in all) through the archipelago to the Baltic, passing several steam ferries en route.

All in all, it was a relaxed end to a decidedly unrelaxed (for rail) itinerary!

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**Practical Information**

For schedule details, go to the web, visit bahn.de and click on International Guests for the English page.