

Eye on Europe: Looking Ahead With Eurail

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The first piece of European travel advice I ever received was something along the lines of “find a flight, grab a guidebook, get yourself a Eurail pass and JUST GO”. Luckily, I heeded everything and on my very first visit to Europe fell head over heels in love with the experience of seeing Europe by rail with a Eurail pass.

15 years later, I’m still smitten.

What’s so special? Eurail’s magical passes allow you to hop on, hop off most trains across the continent on a whim, offering an unparalleled level of freedom and flexibility—perfect for travelers on a multi-city, multi-country trip to Europe.

But it’s not just about getting from Pretty Capital Point A to Bucket List Point B; simply just riding the train in Europe quickly becomes part of the fun. Relaxing while you watch the scenery pass by out the window, having dinner & drinks in the dining car, chatting with other travelers: you’ll remember these travel experiences long after you head home. And you won’t get them on any other mode of transport.

I recently had a chat with Yi Ding, the Business and Growth Manager for Eurail, about the current state of Eurail and some of the exciting new developments that will shape the future of the iconic passes. Yi’s passion for travel and growing business inspired her to enter the travel industry. She joined Eurail in 2014 is responsible for the distribution and expansion of Eurail Passes. Since joining the company she has focused on building the awareness of Eurail and its rail passes to business audiences, and ultimately sales growth. Our conversation is below.

Scott Hartbeck (SH): What are the most important things that travel advisors and travelers should know about Eurail in general and Eurail passes in particular?

Yi Ding (YD): Travel advisors should be aware that Eurail recently launched a distribution platform that allows travel companies and OTAs to more easily sell and issue Eurail Passes. With the new platform travel companies can sell the mobile Eurail Passes that were introduced in 2020 as well. OTAs can connect via an API connection, for offline sales there is the Eurail Ticketing System (ETS).

For travelers, planning with Eurail has never been easier now that our mobile Pass system is up and running. Through the rail planner app, travelers can plan their bucket list adventure across Europe. They can take a night train from Budapest to Vienna to spend the day touring the city’s many architectural highlights. While in

Austria, they can book a ride aboard the Arlberg line that runs between Innsbruck and Bludenz through the breathtaking scenery of the Austrian Alps. Train travel is not just about getting from point A to B, it's an experience in and of itself and it's a sustainable way to travel for those looking to reduce their carbon footprint.

SH: Since it's the time of year to look forward, will there be anything new with Eurail in 2022 that travel advisors and travelers should be aware of?

YD: There are a few new routes that were added in recent years that are relatively new for many of our travelers as a result of the slowdown of travel during the pandemic. These routes include the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, Macedonia and Great Britain.

The rising popularity of night trains has seen the announcement of some new night trains including a Vienna - Munich route, Paris - Vienna and Amsterdam - Zurich route starting this winter. Towards the end of 2022 there will also be a Nightjet train operating between Zurich and Rome with a stop in Milan. A new player in the market, European Sleeper, also has some projects in the pipeline including a train from Brussels to Prague via Amsterdam that is slated to launch in April 2022.

SH: Eurail mobile passes have been active for a while now. What has the reaction from travelers been like?

YD: Travelers have been very satisfied with the mobile Pass that can be used in the Rail Planner app. and we are delighted at this positive reaction on the mobile Pass. More than 85% of our customers choose the mobile Pass instead of the paper Pass. It's one Pass that works across the systems of dozens of train operators across 33 countries, which is no small feat. Now that we've gone mobile, it's easier for travelers to plan their journey, make changes to their itinerary and take advantage of partner discounts all through the app.

SH: Eurail recently announced a new distribution platform that should make it much easier to sell the passes. How are things going there?

YD: A significant part of our annual Pass sales come from Eurail's distribution partners. After a swift migration from existing distributors Rail Europe and SilverRail, we connected new distributors Trip.com and train travel start-up All Aboard. We've recently seen increased interest in the distribution platform as the travel industry has geared up for recovery as well as the increasing interest in sustainable ways of travel.

SH: What are the biggest benefits of selling Eurail for travel advisors?

YD: It's an opportunity for travel advisors to tap into selling a new method of travel that allows for flexibility and can in and of itself be an experience for the traveler. For example, with Eurail a traveler in Switzerland can take a trip aboard the Glacier Express through some of the most breathtaking winter scenery one can ever see, and this is just an example of one of our many scenic routes which can take travelers through vineyards in Italy and past castles in Germany or France. And if the client is experiencing a case of flygskam (flight shaming), an advisor can offer them travel via railway which is arguably one of the most sustainable forms of travel. Additionally, it has been proven that on distances of 1,000 to 1,500 km trains are often as fast as flying when one accounts for transport to/from the airport and airport waiting times with trains travelers arriving right in

the city center. Furthermore, our products are commissionable, so it's a win-win for both parties.

SH: Have there been any changes in Eurail travel patterns during the ongoing Covid situation? Does Eurail expect any of these trends to stick around?

YD: Like many of our cohorts in the industry, we've seen shortened booking windows as travelers delay solidifying their plans given the changing Covid situation and travel requirements. We anticipate this to continue for the time being but eventually as travel prices increase and events return, we will likely see people beginning to book further in advance.

When we looked at our rider data the same destinations continue to be popular amongst our travelers including Paris, Venice, Munich and Florence, to name a few. One name on the list that did stick out as a new addition was Metz, France, and upon looking into it further we concluded that it is likely because it is at the junction of France, Germany and Luxembourg and as such is used as a transit point by travelers. However, this city also happens to have a rich storied past with over 3,000-years of history so perhaps it's a destination that will soon be trending.

SH: What trends in European rail travel was Eurail seeing pre-pandemic?

YD: Prior to the pandemic trends in European rail travel would be closely tied to trends within the larger travel industry. For example, with the success of Game of Thrones, we saw many U.S. travelers looking into booking travel through Croatia in hopes of visiting filming locations. France, Italy and Spain are amongst the European destinations that have always remained high atop everyone's travel list, but we also did see a growing interest in more under-the-radar destinations like the Balkans.

SH: For people looking to travel off the beaten "track", do you have any advice on countries and regions that, despite having good rail connections and destinations, see fewer Eurail travelers than others?

YD: The Baltic countries, which were only added last year so we would certainly recommend considering exploring those destinations once travel is more open. The cities of Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius are quite breathtaking and something that many of our travelers may not realize is that there are also options to access ferries to Sweden and Denmark, or vice versa, from the Baltics.

Eurail actively promotes travelers to 'go one stop further'. While the European capitals are often high on the bucket list of our travelers, the train allows the discovery of many off-the-beaten-track destinations. These lesser-known destinations give travelers the opportunity of a unique experience and to beat the crowds, by just leaving the train on the next stop.

SH: I've always found that many people aren't aware of all the added benefits of a Eurail pass, such as the discounts on various other travel experiences in Europe. Which one do you think we should all be talking about more?

YD: The two benefits that we should be talking about are the ferry discounts. We've already touched on a few ferry routes, but Eurail users can get discounted access to ferry companies across Europe. There are the

Balearia ferries which run between mainland Spain and its cluster of Spanish Islands (the Balearic Islands), and also make their way to North African destinations like Morocco and Algeria. There are the Grimaldi lines which amongst its stops includes Malta, which one could consider an under-the-radar European destination. The option to travel via Ferry really broadens the opportunities for Eurail travelers. Next to that, there's the Eurail Greek Island Pass that allows you to explore 53 Greek Islands by ferry with access to some of Greece's most popular destinations including Crete, Mykonos and Santorini.

