



A Train of thought!

Many of us travel and most of us who do will have tried using any and all of these options - with widely varying levels of satisfaction...

I am fortunate to travel regularly both on business and on holiday and have used all these modes of transport for journeys long and short. My reason for writing this article is to cover an issue that has been on my mind for some time, namely: is there an alternative for medium length journeys beyond driving or flying?

What are the options and why consider another way?

If we are considering a journey to Europe from England, what happens?

Driving - I drove to the Cote d'Azur some years ago and I found it took a tiring three day drive requiring two overnights, endless lugging of bags in/out of cars, numerous driver changes and higher than expected ferry, fuel and toll charges. Even now, years later, I cannot listen to Van Morrison after grossly overdoing it on that journey...Conclusion - possible but far from ideal.

Flying - having flown extensively long and short haul over 20 years, I have found that while price and destination choice is good the experience of flying has deteriorated markedly. Over-zealous regulation has resulted in far less flexibility regarding check-in, seating position, wheelchair storage, over-weight allowances to say nothing of parking restrictions and cost, increased time and the scrum that is a modern airport. Conclusion - for long haul the only option. For short haul, good availability of destinations but the journey is often stressful, complicated and physically quite challenging/even unpleasant regarding aircraft transfers. I know that many disabled people refuse to fly because of these issues.

Trains - are they a viable alternative? The fast train network goes to many destinations all over France, the Low Countries and, shortly, Germany. Standard railways run over much wider networks but are less accessible, as far as I know.

To find out, I decided to give it go in October. This was chosen as an example journey - Yorkshire to Collioure in the far South of France, a distance of over 1,100 miles.

I started out by identifying the best route and found Skipton to Perpignan was do-able in one day.

Buying tickets

I use a manual chair but cannot push quickly. I travelled with one PA and one large suitcase. If taking more bags, more porter assistance will be needed and is available at the stations.

UK - Journeycare is the contact point - ensure assistance is booked. Helpful.

London/France - I rang RAIL-EUROPE and SNCF and became concerned that journeys might not get joined up and go wrong. So, stumbled on INTERNATIONAL RAIL - see internationalrail.com - and booked all other legs through them. Very good. Another useful site is - seat61.com

The return journey times were much the same although you gain an hour coming back and so arrive home correspondingly earlier.

Details of the journeys		
Outbound		
Leave	Skipton -	0647
	Leeds -	0730
	St Pancras -	1056
	Lille -	1506
Arrive	Perpignan -	2147

So, on the day...

Drove to Skipton station and parked for free in disabled space right outside. Arrived about 25 minutes before train left.

- 1 Onto local train to Leeds with one large suitcase. Staff helped with ramp access. Train a local one, flat access, lots of space.
- 2 At Leeds, staff helped us off one train and onto the next - about 10 minutes between trains. Ramp access and good seating area with a table.
- 3 At Kings Cross, requested help from staff to aid us across to St Pancras - easy, flat push
- 4 At St Pancras, quick, simple check-in/passport control. Lots of help around. Onto EUROSTAR. Ramp access, good seating area with a table. Nice to get free upgrade to First class, where all disabled seats are located. Free tray of snacks/drinks. Easy, quick journey through the Channel Tunnel to Lille.
- 5 At Lille, help to get us off using an automated ramp. Then a wait during which time we had lunch in a café.



Onto the TGV. Incredible double-decker train, ramp access and the train floor drops to take you down to your seating area. Again in First class. Wheelchair space here is located on a dropped floor area in a widened part of the aisle next to a window seat. The only downside is that the aisle is still quite narrow, i.e. about 1 metre/3 feet. My chair is around 65cm/2 feet wide so the space/gap between me and the other side is a maximum of 35cm/around a foot. This means all other passengers have a narrow spot to squeeze past and heave suitcases past too. As the train gets very busy/standing room only at some points, this is not ideal as the chair does get bumped sometimes but is perfectly do-able. Those with a wider chair may have more issues here. Those who can transfer themselves could easily hop across into the train seat and get their chair put in the nearby luggage rack. A toilet is located nearby but is not accessible to wheelchairs although walkers will be fine. There is a café on the upper deck but it is not accessible - it sells a range of hot/cold snacks and drinks much like in the UK.

- 6 Arrived at Perpignan at 2142 - wheelchair accessible taxi collected us and at our destination in Collioure at 2230.

So, door to door Yorkshire Dales to Mediterranean coast in the very south of France in 16hrs. A long journey most certainly but a much more relaxing one than flying. There is far less queuing and hanging around, no need to be hauled in and out of aircraft seats, check-in and security is much easier and you have the pleasure of an ever changing view as France gradually transforms from the grey, flat Pas de Calais to the green and rolling centre of the country and finally to the colourful Languedoc-Roussillon coast. The downsides are the longer journey, some need to 'explain' (verbally or as us Brits do, by waving your arms about SPEAKING VERY LOUD) what needs to be done and the number of connections; although this will vary by journey.



I found the journey a fun adventure and a very credible alternative to flying. I felt much more relaxed on arrival and settled in to the holiday immediately rather than taking a couple of days to relax. Those living nearer London will obviously have a much shorter journey too. Would I go by train again, and to other destinations? Most definitely but probably not every time I travel. If I lived nearer London, I would use it more extensively as the leg from northern England would not be needed.

The routes for high speed trains to and from the UK are good and expanding further into Europe - see raileurope.co.uk - so why not give it a go?

Where did I stay?

At L'Origine - a fully accessible and adapted apartment in the centre of a pretty village called Collioure in the Catalan South of France. Collioure is that rare thing, an old sea port which is ideal for wheelchair users as much to do near the house, the surfaces are good and the centre of town is fairly level. For full details see - origincare.com and click the link to L'Origine.

