

## **Vienna without (Airport) tears.**

**By Rachelle Smith**

**An abridged version of this article was published in the Sept 2007 DA21 newsletter.**

When I was asked by an American friend to meet her in Vienna this summer & travel on with her into the Czech Republic, I said yes before I thought about how I was going to get there.

I had made two flights already this year and was feeling guilty. On both occasions the experience had been unpleasant in any case, all that queuing and hanging around, the total illogicality of the security requests, take your boots off on the way out, keep them on on the way back..... And I like travelling by train, I had been to Lille, Paris and Antwerp by Eurostar and down to Avignon, I had even crossed America from Boston to San Francisco by train so I reckoned I could try this out.

So I went to the website [www.seat61.com](http://www.seat61.com) and followed the easy instructions for booking tickets and away I went. First I booked a return ticket from London to Koln (Cologne) on the Eurostar website. This cost me £80 return and entails changing at Brussels on to the fast German express train, the Thalys. I then booked a night sleeper to Vienna on another website (79 Euros) and on a third website a return sleeper from Prague to Cologne (89 Euros). It sounds complicated but it wasn't and obviously if I'd been returning from the same city as I arrived in it would have been simpler.

For the Eurostar part of the journey you get sent proper tickets in the post, for the others, you have to print out the tickets from your own email. But really that is all pretty similar to booking on-line for air flights and you can do it by phone if you prefer.

The journey itself worked like a dream. I turned up at Waterloo in good time, an hour before the train left, security checks were civilised and easy. I had plenty of good books with me but spent the journey talking to my Belgian neighbour, a single mother who had trained late in life to be an English teacher and was returning from a course in London. The buffet sold perfectly edible vegetarian food too! Time in Brussels for a cup of coffee in a pleasant café in the station before the train to Cologne.

The night sleeper was extremely well organised, albeit cramped. The attendant explained to me that my companion would be joining in Koblenz and I went to the dining car where I had an excellent vegetarian meal ( o.k., usual ridiculous train prices applied) whilst watching fairy tale castles and the Lorelei rock glide past in the setting sun. Very romantic and not possible from a plane. I returned to find my companion in the top bunk already. She spoke excellent English and was returning home to Austria after attending a conference on improving the environmental standards of building materials. Apparently Austrian standards are higher than general EU ones and they are

pressing for EU ones to be raised. In the morning we were brought breakfast by the attendant (all included in the price, as were the complimentary bottles of mineral water).

The holiday was great, we did all our travelling by train or bus. O.k., because it was so very hot (38-40 ) we did end up having showers at every possible opportunity so our water consumption cant have been very green.... The return journey was equally efficient, although I had a panic about finding the train as nowhere in Prague Holesovice station is the night train to Koln listed, the only train listed leaving at the exact same moment as mine was going to Berlin. So I headed for that one and it did indeed prove to have a set of sleeper cars. It's not as good as the Vienna train as it doesn't have a dining car. Fortunately I'd already eaten at the buffet but this was chance, I didn't know it had no dining car. Also I was in a 3 person sleeper as it was the only one available when I booked. By great good fortune I had it to myself but I honestly cant imagine how 3 people could have fitted into the space available!

Apart from that however things all worked out well. I'd timed the trains so that I had the day to look around Cologne. This is another advantage of train travel, stations tend to be quite central, in the case of Cologne, this means the station is literally opposite the cathedral, which itself is next door to two of Cologne's most important museums and within easy walking distance of the river, the old town and most of the tourist sights.

Would I recommend train travel again? Most definitely. Apart from being much less damaging to the environment than flying, you will also see more of the country you are visiting. You can walk around more easily than on a plane and on the whole the food is better ( although this is not guaranteed). The usual objection to train travel is that it is much more expensive than the plane and that it takes longer. But actually my journey cost me about £180. (True, this doesn't include the cost of getting up to London and back) and I arrived and left from the city centres so had no need of expensive journeys from outlying airports. I also saved myself two nights of hotel bills. Obviously it took longer but much of it was at night and there were absolutely no delays at any point. I left London at midday on the Saturday and arrived in Vienna on Sunday morning – if I'd flown, the only probable difference is that I'd have been able to go out for a meal on the Saturday night. But I wouldn't have had that beautiful ride along the Rhine.....