

STRONG GROWTH IN INTERNATIONAL RAIL TRAVEL IN GERMANY



One out of every six long-distance travelers with Deutsche Bahn chose an international route last year. That figure, around 25 million people, marks a clear rise since 2019 - up by nearly one-third. Growth has been steady so far, yet still building momentum.

New links across borders help explain the shift. Passenger demand crosses national lines more often now than before. While gains for rail travel this year appear gradual, future increases could move faster. Expansion plans already in motion suggest stronger jumps ahead. Rail travel beyond Germany's edges turns into a bigger part of daily operations.

Sharp Increases on Major Routes

During 2025, expansion stood out across the key corridors. On the Munich-Zurich path, **travelers climbed 27% compared to last year; meanwhile, traffic between Frankfurt and Paris grew by 22%**; similarly, trips along Cologne to Brussels edged up 16%.

Dr. Peterson, the Deutsche Bahn board member, attributed the boom to rail's inherent advantages: "International rail travel has become more attractive for many people. They appreciate that the trains go directly to the city centers on long-distance trips, while on air trips you often end up far outside the centers." He also noted a significant shift in passenger tolerance, with many now comfortable with six- to eight-hour journeys, up from four to five hours pre-COVID.

New and Expanded Services

To capitalize on the demand, Deutsche Bahn is rolling out several new and enhanced connections:

- From mid-June, the direct Copenhagen-Prague service via Hamburg and Berlin will increase to two daily train pairs.
- Between June and the end of August, weekend ICE trains from Cologne to Brussels will continue to Ghent, Bruges, and the Belgian coast.
- Direct Frankfurt-Bordeaux services will operate on Saturdays in July and August.
- Starting September 7, four daily ICEs will run between Cologne and Antwerp, marking the first time with a stop at Brussels Airport.
- Looking ahead to 2027, DB plans a new direct connection from Munich to Milan and Rome in cooperation with Italy's Trenitalia and Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB).

Plans could soon include a second daily service between Berlin and Paris, cutting travel time compared to current eight-hour journeys. Talks continue with SNCF after initial signals of shared enthusiasm emerged. Stops in Frankfurt might become part of the revised routing if agreements progress.

Challenges on the London Route

Getting trains straight through to London hasn't moved fast. Though travelers leaving Frankfurt or Cologne already make it to the British capital by switching in Brussels, skipping that stop remains

tricky. Border rules stand in the way - since the UK stays outside Schengen, special station zones with individual screening setups would be needed, according to Peterson. Work continues alongside Eurostar on possible fixes; even so, a nonstop German-London service likely won't arrive for many years yet.

External Factors and Operational Improvements

Because of higher fuel costs tied to conflict involving Iran, rail travel is seeing stronger interest. On some days, according to Peterson, ridership climbs by as much as one-tenth. Moving farther distances by rail gains extra support from power drawn entirely from renewable sources. This shift away from oil-based energy helps avoid price swings seen in traditional fuels. Electricity rates for now have already been locked in by DB, shielding budgets. Supply deals stretching into 2027 are already set in place.

Even so, financial problems continue. Losses worth billions were recorded by the group in 2025, Fernverkehr is to begin reorganizing its operations. Because of this, better service consistency has become essential for recovery. In April, on-time performance for long-distance trains hit 64.4%, rising from earlier months - February saw 59.4%, while January hovered near 52%. Their goal now stands at achieving 60% punctuality across 2026. Yet challenges remain beneath these numbers.

AI to Tackle Delays

Delays rank high among traveler complaints - now Deutsche Bahn is testing artificial intelligence to respond faster. Instead of fixed rules, software guides dispatchers by weighing connection impacts moment by moment. When a train runs late, the system suggests either holding service or sticking to schedule. Outcomes aim at smoother flow across routes, not isolated fixes. Efficiency gains come from constant adjustments, shaped by live conditions rather than guesses. Traveler experience improves when choices reflect actual network needs. Decisions once made manually now lean on data patterns spotted early. This shift doesn't eliminate disruptions - but it reduces ripple effects down the line.

The goal isn't perfection but better handling when things go off track. Tools adapt as situations unfold, learning which trade-offs serve most riders best. Real-time inputs shape responses minute by minute. What matters grows clearer: coordination beats rigid timing. Progress shows in fewer cascading holdups after initial hiccups. Each adjustment targets wider balance, not single points. Results depend on continuous feedback, not preset plans. Over time, small refinements add up across the grid. Success hides in what doesn't happen - a missed link avoided, a crowd unformed. Systems learn where bottlenecks start, then act before jams spread. Insights emerge not from theory but from motion itself. Movement becomes its own teacher.

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