

Rail catering

Explorer at large

Roger Williams, chairman of the International Rail Catering Group and consultant with The Catering Explorer shares his recent travel notes from a series of European rail journeys



I often have the opportunity to take in rail journeys around the UK and Europe and it's a great excuse to keep a travel diary.

Most recently I've been sampling rail catering in Germany, Austria and Czech Republic.

Frankfurt to Cologne

I recently joined the ICE express train to Cologne and was immediately impressed by the friendly greeting of the conductor and Bistro car staff.

The Bistro area offered an extensive menu of traditional German dishes including braised pork with dark beer gravy and cabbage, rostbratwürstchen with potato salad, potato stew and currywurst, amongst others and although I skipped desert, a speciality coffee served in a DB china cup rounded of the meal.

German rail catering services are managed by Deutsche Bahn (DB) itself, co-ordinated by the very capable onboard service team in Frankfurt which determines menus, pricing and service standards. There are nine station logistics centres spread across the country and a half hour walk around the basement of Cologne station soon confirmed it is a slick operation. Logistics staff help onboard operations by providing flasks of pre-brewed coffee, trays of fresh-bake pastries and fresh salads, all prepared centrally and delivered directly to the train.



Some train deliveries are made from dedicated pathways set between the tracks, rather than battling through customers on platforms but as with many older railway stations, the operation relies on lifts that are many decades old - a key factor when maintenance issues arise.

On the return trip I also tried the golden German Pilsner from the bar, a real draught beer on tap and served in proper beer glasses. So much better than beer from a can!

Vienna to Linz

The majority of intercity trains in Austria are operated by OBB (Austrian State Railway) and are catered by DO&CO. A private railway called Westbahn also operates trains on a single route and these are self-catered. Both run between Vienna and Linz so we could compare the two.

The OBB trains are Railjets - spacious carriages, with a buffet counter, small galley and about 15 dining seats. A catering trolley is operated through Standard, and waiter service into First, but there was not much evidence of 'selling' during our trip.

Sitting in the Bistro car we ordered coffee, water and savoury snacks, which were served by the DO&CO member of staff with reasonable speed but little attention to detail. The coffee arrived with no spoon or sugar and the water

PROFILE



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without a glass or ice being offered.

Menus were sticky, tables were grubby and uncleared and the catering offer did not add to the travel experience. Marketing references to a branded offer - Henry am Zug - promised culinary delights but none of the passengers were buying, even though it was lunchtime.

Overall it wasn't particularly impressive and the Bistro looked in need of refurbishment. With an OBB tender process for a replacement caterer ongoing, perhaps uncertainty and staff shortages are having a detrimental effect.

The Westbahn return journey had a different and even lower catering specification. Staff were checking tickets, cleaning and (in some small way) providing catering but there was no catering vehicle and the only snacks were in a locked cabinet, unlocked on request. Coffee was from a vending type machine and of poor quality. A disappointing catering experience.

Vienna to Prague

At the newly-refurbished Vienna International Hauptbahnhof we joined the CD (Czech Railway) Railjet train, catered by JLV. Fresh and clean, with smart JLV staff who were immediately interested in serving you. We'd opted to travel in

First at only a minimum supplement, and on departure the host came into the carriage offering complimentary water and newspapers and taking orders to be served at seat.

The advertised breakfast included hot porridge with apple slices and cinnamon; or warm smoked ham, cheese and relish with fresh baked bread; or even the delicious smelling sausages and mustard sauce.

Traditional Czech meals with regional flavours were also offered onboard including braised sirloin in cream sauce with dumplings and cranberries.

Prague to Pardubice

The Pendolino and Intercity trains both have well-presented restaurant, buffet counter and trolley

"Given Austria is such a refined society with a discerning customer base I was surprised. I came away feeling that both operators need to up their game"



services. In First, the at-seat complimentary offerings on the Pendolino included Bohemia Sekt Sparkling Wine as a welcome drink, hot and cold drinks and a snack - baguette, salad or yoghurt. Interestingly, complimentary water is handed out in Standard too. Menus have

been developed by CD restaurant chef, Martin Jiskra and his team and the restaurants were well frequented. The bar counter and galley of the Intercity train has recently

been refurbished allowing for a greater range of snacks, draught beers and speciality coffees to be served. Galley equipment has been improved too with dishwashing facilities and new ovens. What sets the Pendolino apart from both the Intercity train and Railjet is the online offering. Wifi allows customers to order hot snacks from their seat with delivery guaranteed within 20 minutes. JLV reports a decent take-up rate has pushed up meal sales levels. •

Above: Czech Railways Pendolino Bar serving draught beer **Below:** Martin Jiskra (second left) with other members of the Czech National Team of Chefs and Confectioners leading menu development for JLV

