



# CHRISTMAS TRAVEL PRICE ANALYSIS:

comparing December ticket prices from Brussels  
to 20 European destinations by train and plane.

Greenpeace European Unit fact sheet, December 2023

**GREENPEACE**

With the exception of a certain sleigh pulled by reindeer, the train is the climate-friendliest way to travel long distances in Europe. **Rail travel produces 80% less carbon pollution per person per kilometre than flying on average.**

[Hundreds of thousands of people](#) travel from Brussels to other European cities to visit loved ones every holiday season.

We chose three dates in December and compared the cost of travelling by train and plane from Brussels to 20 destinations in the rest of Europe on those dates. The results paint a picture of a transport system that is still heavily skewed in favour of flying (in planes, not sleighs).

**On average, the price of a ticket to travel by train between Brussels and the 20 destinations we analysed was three times more than making the same journey by plane.**

**Only four of these destinations had a direct train service from Brussels,** while all twenty had direct flights at least three days a week. It was possible to buy plane tickets three months before travelling to any of these destinations, but **in most cases train tickets only became available for purchase one or two months in advance.**

**Governments and the EU should make it simpler and much more affordable to take the train from one European country to another.** The cost and hassle of booking an international train trip are political choices which place barriers in the way of more sustainable travel, benefit the airline industry, and contribute to climate breakdown.

**Transport is the only sector in the EU where climate-damaging carbon emissions have increased compared to 1990.** In order to bring emissions down, governments must urgently prioritise rail over polluting planes, by slashing tax benefits for aviation, expanding and improving railway daytime and nighttime connections across Europe, streamlining train ticket booking systems, financing accessible [climate tickets](#) for all European residents, and bolstering green transportation infrastructure to enable seamless cross-border rail travel.



## SCOPE OF THE ANALYSIS

During November 2023, we analysed how much it would cost to travel between Brussels and 20 destinations in other European countries by plane and by train. As well as price, we gathered information on the simplicity of the booking systems.

The 20 routes analysed are between Brussels and: Barcelona, Berlin, Bratislava, Budapest, Copenhagen, Ljubljana, London, Madrid, Manchester, Marseille, Milan, Munich, Nice, Prague, Rome, Venice, Vienna, Warsaw, Zagreb and Zurich.


All routes were analysed for one trip in each direction on each of 21, 23 and 28 December. These are some of the busiest travel days in Europe.

The figures always refer to the cheapest available ticket option (2nd class, economy class, no extra reservations, no luggage fees, non-refundable tickets, etc.). Discount cards, individual subscriptions and long-term rail passes were not taken into consideration.

## KEY FINDINGS

- For the 20 destinations that we analysed, it costs on average 3.1 times as much to travel home for the holidays by train than to take a flight.
- On 11 out of the 20 routes, it was cheaper to take the more polluting option of flying than it was to take the train for every trip we analysed.
- All routes where the train cost more than twice as much as the polluting flight are operated by the low-cost carriers Ryanair, easyJet, Vueling and Wizz Air.
- The average price of a train ticket was cheaper than a flight on only two routes: Munich and Zurich. Brussels–Munich is the only route where the train was always cheaper than the plane.
- Passengers between Brussels and Madrid pay on average 7 times the price to reach their destination by rail, the largest average price disparity. Madrid was the most expensive destination to reach from Brussels by rail, with an average cost of €324.47.
- The single biggest difference in price was found for a trip from Rome to Brussels on 21 December. The Ryanair flight cost €14.99, while the cheapest train ticket cost €249.50, over 16 times the price.
- The cheapest train tickets were found on the route from Brussels to Vienna, with an average price of €65. However, Ryanair flights were still cheaper on 2 out of the 3 dates analysed.
- Where available, night trains help keep costs down for rail passengers compared to day trains. But only two destinations have direct night train connections from Brussels at present, and only a further six can be reached indirectly (e.g. by travelling from Brussels to Nice via Paris, with a night train for the Paris–Nice leg of the trip).
- Only 4 out of the 20 routes analysed have a direct train connection from Brussels: Berlin, London, Marseille, and Vienna. London and Marseille are the only destinations with daily direct train connections.
- By contrast, there are direct flights from Brussels to all the cities analysed at least three days a week.
- For half of the routes, it was not possible to buy a through-ticket for the train, meaning that passengers would need to make two or even three separate bookings with different railway companies for different sections of their trip.
- While all airlines sold tickets for the winter season more than three months in advance, most railway companies did not start selling tickets or providing time tables until the second half of October. Some railway companies only started selling tickets for the end of December in mid-November.

## TABLE: DATA BY ROUTE



	Price of train vs. flight (x times as much)	Flight is cheaper for X out of 6 trips	Range of price of flight (€) <sup>1</sup>	Range of price of train (€) <sup>1</sup>	Num. of train transfers	Night train	Num. of train tickets required
Brussels–Madrid	7.0	6	20–203	280–375	2		2–3
Brussels–Rome	5.9	6	15–126	146–322	3	indirect	2
Brussels–Milan	5.8	6	17–66	166–288	2		1
Brussels–Barcelona	5.6	6	23–150	247–340	1		2
Bru.–Manchester	4.9	6	22–93	131–224	2		2
Brussels–Budapest	4.9	6	15–108	108–190	1	indirect	1–2
Brussels–Warsaw	3.6	5	17–158	97–164	1	indirect	2
Brussels–Venice	3.2	6	19–80	70–216	2	indirect	1
Brussels–Prague	3	6	18–110	78–221	2		1
Brussels–Marseille	2.9	6	15–79	74–199	0		1
Brussels–Vienna	2.6	5	21–156	58–140	0	direct	1–2
Brussels–Berlin	2.3	6	22–69	69–110	0	direct	1
Brussels–Bratislava	2.1	5	32–167	69–151	1	indirect	1–2
Brussels–Zagreb	1.9	5	33–217	151–218	2	indirect	2
Brussels–Ljubljana	1.8	5	42–157	151–264	2	indirect	2

<sup>1</sup> This refers to the range of prices for the cheapest possible ticket available across the six trips analysed: to and from Brussels on 21, 23 and 28 December.



	Price of train vs. flight (x times as much)	Flight is cheaper for X out of 6 trips	Range of price of flight (€) <sup>2</sup>	Range of price of train (€) <sup>2</sup>	Nr. of train transfers	Night train	Nr. of train tickets required
Brussels–Nice	1.5	6	70–181	151–253	1	indirect	1
Brussels–London	1.2	5	71–128	97–155	0		1
Bru.–Copenhagen	1.1	3	48–171	57–227	2		1
Brussels–Zurich	0.84 <sup>3</sup>	1	126–345	90–228	1		1
Brussels–Munich	0.66 <sup>4</sup>	0	76–153	58–137	1		1

[All data including flight and train numbers can be found here.](#)

<sup>2</sup> This refers to the range of prices for the cheapest possible ticket available across the six trips analysed: to and from Brussels on 21, 23 and 28 December.

<sup>3</sup> This means that the train is 16% cheaper on average.

<sup>4</sup> This means that the train is 34% cheaper on average.

# A NOTE ON NIGHT TRAINS

There are currently only two direct night train routes from and to Brussels. Berlin is served twice a week with the private European Sleeper and three times a week by the Austrian ÖBB Nightjet, Vienna three times a week by the Austrian Nightjet. While Vienna can be reached daily by night train via Cologne, there is no night train service to Berlin on the other two days of the week. These two night train routes are also part of the services to Bratislava, Budapest, Venice and Warsaw.

The only four other night trains that could be considered in this research are the night trains Stuttgart–Ljubljana–Zagreb, Paris–Nice, Stuttgart–Venice and Munich–Rome. The last train was already booked out for two trips when the research was made.

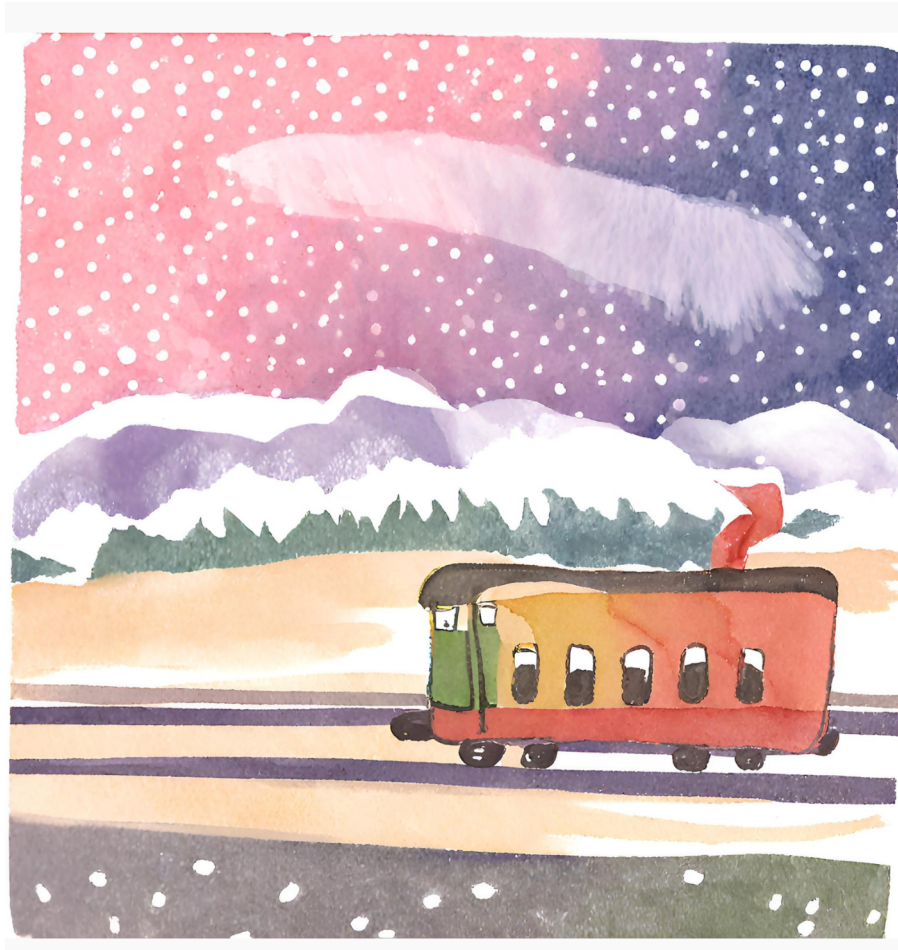
From March 2024 on, the European Sleeper to Berlin will be extended to Prague.

The prices considered in the research are always for the cheapest category which usually is the seater, or the couchette if the seat carriage is already sold out or not available. Most night trains offer more comfortable couchettes and sleepers, which are available for a supplement. The following table shows the supplement for couchettes for some of the routes analysed:

Route	Railway company	Supplement for couchette
Brussels–Berlin	European Sleeper	€10–50
Brussels–Vienna	ÖBB	€0 <sup>5</sup> –29.20
Stuttgart–Zagreb	HZ (Croatian railways)	€24.40–34.10
Paris–Nice	SNCF	€3–13
Munich–Rome	ÖBB	€0 <sup>6</sup> –20.60

<sup>5</sup>On some trips, the seat carriage was already sold out, and the couchette was therefore the cheapest available ticket category.

<sup>6</sup>On some trips, the seat carriage was already sold out.



## GREENPEACE DEMANDS TO THE EU AND GOVERNMENTS

### To make rail affordable and practical:

- Introduce nationwide climate tickets and a Europe-wide ticket valid for all means of public transport, more affordable and simpler than the Interrail pass, a rail subscription/monthly ticket modelled on the highly successful national climate tickets in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, etc.
- Reduce or remove VAT on train tickets, introduce family fares and social fares for low-income travellers and reduce or remove track access charges for night trains.
- Introduce an integrated EU-wide information, ticketing and payment system to make it easier for passengers to book a train journey involving different operators and make it mandatory for rail companies to sell through-tickets to protect passenger rights. Sell tickets for long-distance trains a longer period in advance.



## To make airlines pay the true cost of flying

- Phase out the VAT exemptions on flight tickets and the kerosene tax exemptions for airlines, end any subsidies for airports and airlines, and introduce flight ticket taxes to cover the climate and environmental impact of air travel.
- Improve workers' rights (employment forms, contractual arrangements, union relations, collective bargaining, work-life balance, etc.) and prevent tax optimisation, especially by low cost airlines.

## To bring sustainable solutions to more Europeans:

- Open more direct connections between cities, eg. daily night trains to Berlin and Vienna, new night trains to Western and Southern Europe South of France, Italy, Spain, Denmark/Sweden and Poland as well as direct daytime trains to Berlin, Munich and Hamburg.
- Invest massively to upgrade and modernise the rail infrastructure, increase the capacity of the rail networks, and make rail faster especially in Central and Eastern European countries.

To explore our demands in more depth, please see [this July 2023 report](#) from Greenpeace Central and Eastern Europe.



# ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

- The analysis was carried out between 6 and 22 November 2023.
- All routes analysed are below 1,500 km air distance (short-haul flights).
- The trips can be done either with trains and flights arriving on the same day (not later than 1 am of the following day), or with night trains<sup>7</sup> including needed connection trains, not exceeding a total travel time of 24 hours (and without boarding or changing between 1 am and 4.30 am, and with not more than three transfers). For night train connections, the given date is the departure, except when this night train was not available, the date is the arrival date.
- Routes with a train travel time below six hours were excluded, if there is no direct flight (such as Brussels–Cologne), or if flights are dominantly transfer flights (such as Brussels–Paris). Routes under six hours were included, if due to the flight ticket prices, this route is obviously also frequently used for a trip between the cities (such as London–Brussels).
- Prices were taken only from official airline and railway operator websites. If one ticket for a route operated by more than one railway operator can be bought, the price is usually taken from the website of the railway operator from the departure country, or from the railway operator who is able to sell the ticket. When the price appeared unreasonably high, the price was also checked from the other involved railway operators. It was not possible to always check all railway operators selling tickets for the route.
- Greenpeace always chose the cheapest available ticket option (2nd class, economy class, no extra reservations, no luggage fees, non-refundable tickets, etc.). Discount cards, individual subscriptions and long-term tickets were not taken into consideration.
- Only flights that included at the maximum one transfer with a maximum waiting time of seven hours at the transfer airport were considered (except if there is no other travel option available). Also train routes were limited to a maximum of one more change than needed. (If there is a direct train, only 1 transfer was considered, if there is one transfer required, 2 transfers were considered at the most. However, if trains on the direct routes were not available, routes with more transfers were considered.)
- The night train was the first choice for this analysis.
- Transfer flights were only researched if the direct flight cost €80<sup>8</sup> or more. Generally, transfer connections were only considered if they were at least 10% cheaper than the direct one.
- For flights, all airports “belonging to one city” were considered (e.g. Brussels airport and Charleroi). If there is no direct flight, direct and cheaper flights to nearby neighbouring cities were considered. In this case, train fares between the two cities were added to the flight fare. In the case of Brussels, this is relevant for Ljubljana and Bratislava, where direct and cheap flights to Zagreb and Vienna respectively were considered.

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<sup>7</sup> A night train is defined as a train with sleepers and/or couchettes, though for the price analysis, supplements for couchettes and sleepers are not included if the train includes normal wagons.

<sup>8</sup> Technically, prices from €79.90 on were researched for transfer flights.

- The prices for flights and trains were researched on the same day for a route. The days of the research are included in the public datasheet.

## CONTACTS

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EU Transparency Register: 9832909575-41