

16 Traveling with the German Railroad: The Deutsche Bahn (DB)

The convenience of train travel can help to relieve at least one factor of travel stress. In fact, if you are traveling less than 500 kilometers (310 miles) within Europe, railroad travel usually offers time advantages in comparison to air travel. All of Germany's big cities are connected to each other within several hours' train ride, and since all main train stations (Hauptbahnhof) are located in the city centers, you can get off the train in the middle of town. This saves you the time of traveling from airports that lie just outside a big city, like in Munich.



However, train travel can become problematic for foreigners if they don't understand the different train connections, ticket prices, or features of the German trains.

Starting with a few etiquette rules, here are several personal tips from someone who has traveled with the German train system many times:

1. Minding your manners on the train

To ensure that your train trip is a relaxing experience, keep the following in mind:

- Seats marked for the handicapped must be offered when they are needed.
- When choosing your seat on the train, make sure that you check which seats have already been reserved by others. If you do take a reserved seat, you may be asked to get up and move later in your trip.
- Be sure not to block other seats or the aisles with your briefcase, shopping bags, or luggage. Also, do not hesitate to ask others to move their things so that you can sit down or get through the aisle.

2. Types of trains

Although many different types of trains exist in Europe, the most important types you need to be familiar with in Germany include the following:

- **ICE (Inter City Express)** trains are the most modern in the German railway system, and they connect large metropolitan

areas at speeds of up to 280 km/hr (174 miles/hr). Particularly speedy routes are those from Würzburg to Hamburg via Hanover and from Cologne to Frankfurt. The extra services that are offered on the ICE train are also enough to justify the extra cost of travel. However, this train is very popular, so it is always best to reserve a seat, otherwise, you could find yourself having paid a lot to stand in the aisle of a packed train.

- **RE (Regional Express)** trains are standard German trains that stop at most train stations along the way. The RE prices are more economical, but travel times are usually longer than when traveling with ICE trains.
- **RB (Regional Bahn)** trains are the slowest in Germany. They stop at ALL train stations, and offer the same standard travel prices as the RE. The advantage of RB trains is that they deliver travelers to out-of-the-way destinations and rural areas.
- **S-Bahn (Schnell Bahn)** trains connect the centers of Germany's big cities with the city's surrounding areas quickly and frequently.
- **U-Bahn (Untergrundbahn)** trains make up the underground metro lines that run under most big German cities. To ride on these trains you must have a special U-Bahn ticket, usually available from one of the vending machines in the underground station.

If you would like additional or specific information about the various trains, you should visit Deutsche Bahn's (The German Railroad) Internet site: www.bahn.de and click on "International Guests" for information in English or "Service" for information in German.

3. Travel plans

- **Price:** The Deutsche Bahn Internet site also offers an electronic schedule that allows you to enter departure and arrival stations and your requested travel times in order to compare alternative train connections. It is worth your while to look at these travel

plans very closely. In addition to the different time durations from point A to point B, there are usually also several different tariffs. If do not have the opportunity to research your options online, simply go to the ticket counter in the train station and ask for advice. Deutsche Bahn employees tend to be friendly, and most speak English.

Finally, be sure that you always purchase a train ticket, either from the DB ticket counter, on the Internet, or from one of the ticket vending machines, before you get on the train. When traveling in Central Europe, you will almost always be asked to show your ticket, even when only traveling a short distance. If you don't have a ticket, this could lead to a very embarrassing and expensive situation.

- **Changing trains and connections:** When looking at your travel schedule, pay attention to how often you have to change trains. How much time do you have between the arrival of the first train and the departure of the next? If you only have a few minutes to change trains at the next stop, and the train you are on is delayed, it could help to speak to the ticket collector. He or she can call ahead and ask your next train to wait at the station for a few minutes.

Due to problems like this, it is often preferable to take a slower direct train than to take faster trains that require a connection. It is much more enjoyable to sit on one train drinking coffee and reading the newspaper than to run, with all of your luggage, from one busy platform to the next to catch your connection or, as is more often the case, to stand in the cold until the connection arrives.

- **Reservations:** If you plan on traveling with an ICE train, it is best to reserve a seat whenever possible. Make sure that you reserve in your desired smoking zone: "Raucher" ("Smoking") or "Nichtraucher" ("Non-smoking")! It is even more important to make a reservation if you are traveling evenings, Fridays, Sundays, or in a group. Reserving a seat is a MUST if you plan to travel to a fair, such as CeBIT (the world's largest information technology and telecommunications fair) or the Hanover Industrial Fair. The ICE can bring you quickly and comfortably from any town in Germany to the fair location. In fact, special ICE trains are organized to

transport large numbers of people from Frankfurt, Munich and Hamburg directly to the fair.

- **First class:** Almost all of the German trains have first class wagons. If you have not reserved a place in one of these wagons, do not sit in a first class seat or you may find yourself having to pay the additional cost. However, if you are traveling on business, you may want to reserve a first class seat because the second class RE and RB wagons can be particularly crowded and noisy. In comparison, first class wagons offer electrical outlets for laptops and the seats are more comfortable. First class wagons are also ideal for meetings if you are traveling with colleagues and want to use your travel time wisely. Finally, these wagons are usually located right beside the restaurant wagon, just in case you get hungry.

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