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Eurostar to trial London – Aix-en-Provence service

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EUROPE: International high speed operator Eurostar is to operate a new service between London and the south of France on a trial basis in May and June 2013.

Building on its long-standing seasonal service between London St Pancras International and Avignon-Centre which has operated on Saturdays in July and August for several years, Eurostar intends to launch a single train pair linking London and Ashford with Lyon Part-Dieu, Avignon-TGV and Aix-en-Provence-TGV on Saturdays from May 4 to June 29 2013.

According to Eurostar, the trial is a result of the growing popularity of its seasonal trains, and requests from passengers that other leisure destinations in France be served. 'Lyon and the Aix region are the two most popular requests', a spokesman for the operator said. The outward London – Aix-en-Provence-TGV timing with four intermediate stops is 5 h 17 min, extending to 7 h 42 min for the inbound working.

As the UK is not a signatory to the Schengen Treaty which has led to the removal of formal controls at many European borders, Eurostar passengers typically undertake passport control, customs and baggage screening before boarding. Small teams of UK Border Agency officials typically travel with the train to assist this process at seasonal destinations such as Avignon and Bourg-St-Maurice.

However, in a marked change from current practice, passengers travelling from Aix to the UK will be required to disembark at Lille Europe with their luggage to undergo border control checks; a process Eurostar expects to take around 80 min. The operator says it would be 'logistically complex' and 'unrealistic' to expect local checks to be arranged for a trial service, and it is keen to see how customers respond to the mandatory change at Lille Europe. As a consequence, the usual 30 min check-in requirement before boarding will be waived, although Eurostar stresses that no domestic passengers would be carried between Aix and Lille 'when an excellent TGV service is already available'.

Eurostar also says it is 'working closely with border agencies not just in the UK but also in Belgium, France and the Netherlands' to ensure long-term security arrangements can be established to support expansion of the market for passenger services through the Channel Tunnel.

Passport and security checks have been reintroduced at London St Pancras for some Brussels – London services in recent months amid concerns that passengers were buying Brussels – Lille tickets under Schengen rules and staying on the train to reach London — a scenario dubbed the 'Lille Loophole'.

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