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Air fares to London cheaper than rail tickets



Helen McArdle
News Reporter

Tuesday 16 April 2013

FLIGHTS from Scotland to London are nearly always cheaper than travelling by train, a survey by The Herald has found.



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off track: A survey by The Herald reveals it is almost always more expensive to take the train to London than to fly. Pictures: Colin Meams



The survey, which compared return journeys on six consecutive weekends from April to June, found some journeys were almost 60% cheaper by plane.

It also revealed that on all occasions passengers could make the journey more cheaply on the budget airline easyJet than they could by rail, even including additional charges for checked baggage. On three out of the six weekends it was up to 16% cheaper to fly British Airways than travel by train, even though the airline price included checked luggage, and complimentary food and drink.

Colin Howden, director of Transform Scotland, a charity which campaigns for sustainable transport, said it was often possible to reduce the price of train travel if you knew how to split the journey into several cheaper singles, but it was unfair to expect an average commuter to do so.

He added: "With Edinburgh and Glasgow being two of the busiest air routes from Heathrow, some of the expansion being demanded at south-east England airports would not be required if a significant proportion of Scotland-London air travel switched to rail.

"However, the high levels of dependence on air travel will remain so long as the aviation industry continues to benefit from the exemptions it enjoys from fuel taxation or VAT."

The survey compared prices to find the cheapest combination of return tickets for each journey, setting off from either Edinburgh or Glasgow, on condition it included only direct routes and luggage allowance both ways. Departures were after 6am and arrivals before 11pm, and referred to standard adult fares.

On one weekend it was possible to get a flight with easyJet from Glasgow to Gatwick, with return flight from Stansted, from £68.98 – 57% cheaper than the lowest train fare from Glasgow Central to London Euston, which came in at £108. That same weekend it was possible to fly BA from Glasgow to Heathrow, returning from Gatwick, for £93 – 16% cheaper than the train.

Only on one weekend out of six was it cheaper to travel to London by train from Glasgow, while easyJet was the cheapest option for all six weekends leaving from Edinburgh.

It comes as the launch of Virgin's Little Red service – running a total of nine flights a day from Edinburgh and Aberdeen to Heathrow – promises to drive prices down further as it competes with BA, which until now

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has had a monopoly on the London-Heathrow route.

Douglas McNeill, an aviation analyst, said: "The inevitable impact of greater competition is lower prices."

Airlines claim their margins are already squeezed by air passenger duty (APD), a fee levied on each passenger taking off from the UK.

However, Richard Dixon, director of Friends of the Earth Scotland, said: "The carbon emissions from the plane journey are a minimum of three times those from the train journey, yet the prices often encourage people to fly instead of travelling by rail, because airlines pay virtually no tax."

Simon Buck, chief executive of the British Air Transport Association (BATA), said air travel in the UK was among the most expensive in the world. He added: "Many people who live in Scotland like the convenience of flying to London and sadly we have seen many of those routes disappearing, partly due to capacity restrictions on London runways. Increasing charges would only hit the least well-off."

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