

All aboard Britain's most crowded train (if you can squeeze in)



Commuters at change at Twyford station Times photographer Tom Pilston

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Commuters on the 7.42 First Great Western service from Henley-on-Thames to London Paddington have an unfortunate claim to fame: they endure a daily ride on what is officially the most crowded train service in Britain.

Almost twice as many people board the train as there are seats available, according to the Department for Transport. Regulars say that the crush is so great that parents with pushchairs are so crammed in they are unable to alight at intermediate stations.

There is even less chance of people who manage to board along the way to find a seat. Instead, they say, it is quite common to stand for the hour-long journey to London.

Many would like to see more carriages and greater frequency, but for all the discomfort the greatest concern appears to be the cost of travel. Several commuters pinned the blame on inefficiencies within the operating company, Network Rail and the wider privatised railway, which they say is driving fares inexorably higher. Their dissatisfaction is only compounded when they travel in Europe and find trains that are cheaper, clean and comfortable.

"It is an unpleasant journey and it is very expensive," John White, a financial and management consultant from Shiplake, said. "I would use it more if it were more regular, more efficient and a reasonable price. I guess the train companies are sitting there thinking 'this is what we need'. We might not be happy because we are crammed in, but to them it is a profitable business. I have done it for 30 years and it gets worse and worse. We don't want to stand all the way to London. When you travel in other countries, you really notice the difference. You get a better service, it is cheaper and you get a seat."

Michael Skehal, European project manager at a corporate real estate company, said: "I travel in Europe and I would say it is more expensive here than anywhere else I have travelled. It was wrong to privatise it in the first place because all it was doing is putting money into shareholders' pockets."

Frank Collins, a business analyst at the London Business School commuting in from Bourne End, said: "It does seem to be going up a ridiculous amount. I find that quite hard to stomach. It would be nice to be as good as the French, Dutch and no doubt the Germans but I should imagine it would take an awful lot of investment to take us up to that standard. It would be worth it. I would suspect there is a reasonable bit of mismanagement by Network Rail."

He said that the Government was wrong to shift the burden of paying for the railway increasingly on to passengers. "It is part of our infrastructure and should be run and maintained by the State like the motorways. You take a hit on infrastructure costs and only the Government can do that because everyone else has a profit motive and when you have a profit motive too many compromises are made. The sense I get is that the Government isn't watching the price rises too closely because they know that if First Great Western puts their prices up by 30 per cent the Government gets a slice of that. As a consumer group commuters can't really do anything about that."

The operator said that since the Government compiled its statistics it had added an extra carriage to the Henley service to alleviate overcrowding and lengthened other trains to key stations along the route.

• The Network Rail boss and his executive directors will receive bonuses funded by the taxpayer even though the company has missed punctuality targets for England and Wales. Sir David Higgins, chief executive, will get £99,082 on top of his £577,000 salary. Patrick Butcher, group finance director, will receive £67,658 on top of his £394,000 salary. Robin Gisby, operations director and Simon Kirby, infrastructure projects managing director, will receive bonuses of £63,708 in addition to annual pay of £371,000.

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