



Booking a bargain train ticket - Simon Calder

Britain has some of the most expensive rail tickets in Europe – but it also has the cheapest, so long as you follow **The Rules** (Please note that these are mostly for longer-distance journeys).

Rule 1: If you qualify for a railcard then BUY one

Under 26? 60 plus? Travelling with children? Or travelling with the one you love/work with/support a football team with? There's a card that will save you at least one-third on most tickets.

“But I only travel by train once a year” – yes, but it could still be worthwhile.

Rule 2: If you can, book ahead and travel off-peak

A strange repercussion of privatisation means that train operators are strongly incentivised to offer good deals for travellers who commit in advance to a specific train. You can do so any time from 10 weeks before departure. Most demand you book at least the day before, but Cross Country allows you to buy an Advance ticket just 10 minutes ahead.

Rule 3: Look for a cheaper, slower option

London - the West Midlands and Staffordshire: London Midland is much cheaper than Virgin.

London – Birmingham: Chiltern takes 20 minutes longer and typically is half-price.

London - Exeter: South West Trains is the slow, pretty way.

Rule 3a: Going to a London airport? Look for a cheaper deal that takes only a few minutes longer

Heathrow: Connect, not Heathrow Express

Gatwick: Southern, not Gatwick Express

Stansted: The only airport service with Advance tickets, so spend a few minutes booking at least a week ahead.

Manchester Airport: Be careful if you're buying ordinary tickets. An Off-Peak single from Birmingham to Manchester airport costs £7.20 MORE than to Manchester Piccadilly, even though the Manchester Piccadilly to airport trip is only £4.10 if you buy a separate ticket.

Birmingham Airport: it's the opposite! Shrewsbury - Birmingham airport is only £1 more than the price to New Street.

But every journey is different on Planet Train Fares, so do your homework!

Rule 4: Remember Megatrain

A little-known offshoot of the Megabus empire produces some excellent deals, particularly if you are extra-flexible with timings. It covers only a minority of train operators: East Midlands Trains, South West Trains and some Virgin Trains services. No tickets, just show the code number on your smartphone.

Example: Oxenholme to Birmingham for £9 even at fairly short notice, compared with a lowest Advance fare of £13.

Rule 5: Remember Rail Passes

Eight days' unlimited bus travel plus four days on the trains in Wales comes in at £94, less than a fiver more than a Cardiff-Holyhead return. So it's easy to make a profit.

SEASON TICKETS

- Commuters complain about the fares, but if you are travelling the same journey every day they offer phenomenal value compared with standard tickets. So what could possibly go wrong ?
- Well, if you can't use the full term of an annual season ticket, refunds are straightforward. However, it's not "pro rata" - you get back the original payment minus the value of what you've used. Example: buy an annual season ticket from Birmingham to Derby, price £3040, and surrender it after six months, and you will get back only £1289 (42 per cent) of your original fare.
- Special mention for First Transpennine Express trying to smooth out the peaks – the Early Bird season ticket rewards people who can get to central Manchester by 7.30am.

ANY GENERAL TIPS FOR TRAIN TRAVEL?

- Yes: Don't like the fares? Catch a bus. Britain has the best network of long-distance buses in Western Europe, with National Express competing ferociously with Megabus and other operators. When I think a fare is too high, I simply allow a couple of extra hours and take the bus. Example: Manchester-Exeter. The "Anytime" train fare is £124, and even if you book the night before you could pay over £100. But on Megabus, the highest fare I have paid is £20.

HAPPY TRAVELLING!