

# Want European-style rail? Prepare to pay

*Ben Wear, Getting There*

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I'll never complain about Austin traffic again.

OK, I will, of course. But that thought inevitably came to mind earlier this month as my friend Blake, my daughter Molly and I experienced the brutality of rush hour traffic in Paris (the one not in East Texas). Other transportation thoughts from a two-week trip to France and Germany with my daughter, during which we traveled at one time or another on foot, by bike, by plane, by automobile, by train and, at one point, by boat:

- They weren't lying about the autobahn. I'd always heard about people driving at crazy speeds on what amounts to Germany's interstate system and thought the stories were exaggerated. No, they aren't. The speed limit is generally 130 kilometers per hour, or about 80 mph.

But as my German hosts explained to me, their countrymen consider those signs merely a suggestion. During the almost 500 miles I drove across Germany from Heidelberg to Berlin (after renting a car in Paris), I saw only one highway patrol car with someone pulled over. And for all I know, they might have been helping with car trouble rather than issuing a speeding ticket.

Many times, as I was in the right lane (the system is still just two lanes on each side for long rural stretches), a car would blow past me at astonishing speeds. Malleable as I am, I even inched up to 140 several times, and even 150 at one point. Which is 93 mph. And people were still passing me. Gulp.

That this was not terrifying, most of the time, I can ascribe to the smoothness of the roads. I don't know what German highway engineers do differently from our road builders, but when I returned to Texas and had to drive down Interstate 35 from the Dallas-Fort Worth airport to Austin, the ride was noticeably bumpier.

And the autobahn sections I was on were surprisingly uncrowded. This may have been an accident of my route (I wasn't near the country's largest cities until I neared Berlin). Or perhaps it was due to the plentiful rail alternatives there.

- Yes, there was passenger rail everywhere. Rail boosters here are always quick to point to Europe as, in effect, the way it ought to be in Central Texas. You know, a multimodal paradise where the town is crisscrossed with train lines and bike lanes, and a person truly doesn't need a car to get around. And indeed, I kept encountering light rail-streetcar systems in surprising places. Heidelberg, with fewer than 200,000 people, has light rail, as did ravaged and dreary Dresden, formerly in communist East Germany. Dresden has slightly more than 500,000 residents and, based on my experience on a Monday morning, extremely light rush hour traffic.

Berlin — with about 5 million people in the overall urban area — has two rail systems totaling almost 300 miles, with about 340 stations and daily ridership of 2.4 million — about 1,000 times MetroRail's ridership here. And traffic on Berlin roads was largely uncongested. We often took the train to and from central Berlin, but I was a passenger in my friend's car a couple of times — he was headed into town on business from his southwest suburban home and gave us a ride — and we generally moved steadily.

As I said above, this was definitely not the case in Paris, which has more than twice the population of Berlin and is much more dense. Despite its extensive metro system — much of its 133 miles are packed within a 35-square-mile area and the bulk of the stations are less than a half-mile apart — the traffic is

horrible, abetted by the aggressiveness of everyone involved. That includes pedestrians, cyclists and motorcycle riders, who with head-shaking pluck buzz past in the narrow spaces between lanes of cars. Maybe Paris traffic laws allow this, or maybe not. But the practice is ubiquitous.

■ Which means ... what, to the Austin rail debate? People who want Austin to expand its nascent passenger rail system, both those on the inside and just regular folks I talk to, generally say some version of, "Wouldn't it be great if we had all that rail like they do in Europe? Then people would have travel options, and each person on the trains would be one less person on the roads."

True enough. But what that vision overlooks is that we don't have European-style taxation — not even close.

According to the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, French residents this year on average will pay taxes in one form or another amounting to 44.6 percent of the country's annual gross domestic product. In Germany, the figure is 40.6 percent. In the U.S., our total tax tab is less than 27 percent of gross national product.

My German friend Diethard, a telecommunications consultant, told me that he pays 55 percent in income tax on the last dollar he earns each year. The top bracket for personal income taxes here, meanwhile, is 35 percent.

Residents in France, Germany and other eurozone countries pay a value-added tax, essentially a sales tax, of almost 20 percent on most purchases. The sales tax in Austin, and most Texas cities, on the other hand, is 8.25 percent.

We pay a total federal and state gasoline tax of 38.4 cents a gallon. In France and Germany, the fuel tax is about 10 times that. Renters pay a tax in France but not here generally. People who have accumulated wealth in France pay an annual tax of up to 1.8 percent on the value of their assets, not just on the income that came in that year. The list goes on and on.

None of which should be construed as an argument for that level of taxation in the U.S. The point is, while the debate about taxation between conservatives and liberals takes place in most countries, the discussion starts here at a much lower level of taxation than it does in many European countries. So, with more money, government can buy much more stuff. And that includes passenger rail, something the private sector is not interested in because all train lines operate in the red.

The U.S. gross domestic product currently is about \$15 trillion. The taxation difference between 27 percent and 40 percent, based on that, would be about \$2 trillion a year. That's 2,000 billion dollars. You could build a lot of roads and rail with that kind of money, and have some left over for a host of other services.

That smooth, speedy autobahn in Germany, it's worth pointing out, does not include any tolled sections (although most French rural expressways have tolls). So, just using taxes, Germany has this extensive and marvelous road system, and rail even in relative hamlets like Heidelberg. And, unlike some of its continental brethren, Germany has a strong economy despite that high taxation level.

Based on the \$100 million a mile that the City of Austin has estimated for a short first segment of urban rail, and the rule of thumb that putting the track in tunnels would cost at least twice as much, that 300-mile system in Berlin (about half of it is underground) equates to something between \$30 billion and \$50 billion in 2012 dollars.

Do that, and you get a system where rail is a genuine option for most people.

The City of Austin's general fund spending this year is about \$700 million. Which means an effective, European-style urban rail system would cost (even before you talk about operating expenses) the equivalent of 40 to 70 years of Austin's basic budget for police, fire, parks, libraries and basically everything else but the electric, water and wastewater utilities.

Europeans don't have to have an either-or, rail-or-roads debate because, for better or worse, historically there has been enough government revenue for both. That is generally not the case here.

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