

Pennine offer

This offer from Trans Pennine Express allows student railcard holders to get 50% off Saver tickets rather than the usual 30%.

But sadly the tickets can only be used in the TPE area. If you happen to live in Newcastle and go to university in Manchester, you can get a £32 Saver ticket for £18.

The campaign was launched at university fresher fairs and a life-size cut out of bespectacled Bob Trotter Train Spotter dominated the fairs.

To reinforce the message 25,000 goody bags were distributed among the students.

There were also discount offers with a DVD rental company, a discount voucher for station fast food outlets, the chance to enter a free prize draw to win a ski holiday, and details of an online booking promotion with an iPod as the prize.

Pictures: REAL CREATIVE GROUP



MPs pay attention

By Howard Thomas and Ray King

MPs travel free on the railways but it is MPs on the House of Commons transport committee who are currently investigating rail fares.

We must hope that even though they do not feel the pain of rising fares directly, they listen to their constituents.

In its submission to the committee, Railfuture highlighted the problem of open fares which have become ever more expensive since rail privatisation in 1994. The rises have been unacceptable.

In 1995 the cost of an open return from London to Manchester (183 miles one way) was £84. The fare in January 2006 had risen to £202, an increase of 140% over a period when the retail price index rose by 32%.

Similar rises have occurred on other inter-city routes.

As it is the only fare without travel restrictions on it, Railfuture believes it should be regarded as the default fare and should be protected from excessive rises, possibly by matching it to the retail price index. Many, if not all, should be cut.

To make matters worse, the British open ticket is usually only valid for one month while in Europe a similar ticket is valid for two months.

First class fares in Britain are usually 50% more than the standard fare while in Europe the price differential is usually 25%. The cost of a first class open return from London to Manchester is £311.

Railfuture believes the open fare has to be seen as affordable by the general public, particularly for motorists who will often be comparing only the cost of petrol for

their trip to the cost of possibly several rail tickets if a family or group is on the move.

Since privatisation, several train operators have withdrawn the Super Saver ticket which had the advantage of being a national ticket, allowing passengers to travel across the artificial boundaries erected by the train companies.

They have also introduced time restrictions on the Saver fare which theoretically was protected. It is increasingly difficult to use these tickets between 15.00 and 19.00 Monday to Friday.

Overall the constantly changing validities, the rising prices, the baffling terminology and the ignorance of many rail staff has led to bewilderment among many existing passengers. Outsiders, including car drivers who may want to switch to a more environmentally friendly mode of travel, may well feel locked out of their national public transport system.

Changes to non-protected fares have caused tremendous problems for passengers.

In 2004 Central Trains scrapped cheap day returns from Peterborough to Birmingham. The official

watchdog – now abolished by the Government – condemned the decision as a rip-off.

The change put up the price of the cheapest “walk-up” ticket from £11.90 to £32.10, an increase of 170%, the Rail Passengers Committee for Eastern England pointed out.

The committee advised passengers to cut the cost in half, by buying separate day return tickets for the overall journey and the committee even handed out leaflets at Peterborough station to inform passengers.

In Britain we are now familiar with long queues at ticket offices as passengers try to negotiate the cheapest fare. How many are pressured into buying a more expensive ticket to avoid the embarrassment of holding up other people? If only the train operators had a similar sense of social responsibility.

In a rail user newsletter, one writer pointed out the irony in an article about the Apex Paint Company. A customer tries to buy a tin of paint but is told by the counter assistant that he can buy any tin from £12 to £200 depending on which type he wants and when he wants to use it. The article in the Oldham-Rochdale-Manchester rail users newsletter

ends with the joke slogan: Thank you for painting with GNER.

One of the main advantages of rail travel should be that a passenger can turn up and go.

Perhaps a return to fares linked to distance might bring some simplicity to the system and a national system of fare zones could work.

Regulation does not need to lead to lost revenue.

In south Wales, when rail fares were reduced, demand went up so much that overall revenue increased too.

Train operators are too keen to keep information secret for purposes of commercial confidentiality. How often is this a convenient excuse for proper scrutiny? The level of their fares is a matter of public interest.

Can we trust them when they refuse to tell us what proportion of tickets are being sold at cheap rates or in advance?

In spite of all the rhetoric and the Government determination to keep clear of difficult decisions, most passengers and passenger groups regard the railway as a public service. Fares should reflect this.

Even though the Government figures distort the number of people who “have access” to a car, there are still many people who rely on the railway.

People from deprived areas should be able to make journeys by train, to fit in with the Government’s social inclusion policies.

A good, reasonably priced public transport system to give access to work and leisure should be a right for all British citizens.



NATIONAL RAILCARD:
Railfuture wants this card introduced to make off-peak rail fares more affordable and to help people to identify with their railway. It could also be extended to become both a loyalty card and a credit card