



Train passengers will often pay too much for their tickets if they rely on advice given by railway staff, a Which? investigation has found.

We asked station ticket office clerks and call centre staff at National Rail Enquiries (NRE) a series of questions about the cheapest way to get around by train (see 'Our research', below).

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- be aware of the mistakes that rail staff make
- find the cheapest fares as soon as they're available

What we found

- We were given the cheapest fare only 93 out of 200 times.
- Only one in three station clerks answered questions correctly.
- Just over half (58 out of 100) NRE staff answered correctly.
- Staff failed to tell us about cheaper train firms we could use, cheaper fares outside of peak hours, season ticket savings and how to pay less when breaking a journey overnight.
- In all, the fares we were quoted would have cost £5,295 more than we needed to pay.

Competing routes

Travel on some of the most popular rail routes in Britain and there may be a choice of companies you can use. But will you be told about this choice?

We asked at five ticket offices and in five calls to NRE staff for the cheapest single ticket to travel by 9am on a weekday on the following journeys, which all have a choice of train companies.

■ London to Grantham

Four out of five ticket offices told us only about National Express East Coast services, which cost up to £57.

Just one office mentioned that travelling on First Hull Trains instead cost £22, a saving of more than 60%.

Three in five NRE staff told us about this fare. Our rail fares expert called the result 'appalling'.

OUR RESEARCH

We devised 20 journey scenarios with a rail fares expert. These scenarios were tested by Which? researchers at stations across the country and on the phone to National Rail Enquiries (NRE) during June this year. Each scenario was tested 10 times – five times at stations and five times over the phone, meaning we asked 200 questions in total. All scenarios dealt with walk-up travel only, so did not cover advance fares.

A fare price?

Poor advice from rail staff could mean your ticket will cost too much



There were problems with other journeys too, where staff often told us only about the fastest, most frequent – and most expensive – services.

We were quoted a fare that was the most expensive 27 out of 50 times, 20 of these quotes coming from ticket office staff. Staff failed to tell us the cheapest fare for these journeys:

■ **Bromley North (London) to Bristol**
Quoted: £52 (First Great Western)
Cheapest: £39.30 (South West Trains)

■ **Crewe to London**
Quoted: £95 (Virgin)
Cheapest: £40 (London Midland)

■ **Birmingham to London**
Quoted: £66 (Virgin)
Cheapest: £22.90 (London Midland)

■ **London to Exeter**
Quoted: £99.50 (First Great Western)
Cheapest: £56.40 (South West Trains)

We would have overpaid £858 in total if we had followed their advice.

Peak-time problems

'Anytime' tickets allow you to travel at peak times (usually early weekday mornings) and are far more expensive than 'off-peak' tickets which are for travel at less busy times.

Delaying a journey until after the peak period is a simple way to save money. But when we asked about the cheapest ticket for journeys leaving close to the end of peak time, staff tended not to tell us how much we would save by delaying our journey – in some cases by just a few minutes – to travel off peak.

Travelling from Great Yarmouth to arrive in London by 10am on a weekday costs £85 for an anytime return. Delay your arrival until 10.24am and you pay just £43 (off-peak return). But would rail staff tell us this?

We asked for the cheapest fare arriving in London by 'about 10am'. Just one ticket office clerk told us of the half-price saving.

65%

of station ticket clerks failed to tell us the cheapest fares

40

out of 60 answers about season ticket savings were wrong

107

out of 200 fares were quoted incorrectly

PAY AND DISMAYED

We've taken a snapshot of parking charges at 150 stations

There are big differences in charges, even at stations just a few miles apart.

■ Cheapest parking

Parking is free at some stations, such as Halifax, Barnsley and Altrincham. Others, including Bangor, Margate and Warrington, are £3 or less a day.

■ Most expensive

The 'short-stay' car park at Birmingham New Street station costs £215 for 12 hours. Glasgow Central costs £175 for 12 hours.

■ The London factor

Parking tends to be more expensive the closer you get to London. You typically pay £4-£10 a day before 9 or 10am on a weekday in car parks managed by firms that run commuter trains into the capital. Parking at central London terminuses such as Euston and Victoria is £18-20.

■ Discounts

Many stations have discounts of 50% or more for parking later (after 9 or 10am) or at weekends.

■ Try nearby stations

If you're travelling from a large city and need to get to the station by car, consider starting your train journey at a station on the outskirts of the city, where lower land costs often mean cheaper, or free, parking. Parking at Sheffield train station is £12 for 24 hours, but free at Meadowhall, just 8-10 minutes away by train.

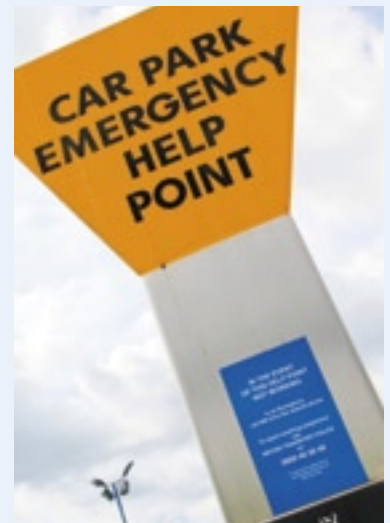
Sandwell & Dudley station, managed by London Midland, and Virgin's Wolverhampton station are just a few miles apart and both have about 400 spaces. Yet Sandwell & Dudley's car park is free, while you pay £6 a day at Wolverhampton.

■ Check charges

Visit nationalrail.co.uk or call 0845 748 4950 to find parking charges and spaces for most stations.

■ If you're unhappy with the charges

The station operator decides parking charges. If you're unhappy, complain to the operator. If you're not satisfied with the response, you can ask the Office of Rail Regulation to look at your complaint in the context of competition law to make sure you're not being taken advantage of.



NRE and other station staff ignored it. 'Awful,' said our expert.

There's an even bigger price difference on a return journey from Bromley South to Manchester. This costs £268 at peak times, £69.40 off peak. We were quoted the off-peak fare six out of ten times.

Our third journey, Rotherham to Bristol, cost £135 peak versus £73.30 off peak. This was slightly better, with seven out of ten staff quoting us the cheaper fare.

In total, we put our three questions about peak-time journeys to rail staff 30 times. We were quoted the cheaper price on just 14 occasions – a success rate of less than 50%.

Breaking a journey

We asked six questions about return journeys that involved an overnight break on the outward or return leg. These questions were poorly dealt

Just one ticket office clerk told us of the half-price saving

with, which is a concern because the ticket offices and the NRE phonenumber are the best sources of information for this type of journey. The NRE website (www.nationalrail.co.uk) has information on the different fares on routes with a choice of train companies and peak-travel restrictions, but it can't deal with breaking a journey and continuing the next day. So it's particularly important that passengers wanting to make these kinds of journeys get the right advice from staff.

But we found that staff failed to give the correct advice 36 out of 60 times. Our expert said this was 'an appalling performance showing no understanding of basic rules by staff in most cases'.

We asked about an evening journey from Lowestoft to Maidenhead with an overnight stop in London on the way.

Just three out of ten staff (all NRE operators) correctly advised that a £45.90 off-peak return would let us stop overnight and continue our journey the next day. The rest said we had to buy separate return tickets for each leg (£62.30 in total), if we wanted to break our journey.

Season savings

If you make the same journey more than once a week, a season ticket or 'rover' pass may be better value than buying separate tickets, but it's not easy to work this out on the NRE website. So, again, sound advice from staff is essential.

We asked six questions ten times each about making the same journey twice in a week. In each case, the correct answer was to recommend a season ticket or rover because it was better value than buying separate tickets.

Just 20 out of 60 questions were answered correctly. For three questions, we didn't get one correct answer – staff just quoted the price for each journey. Our expert told us that the guidelines for

Just 20 out of 60 were able to tell us if a season or rover ticket was better value than separate tickets



PARKING SPACE OR A SEAT ON THE TRAIN?

Jenna Davis, 23, PA

Jenna faces a daily commuting dilemma – get a parking space or a seat on the train.

Jenna travels to her job in London from Southampton Airport Parkway. This is one of the bigger station car parks on the network, but that doesn't help Jenna.

She says: 'It comes down to whether I want a parking space or a seat on the train.'

'The station car park, which costs over £120

a month to use, fills up quickly so getting a space means taking one of the earlier trains.

'These are so busy I rarely get a seat and have to sit on the floor for the hour's journey.'

If Jenna takes a later train, she will usually get a seat but then she has problems parking:

'I usually have to pay £20 to park for a day in the airport car park as the station one is already full by that time.'

She even bought a motorbike to get round the problem, riding to the station to park and get a seat, which she may get if she's lucky.

'I now have to carry my bike helmet and gear to work and cram work clothes into a rucksack. When I'm sitting in soaking wet bike leathers on the dirty floor of the train with 15 others, I do wonder if this is all worth the £5,000 a year my ticket costs.'



Finding the cheapest train tickets can be a bit of a lottery, whenever you are travelling.

Visit www.which.co.uk/cheaptickets for more on finding the cheapest tickets at peak times or off peak.

Find out too, how you can get compensation if your journey is delayed and getting refunds for unused tickets.

ticket office clerks and NRE operators make it clear that they should always consider season tickets and rovers when customers ask about multiple journeys. This is clearly not always happening.

For example, we asked ten times about the cost of making two peak-time journeys a week between Sutton Coldfield and Reading. We were told only five times that a £116.90 weekly season ticket was cheaper than return tickets for each trip which cost £75 each, £150 in total.

When we asked about the cost of making two standard-class journeys between Blackburn and Carlisle in a week, staff offered two off-peak returns at £39.90 each, ignoring the 40% saving offered by the North West Rover ticket (£57 for any four days travel out of eight).

Which? says

Travelling by train can be complex, with many different companies and travel restrictions to deal with. Yet the least that passengers can expect is that when they ask something as simple as the cheapest way to get from A to B, they will be told just that. Our research shows this is the exception, not the rule.

Train firms must ensure that staff are trained to give people the information they need and that the cheapest walk-up fares to key destinations are clearly displayed at point of sale in every station.

Passengers asking about the cheapest way to get from A to B by train should always be told just that



Checklist

Find out about cheaper ways to travel by train



■ **Advance tickets** You can usually buy tickets 11-12 weeks in advance and these are often a lot cheaper than buying a ticket on the day. Seat reservations are included, but you must travel on a specified train and refunds aren't usually available.

To find train companies and when their advance tickets become available, see www.nationalrail.co.uk/times_fares/booking_horizons.html. Register at www.thetrainline.com to be notified by email as soon as advance tickets are available.

■ **Bargains** Megatrain offers intercity travel on Virgin, South West Trains and East Midlands Trains from £1.50 each way. See www.megatrain.com.

■ **Off peak** It's usually cheaper to travel just before or after peak time (7am- 9am weekdays and, in some areas, 4pm and 7pm).

■ **Railcards** These cost £26 for a year (£18 if you're disabled) and can save a third on most tickets. Call 0845 748 4950 or visit www.railcard.co.uk to check eligibility.

■ **Season or rover tickets** These may be cheaper if you make a journey regularly, even just twice a week. See www.nationalrail.co.uk for further details.

■ Check the 'promotions' section on www.nationalrail.co.uk and train companies' own websites for details of special offers.

Opening up competition

Smaller train firms compete with the big boys on some lines. We compared journey times and the cost of return walk-up fares

Open-access train firms focus on destinations served poorly or not at all by the main train companies (franchise operators). Towns such as Hull, Sunderland and Wrexham, for example, now have direct trains to London for the first time in years.

Ashwin Kumar, passenger director at rail watchdog Passenger Focus, said: 'People like the competitive pricing, convenience of buying tickets on board with no penalty, and often more personal service – although we would like to see open-access operators publish punctuality statistics and a charter setting out compensation for delays, which the franchised operators have to provide.'

	OPEN ACCESS	FRANCHISE
YORK TO LONDON		
	GRAND CENTRAL	NATIONAL EXPRESS
Anytime	£95	£223
Off-peak	£61	£90 (£84 super off-peak)
DONCASTER TO LONDON		
	FIRST HULL TRAINS	NATIONAL EXPRESS
Anytime	£107	£172
Off-peak	£71.80	£71.80
WREXHAM TO LONDON		
	WREXHAM & SHROPSHIRE	VIRGIN
Anytime	£53	£201
Off-peak	£53	£66.40 (via Chester)

