



Cheaper rail fares

Advance tickets can slash the cost of rail travel – but just how easy is it to get hold of them?

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- save money on your rail tickets
- discover the best times to book cheaper advance fares.

Unable to find a reasonably priced train ticket to get him to Gatwick in September last year, Lance Dyer (right) from Truro found it cheaper to fly from Newquay instead.

'Buying train tickets is a complete lottery,' Lance told us. 'When my daughter came home to Truro from Birmingham the other week, a return cost her £187 because she bought it on the day.'

Lance isn't alone in finding the system baffling, despite the recent simplification of ticket types (see *Which?*, September 2008, p9). The huge rise in the number and varieties of advance-purchase tickets has been one of the biggest changes for rail passengers since privatisation in the 1990s. But using our research findings, you should be able to get a good deal.

Cheap but no flexibility

Advance tickets may only be valid on a specific train, and you won't get your money back if you decide not to travel or fail to get on that train. But trading off flexibility can bring significant benefits.

For a start, almost all advance tickets are sold with a seat reservation – no small mercy on Britain's often-overcrowded railways.



The other major boon is cost. When we checked fares on five intercity routes over a 12-week period (see 'Our research', opposite) we found prices as much as 80% lower for advance tickets. For example, a return between London and Edinburgh on National Express East Coast cost £31.40 if you booked eight-and-a-half weeks in advance, compared with the £158.50 you'd pay on the day.

Best times to book

We found that the very cheapest fares were generally available as soon as tickets went on sale. However, the length of time they were available for varied.

For example, we only found the £31.40 advance fare (80% cheaper than the £158.50 on-the-day ticket) for London to Edinburgh once – when we checked again a couple of days later, the lowest available fare was £70 (still a saving of 66%).



Lance Dyer found it cheaper to fly from Newquay to Gatwick than to get the train

While train companies open their booking systems 12 weeks ahead of travel, based on our research, we'd advise you to start searching for advance tickets around 10 weeks before travelling.

Most companies had advance fares for both legs of the journey we wanted to make available by around 10 weeks ahead of departure. But there's no guarantee that if you book an advance ticket at this point, a cheaper one won't become available later on.

If you're not able to plan your life 10 weeks ahead, then you'll be pleased to hear that good savings were still available on most off-peak services until at least two weeks ahead of departure. And on

THE GREAT TRAIN TICKET LOTTERY

Advance tickets offer large savings over on-the-day fares, but you may have to book a long way ahead, and on some services advance booking may not be worth it

Advance fares tend to offer the best value in terms of total discount if you're travelling on peak time trains, but how 'peak time' is defined can vary by train company – for example, none of the five Edinburgh trains we looked at were peak trains, while all but one of the Birmingham trains were, despite leaving around the same time.

If your travel times are flexible, it's worth seeing if you can travel off-peak. However, you'll have to book further ahead to get the best price, because the cheaper off-peak tickets tend to sell out more quickly due to their lower price overall (particularly on 'shoulder services' that depart either side of peak times).

On the Leicester and Edinburgh services, there would have been little point buying advance tickets less than two weeks before departure, as the more flexible off-peak walk-up ticket would have been cheaper or only slightly more expensive. On the one off-peak Birmingham service we checked, the cheapest fare we found on Virgin Trains was the on-the-day fare of £39.50. However, it would have been possible to buy an advance ticket to travel on a peak time train departing slightly

later for £27 – a saving of 78% compared with the on-the-day fare of £123 for travel at peak times. On the less busy Norwich and Cardiff trains, we found advance off-peak tickets giving around a 20% discount, available the day before travel. But as this only amounts to fairly small savings of between £8 and £11, you will have to decide if such a saving is worth the loss of flexibility.





peak trains, we found that advance tickets costing between 50% and 60% of the walk-up price were available to Birmingham, Norwich and Cardiff from London on the day before departure.

Bear in mind that on-the-day fares on peak trains are much more expensive than off-peak. On the Cardiff service, for example, the walk-up ticket cost £158 for peak trains, but only £57 off-peak. So even though the saving is bigger, it may still cost you more in real money.

On Virgin services, railcard holders can travel using off-peak tickets at peak times. The other operators do not offer this benefit.

The train companies say that advance tickets can be bought up to 6pm the day before you travel. However, if you leave it that late, you may find that the best deals have gone – or that there aren't any advance fares left at all.

Generally, the longer before departure an advance fare is booked, the cheaper it will be. However, sometimes fares will be reduced closer to departure if there is still a large amount of space on the train.

Which? says

Eye-wateringly high prices for walk-up tickets on peak services mean that those who have to use these trains should take advantage of advance fares – we found sizeable reductions available right up to the day before departure.

However, for many people, even a 50% saving on, say, a £158 return fare from London to Cardiff, might not be enough to justify the limitations of being tied to a particular time, date and train for their journey.

A fare deal

This map shows the cost of the cheapest off-peak ticket combination we found – as a percentage of what it would cost you to buy a return walk-up ticket on the day of travel



Which? online
UK holidays

We don't just help you to save money on train tickets – see our UK holiday guide at www.which.co.uk/ukholidaytips for advice on how to cut the cost of days out, school holidays and transport. You'll also find inspiring ideas for places to visit.

OUR RESEARCH

For 12 weeks between August and November 2008, we used the National Rail Enquiries website – www.nationalrail.co.uk – twice a week to find the cheapest return journeys between London and Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leicester, Norwich and Cardiff. We checked the price for each journey, departing London around 3pm on Friday 14 November and returning around 4pm on Tuesday 18 November.