

A New High-Speed Train Connects Berlin and Munich (2017)

Abstract

The completion of a new high-speed rail line between Berlin and Munich reduced travel time to under four hours by running trains up to 200 miles an hour. It set an example for refining existing technologies and a commitment to improving public transportation.

Source

A new Intercity-Express line

“The biggest improvement in decades”

In December, the new route will finally be in service. The Intercity-Express, commonly known as the ICE, will race through the Thuringian Forest at 300 km/hour – and connect Berlin and Munich in less than four hours. Customers have long been awaiting this huge change in the train timetable.

Richard Lutz is a pleasantly reserved, almost shy man. The new railway chief seems more comfortable with tiny numbers in Excel tables than grand emotional displays in public.

Actually.

Last Friday, however, it was possible to observe a downright enthusiastic railway CEO.

It was shortly after ten thirty in the morning when Lutz rose to speak aboard the “Wittenberge” ICE train. “Welcome to our maiden journey,” he said to the nearly 50 people present. “You are the very first guests to be able to travel on this new high-speed line.” Described as a transportation project of “epic dimensions,” it had even this skilled businessman carried away with enthusiasm.

The transportation project Lutz referred to is the new high-speed rail line between the Thuringian state capital of Erfurt and Ebensfeld, a municipality near Bamberg in Bavaria.

On its maiden journey, the train raced through the Thuringian Forest at 230 km/hour on one of the most demanding railway lines ever built in Germany. Half of the 107 km route runs through tunnels and over bridges. On average, construction costs were around 30 million euros per kilometer.

One unusual feature of the line is that some segments lie at an altitude of more than 600 meters. This is almost unique for high-speed rail lines in Europe. The Deutsche Bahn (DB) is responsible for clearing the rails in the winter.

It has not, however, assumed responsibility for the less successful choice of colors for the noise barriers along the start of the ICE route. “The ochre color scheme was the wish of the city of Erfurt,” says project manager Olaf Drescher. “We’ll be seeing something different in Bavaria.” Around half an hour later, the train crosses the state border and the barriers are painted in white and blue – the colors of the Bavarian flag.

Three ICE “Sprinter” trains a day in each direction

The line will officially be connected to the rail network only with the timetable change in December. The ICE trains will then hurtle down the tracks at up to 300 km/hour. For the end of the year, Lutz promises the most extensive timetable change in decades and the “greatest improvement in service in the history of the Deutsche Bahn.”

In particular, the connection between Berlin and Munich will be much faster. The new timetable plans to link the two cities with three “Sprinter” trains a day traveling in both directions and stopping only in Halle, Erfurt, and Nuremberg. Total travel time will be reduced to just under four hours. Regular ICE trains should take around four-and-a-half hours. Until now, the journey required more than six hours.

Four hours is regarded as an important psychological threshold to get travelers, especially flyers, to switch to the train. The assumption at DB is that even with Lufthansa or Air Berlin, it isn’t really possible to get from the center of Berlin to downtown Munich any faster. All the more so because air passengers feel as if Munich airport is closer to Nuremberg and the new BER airport in Berlin— if it ever opens—seems closer to Leipzig.

To date, DB has a market share of around 20 per cent of those travelling between Berlin and Munich. The goal is to considerably increase this share— just as shorter travel times between Cologne and Frankfurt and between Berlin and Hamburg have already succeeded in winning passengers.

According to the company’s official calculations, some 17 million people— around every fifth person living in Germany— have benefited from improved long-distance train service.

This high figure is also due to the fact that service has improved not only between Berlin and Munich. Cities such as Erfurt, Dresden, Leipzig, and Halle have also profited from the extensive timetable changes. Similar to the Frankfurt-Berlin line, plans are for two trains an hour on the new route. Lutz stresses that this is clearly not merely a prestige project, pointing out that many rail customers have benefited from the improvements.

Ten billion euros for a 500-kilometer route

Amidst all the celebration on Friday, the relief among those involved that the project was finished at all almost went unnoticed. It has taken almost a generation from the initial decision to construct the line to its completion.

In the early 1990s, the then German federal government decided to expand and construct a more than 500-kilometer railway line between Berlin and Nuremberg. In German officialese, the project bore the name VDE 8. VDE stood for “Transport Project German Unity.”

VDE 8 was the largest rail project in the wake of German reunification. It was divided into three subprojects:

- An upgrading of the line from Leipzig/Halle to Berlin, which commenced operation in 2006.
- The new line between Leipzig/Halle and Erfurt, in use since 2015.
- In December 2017, the newly constructed section from Erfurt to Ebensfeld was finally opened. Construction between Ebensfeld and Nuremberg will continue for a few years.

Only then will everything be genuinely finished. According to the original plans, the route was already supposed to be running by the new millennium. There were frequent delays, however, also the result of a construction stop lasting several years. Construction costs ballooned from an initially estimated 13 billion Deutschmarks (6.65 billion euros) to a final bill of at least 10 billion euros.

In terms of delays and cost increases, this massive project has been no different from other major projects. Experience, however, has also shown that most people are overjoyed once everything is fully up and running.

Source: Sven Böll, „Größte Angebotsverbesserung seit Jahrzehnten,“ *Spiegel Online*, June 16, 2017.
Available online:
<https://www.spiegel.de/reise/aktuell/neue-ice-strecke-erfurt-ebensfeld-a-1152353.html>

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Recommended Citation: A New High-Speed Train Connects Berlin and Munich (2017), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5302>> [June 15, 2024].