

## **Testing local public transport systems in major European cities**

### **Problem case: Athens, where local public transport is a matter of luck**

Whilst Germany's capital Berlin was not included in this test of local public transport systems due to its headline-grabbing difficulties with its commuter trains, Athens was in fact initially put to the test. Full of energy, the EuroTest experts got to work – but were very soon brought to an abrupt halt by various factors. The problem was that reliable information about the services offered by transport companies was scarce and when information was provided, it was often only in Greek. This makes life extremely difficult for passengers who are just visiting.

Our inspectors approached the task at hand from the perspective of the unfamiliar visitor. The first step involved searching for the required information on the Internet. Although our inspectors found a website for the linked transport system of Athens's local transport organisation (OASA), this website failed by far to provide all the information required. As soon as more details are required, the user is diverted to the websites of the individual local public transport companies. This means that even information about Athens's three underground lines cannot be found on one joint website. This is tiresome. And what's more, the information found was not always the same, even the names of stops can differ on the different websites.

The online timetable information is currently in the test phase on the OASA website. At the time the EuroTest was conducted, it was not always possible to find the lines proposed on the line network map, even within the city centre. Nor were all the lines on the line network map listed on the transport companies' websites. What remained was a big line network map showing all the modes of transport. The problem here, however, was that this could only be printed in sections which didn't really fit together. And that meant that it wasn't always possible to decipher precisely where the stops were located. And journey times from the place of departure to the selected destination were clearly provided only for the underground, but not for buses.

The hope now was that the test on site would bring about a new insight. Our inspector hence made his way to a major bus stop located next to a motorway junction. According to the timetable information on the Internet, this stop was serviced by a bus heading in the direction of the bus depot. Information was only available in Greek. Our expert therefore went from one stop to the next until he thought that he had found the right one. That took 15 minutes. Then he waited for the bus which came every 30 minutes. But the first bus didn't take him. Due to the language barrier, he did not know why, but when he tried to get on the next bus after waiting another 30 minutes, he was once again told, "Get out of the bus!" Our inspector then went to the ticket desk at the commuter train station to ask for assistance. Staff there was indeed very helpful, but their suggestion that he should try the train wasn't all that much help considering that he wanted to go to the bus depot.

So patience is what's needed here. But patience can prove to be a problem in two ways: not only does it wear passengers out, it can also suddenly turn them into fare dodgers. That's because tickets in Athens are valid for 90 minutes after stamping, usually at the entrance to the stop. But if a passenger has to make several attempts to board and if the train is then also delayed, time can be of the essence. Our inspector's ticket was already invalid before he had even travelled just one metre on it.

On top of all that, it can take some time before a passenger, especially someone unfamiliar with the area, can find out the where, when and what. That's because Athens's transport operators are reluctant to divulge information, not just on the Internet. The situation becomes worse when the information provided is only in Greek, after all, not everyone can be assumed to have a command of the Greek alphabet. ΟΡΓΑΝΙΣΜΟΣ ΑΣΤΙΚΩΝ ΣΥΓΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΩΝ ΑΘΗΝΩΝ (ΟΑΣΑ), the name of the linked transport system of Athens's local transport organisation (OASA), is only the beginning.

For our test of local public transport systems, all of this meant that it was impossible to rate Athens because it was impossible to find reliable information about departure/arrival times and prices. Although this may have prevented Athens from receiving a poor rating, it is anything but flattering for Greece's capital city.