

Testing local public transport systems in major European cities

Results: What was missing most was information

Not bad, but it could be better. That just about sums up the result of the most recent EuroTest of local public transport systems in 23 major European cities. Only two cities failed to make the grade and were given a rating of poor and very poor, all the others were given positive ratings. However, there were nine ratings of Acceptable, but eleven of Good and even one rating of Very Good for the winner and first place which went to Munich in Germany. Fast connections, especially within the inner city, plenty of information at stops and in vehicles, an extremely impressive website and extra marks for accessibility catapulted this city on the river Isar to first place. It's only when it comes to prices that Munich's star begins to wane slightly.

The opposite impression was made by last-place Zagreb. This begins with the connection from the airport which is serviced only by buses. Our inspectors also had to be patient when it came to most of the other connections. In the city centre, for example, the tram travels at an average speed of around only 13 kph, making it easy for even amateur marathon runners to overtake it. Information is also rare. In many places, basic items, such as timetables and clear stop names were missing; sometimes they didn't exist at all, other times they were just confusing because there were tram and bus stops with the same name but at different locations. The dynamic displays in vehicles were sometimes used for other purposes, for instance, to inform about events. On top of all that, Croatia's capital city together with Ljubljana in Slovenia were the only two cities in the test that failed to provide timetable information on the Internet with a route search function. Despite all this criticism, it must be mentioned that Zagreb is currently vamping up its local public transport system with state-of-the-art vehicles. The city is also participating in the European Civitas project to improve local public transport in European cities, as is Slovenia's Ljubljana whose local public transport system only managed to come second last with a rating of Poor in this test.

However, it is not only those bringing up the rear who should take a closer look at their information policy. Other cities tested were found to have plenty of room for improvement. Information was rarely complete, clearly structured and also understandable. Our testers found that around one third of the vehicles tested did not have practical, variable, i.e. dynamic, displays. On the Internet too, not every click was paired with success and some websites resulted in users giving up in despair due to difficulties when entering data or displaying results. In some cities, like Lisbon, for instance, the different transport operators do not have a common website which makes life difficult for users who have to search through different means of transport. London's very informative website could serve as a model here. Even the reduced version in 16 (!) languages features a fully translated timetable and tariff information. A short note from Vienna shows that this is all a matter of give and take: Passengers in Austria's capital city even pay honour their lines in Vienna, briefly referred to as "Wili", with a dedicated fan site on the Internet. Praise also goes to Prague and its website which also offers a free telephone hotline in three languages.

When it comes to accessibility, there is certainly room for improvement. Only a third of the stops tested were equipped with systems to guide the blind, at only around one fifth of stops were wheelchair users able to enter the vehicle without difficulty. There is still a long way to go before accessible stops are automatically identified in network maps as such. Accessibility is also vital on the Internet. Helsinki was a strikingly good example here. Users can have the many websites provided there read out to them, even in several languages, by clicking the respective icon.

Buying a ticket can be trying, especially for the occasional or visiting passenger. Many different tickets is a good thing. But not when you do not know what you need especially when combined with extra tickets when you change lines. Even one of our testers unwittingly became a fare dodger. In only around one third of the cities tested is it possible to pay with a local public transport smartcard which means passengers no longer have to worry about the right ticket or the right number of zones. This kind of card is available, for instance, in Amsterdam. The OV-chipkaart is valid on many forms of transport throughout the Netherlands. This service is even better if the card has "BestPricing" capability. London is where our testers found out precisely how that works. If after taking several trips over the course of one day the price of a day ticket is reached, the so-called OysterCard does not clock up, i.e. charge for any more trips taken that same day. However, public transport in London is also expensive, more expensive than in any other city tested.

Talking about prices: Prices differ hugely from city to city. One key aspect here is the extent to which local public transport is subsidised. This aspect was not examined in this test. Prague came out tops among the low-cost cities. A monthly ticket here costs the equivalent of only 20 Euro and already pays for itself after 22 trips. Many cities with low prices for single or multiple trips more than make up for this with prices for monthly tickets. Take Madrid, for example, where a monthly ticket used for two trips per working day is more expensive than a 10-trip ticket. But the test also clearly showed that a truly attractive local public transport service comes at a price.

Conclusion: Even if a good basic service is available in the majority of the cities tested, efforts still have to be made in many ways in order to establish local public transport as an attractive alternative to private cars.