

# Future Rail Tourism Workshop



**18 November 2025**

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## 1. Introduction

The Future Rail Tourism Workshop, organised by UIC TopRail and held online on 18 November 2025, brought together railway operators, researchers, institutions and tourism professionals from different parts of the world to examine how rail can respond to emerging trends in leisure travel. The workshop formed part of the Future Rail Tourism project and aimed to present its research findings while creating a space for dialogue between organisations that are actively shaping tourism-oriented rail services.

The programme was structured around the key themes identified in the study: digitalisation, sustainability, post-pandemic expectations, rural access and new forms of luxury. Multimodality was treated as a transversal element across all sessions. These themes were reflected in contributions on trust and emotional connection in rail travel, the growing role of digital tools, the evolution of post-material luxury, the revitalisation of low-traffic rural lines, the expansion of integrated mobility services and the increasing importance of bicycle tourism. The final session presented the Vall de Núria railway as a practical example of sustainable and regulated access to a sensitive natural destination.

Vanessa Pérez Miranda, UIC Passenger Department Senior Advisor, opened the workshop by presenting its objectives, namely strengthening collaboration between stakeholders, improving the visibility of tourism-focused rail services and supporting

knowledge exchange between research and practice. She highlighted how tourism links with UIC and TopRail priorities, particularly in promoting sustainable mobility, enhancing customer experience and encouraging multimodal solutions. Her introduction set the tone for discussions that showed how operators are improving digital support, reinforcing accessibility, developing seamless connections and designing services centred on comfort and emotional value.

Across the workshop discussions, rail tourism emerged as an essential part of sustainable mobility and a field that is rapidly evolving in response to changing traveller expectations. Speakers repeatedly emphasised themes such as trust, digital simplicity, multimodal continuity, rural inclusion, emotional engagement and low-impact travel. These perspectives aligned closely with the trends identified in the Future Rail Tourism study, illustrating how rail transport can adapt to support slow travel, environmentally conscious tourism and experience-driven journeys.

This report presents the workshop content through detailed session summaries, cross-cutting insights and strategic reflections. It maintains continuity with the analytical pillars of the Future Rail Tourism study and brings together the research findings and the practical experiences shared during the event.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

## **2. Session Summaries**

### **2.1. Welcome Session**

#### **Vanessa Pérez Miranda, UIC Senior Advisor**

Vanessa Pérez Miranda opened the workshop by outlining the agenda and explaining the objectives of the session. She framed the role of tourism within the wider activities of UIC and TopRail, beginning with an overview of why tourism is an important global sector. Drawing on recent OECD and UN Tourism data, she illustrated both the scale of international arrivals and the ongoing recovery of global tourism flows, noting the significant variations across different regions.

Building on this context, Vanessa introduced the importance of sustainable rail tourism. Supporting sustainable tourism, she emphasised, is not only a strategic framework for strengthening the positive public image of railways but also a way to respond to social concerns, manage risks and create competitive advantages. She underlined that sustainable rail tourism contributes to regional development policies and improves the use of existing rail networks and resources, especially when coordinated with other transport modes. She also referred to UIC publications that highlight how customer experience and service quality

are central to promoting sustainable mobility and tourism.

She continued by presenting a series of UIC tools that support multimodal and tourism related mobility. These included Bike + Rail and Air + Rail initiatives, as well as digital tools such as MERITS, the OSDM distribution model and the electronic Ticket Control Database. She also highlighted PRM-ABT, a web-based application designed within the PASSAGE group to support persons with reduced mobility on international rail journeys. The role of EcoPassenger as a tool that allows travellers to understand the carbon impact of different transport modes was also highlighted.

She then introduced TopRail, explaining that this expert group has existed since 2012 and aims to enhance the visibility of railway tourism products while encouraging cooperation between railway and tourism stakeholders. She described the group's core objectives, including raising awareness, creating knowledge and building synergies with partners. She illustrated these activities through examples of past TopRail forums, workshops and deliverables, such as guidelines on sustainable rail tourism, reports on improving attractiveness and the new Tourist-Friendly classification system. She also presented the TopRail Tourist-Friendly Awards, which promote excellence in tourism-oriented rail services across categories such as rolling stock, stations, intermodality and customer experience.



Source: UIC TopRail

Finally, the Future Rail 2024-2025 project was presented. The aim of this initiative is to identify the factors that will shape the future of rail tourism. This involves defining the measures that railway actors should adopt to support quality and sustainable tourism. A survey and questionnaire formed the basis of this work, followed by a Structural Equation Modelling approach to determine the factors influencing the future of rail-based tourism. She emphasised that travellers' insights played a crucial role in shaping this process.

This introduction positioned the workshop within UIC's long-term efforts to support sustainable tourism, multimodality, accessibility and cross-sector collaboration, setting the stage for the presentations that followed.

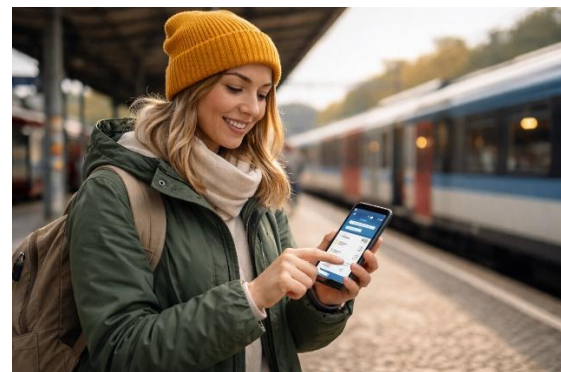
## 2.2. Future Rail Tourism Report Results

### Prof. Francesca Pagliara, University of Naples Federico II

Prof. Francesca Pagliara introduced the analytical foundations and key findings of the Future Rail Tourism study, explaining how current tourism trends influence travellers' perceptions and preferences. She clarified that the study pursued a twofold objective: first, to

analyse current tourism trends; and second, to understand how rail transport adapts to these trends and how it can become more attractive for leisure travellers.

She outlined that the study is structured around five tourism trends that currently guide how the rail sector adapts to evolving traveller expectations. **Digital technologies** have become central, as tourists increasingly expect seamless, connected and personalised journeys. Tools such as real-time information, mobile apps, AI-supported services, high-speed Wi-Fi and smart booking systems shape how travellers evaluate mobility options. Rail operators respond by integrating digital platforms, strengthening connectivity on board and offering services that reduce uncertainty and enhance convenience.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

**Post-pandemic effects** remain highly influential. Safety, hygiene, touchless systems and visible cleanliness continue to underpin traveller trust. Rail adapts through strengthened hygiene protocols, air-filtration systems, touchless controls and design solutions that ensure comfort and reassurance throughout the journey.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

The third trend concerns **Sustainability**, which has become a decisive motivational factor in tourism choices. Travellers increasingly look for low-emission and socially responsible mobility options. Rail operators reinforce this alignment through renewable-energy use, regenerative braking, efficient rolling stock and ESG-oriented policies that highlight rail's environmental advantage.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

Growing interest in decentralisation and **rural access** expresses a shift toward slow travel, cultural immersion and exploration of nature, heritage and remote destinations. Rail is uniquely positioned to meet this demand by connecting peripheral territories, reducing pressure on major urban centres and enabling access to scenic and culturally significant regions.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

Finally, high spending and **luxury** no longer revolve around material opulence but around experiential, sensorial and personalised value. Luxury rail products respond with premium cabins, gourmet dining, themed journeys, cultural storytelling and eco-conscious luxury concepts that transform the journey itself into a meaningful and memorable experience.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

Together, these five trends reflect the broader evolution of global tourism and frame how rail can strategically adapt to emerging traveller expectations.

Prof. Pagliara described the empirical framework adopted to investigate these themes. A structured online questionnaire collected 474 responses from travellers with diverse demographic profiles. Most respondents were young or middle-aged adults, predominantly

from Europe and highly educated, many of whom were already familiar with rail travel. Two initial questions measured current and future use of rail for leisure, showing that while 67% already use rail for leisure purposes, 77% would consider rail more strongly for future leisure trips. This confirmed significant untapped potential for growth.

To analyse the relationships between tourism trends and rail tourism preferences, the study applied **Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM)** using SmartPLS 4. Prof. Pagliara explained that this method is particularly suitable for tourism research because it accommodates non-normal data, reduces multicollinearity concerns and allows the evaluation of both direct and indirect effects. The conceptual model included five first-order constructs: digital technologies, post-pandemic effects, sustainability, rural access and luxury, that collectively form the second-order construct of Rail Tourism Preference (RTP). Thirteen hypotheses were tested to capture the interplay between these constructs.

Before analysing behavioural relationships, she evaluated the reliability and validity of the measurement model and noted that all reliability indicators exceeded recommended thresholds, confirming the robustness of the model. She then presented the structural results, explaining that the strongest direct influences on rail tourism preference came from post-pandemic effects and digital technologies. She highlighted that safety, hygiene and seamless digital services now shape core expectations

among travellers. Luxury, sustainability and rural access also played meaningful roles; while their direct effects were slightly smaller, they contributed important emotional, cultural and ethical dimensions that enhanced the overall rail tourism experience.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

Indirect effects revealed important complementarities between trends. Digital technologies strengthened trust and perceived value by enhancing hygiene perception and supporting sustainable practices, while sustainability gained greater influence when paired with digital or luxury attributes. Luxury also contributed to increasing the appeal of scenic and rural experiences. When considering total effects, digital technologies emerged as the most transversal driver, reinforcing trust, sustainability perception, luxury value and rural attractiveness. Post-pandemic effects continued to strengthen both overall preference and the perceived value of safety-enhanced luxury and rural travel. Sustainability exerted a layered influence that became meaningful when combined with other constructs, luxury provided emotional and experiential depth and rural access remained an important connector to

culture and slow travel when supported by the other trends.

A multi-group analysis explored differences across demographic groups. Younger travellers (under 35 years old) prioritised personalised high-level quality experiences combined with rural access, favouring immersive scenic experiences. Older travellers (above 35 years old) valued sustainability more strongly and preferred when digital tools highlighted environmental information. Women showed higher interest in premium services framed around safety and sustainability, while men appreciate digital convenience and seamless digital support. Students were more attracted to culturally rich rural travel with premium touchpoints, whereas employees responded strongly to digital efficiency and eco-aware routines. These differences emphasised the need for adaptable and segment-sensitive rail tourism strategies.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

Prof. Pagliara then highlighted several implications for the rail sector. She stressed that building trust requires combining digital tools with safety-oriented design so that journeys feel both reliable and reassuring. Digitalisation should act as a connector and enabler across all

stages of the travel experience, supporting personalisation and seamless mobility. She also noted that sustainability becomes more influential when it is integrated with other values, such as personalised services and rural tourism, rather than treated in isolation. Rural rail offers a platform for cultural storytelling and local development, while luxury increasingly takes the form of short, memorable and sensorial experiences accessible to wider traveller segments. She emphasised the importance of tailoring services to different traveller groups and ensuring continuity across the entire intermodal chain.

She then expanded her conclusions by presenting a set of operational directions that show how sustainability can be embedded across multiple dimensions of rail travel. It was outlined how digital and post-pandemic adaptations can support greener operations through AI-assisted eco-routing, smart station concepts, environmental information tools and reduced-waste onboard services. Also the central role of Rail-to-Bike integration as a driver of sustainable tourism, noting examples such as rail connected cycling routes, bike-friendly night train products, unified ticketing and app-based bike sharing systems that strengthen last mile accessibility and broaden the tourism potential of rail.

She finally offered a broader reflection on the overall message of the study. The future of rail tourism will not depend on a single trend but on the coordinated combination of complementary elements. The long-term challenge is to design rail experiences that are smarter, greener and

more emotionally engaging, experiences that align with contemporary traveller values and position rail as a core component of sustainable and memorable tourism.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

### 2.3. Building Trust and Emotional Connection in Rail Tourism

#### Joaquin Botella, SENER Mobility

Joaquin Botella explained that trust is the starting point of every positive rail tourism experience. He described trust as the factor that turns intention into action, because travellers book what feels reliable. Clear information, honest communication and predictable services help travellers feel safe and supported. He emphasised that tourism railways are chosen not out of obligation but out of enjoyment, which makes trust even more important for this segment.

Botella highlighted that operational excellence is the foundation of emotional journeys. Behind every operational metric, there is a feeling: punctuality creates confidence, cleanliness signals care, information gives reassurance and accessibility communicates dignity. He underlined that human presence is emotional presence since empathetic staff interactions can

transform service into hospitality. When travellers feel informed, included and supported, they feel in control of their journey.

**Once trust is established, emotion can emerge.** Botella explained that when travellers stop worrying, they start feeling. Function becomes meaning, comfort becomes memory and the journey turns into a story. Elements such as sound, sight, interaction and values all contribute to this emotional dimension. Calm rhythms, landscape continuity and genuine human contact help shape experiences that travellers remember long after the trip has ended.

He concluded by recalling that sustainability in tourism is not only about emissions but also about human value and respect for places. His message reinforced the idea that rail tourism should design experiences rather than combine operational quality with emotional engagement so that every journey can become a story travellers want to remember.



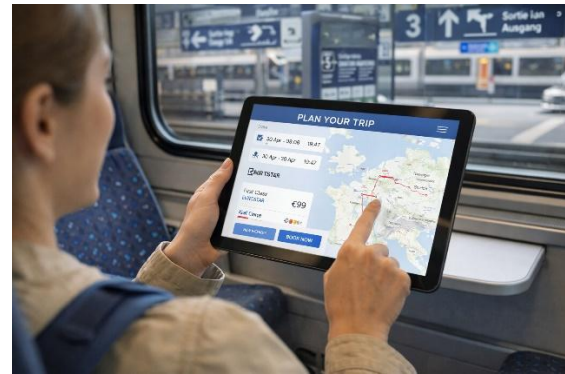
Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

## 2.4. Digitalisation: Expanding Tourism by Train

### Robert From, Rail Europe

Robert From presented how digitalisation can expand rail tourism by removing the frictions that travellers face when crossing borders in Europe. He explained that although demand for train travel is growing quickly, the complexity of the current system prevents the sector from reaching its full potential. Europe has more than forty countries, hundreds of operators, different payment systems, different currencies and no shared standards between railway providers. This creates barriers that make international travel difficult, especially for non-domestic travellers who are unfamiliar with local systems.

He described this fragmentation as the central challenge that digitalisation must address. Travellers encounter different prices, terms, reservation rules and languages as they move between countries. Rail Europe's solution is a **multi-provider approach that brings these systems together through a single engine able to connect operators in a coherent way**. This approach creates a borderless digital environment by integrating inventories, fares and booking processes so that customers can plan international trips without navigating multiple platforms.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

From highlighted that technology, data and storytelling must work together to improve the rail tourism experience. Technology enables integration, data supports relevance and storytelling helps inspire new ways of travelling. He stressed that digitalisation is not only about simplifying transactions but also about shaping how people discover destinations and imagine their journeys.

He illustrated this through the Swiss Bliss campaign, created in partnership with Switzerland Tourism. The project shifted attention away from peak-season hotspots toward quieter moments and lesser-known places. Real travellers, real journeys and unpolished filming conveyed a slower rhythm and deeper form of exploration. Rail acted as the enabler, making spontaneous changes possible with only a few taps. The narrative followed motivations rather than demographics, using formats that matched different travel mindsets such as seekers wanting depth, wanderers embracing spontaneity and planners needing clarity. The campaign spread inspiration across multiple touchpoints and encouraged travel to stations and towns that usually receive little visibility. It

showed how digital content and rail connectivity can work together to transform small detours into memorable experiences.

From explained that the opportunity for the sector lies in serving non-domestic travellers more effectively. Complexity and lack of transparency often prevent people from getting what they want. Yet the European train tourism market is already significant and expected to grow even further. Rail travel also offers a much lower carbon footprint compared to flying, which reinforces its relevance in sustainable tourism strategies.

He concluded that European rail travel can be made simple by connecting countries, providers and people through shared digital tools. This approach mirrors UIC's vision of building bridges between stakeholders and supporting international cooperation. Digitalisation therefore becomes both a practical solution and a strategic driver for expanding tourism by train.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Iter1*

## **2.5. Luxury: From Passenger to Guest**

### **Ana Garcia, InkaLAB**

Ana García Pando presented the concept of post material luxury and explained how it is

reshaping expectations in rail tourism. She described luxury as less about traditional luxury features and more about depth of engagement and meaningful experiences. She emphasised that modern luxury is defined by care, attention to detail, authenticity, environmental stewardship and positive social impact. Emotional connection plays a central role since travellers respond to a 'show, don't tell' approach, that allows them to feel the exceptional rather than hear about it.

She introduced the idea of new luxury capital, where meaning and experience now create distinction in tourism-oriented services. Experience orientation, authenticity, sustainability, purpose, wellbeing, privacy and personalisation are the markers of post-material luxury. García highlighted that rail tourism, whether operated through dedicated tourist services or general commercial lines, is well positioned to deliver these values for leisure travellers.

Her presentation then focused on the **TopRail Tourist-Friendly** Framework, which provides guidelines to design journeys where the trip becomes part of the holiday. The framework covers on-board service and experience, tourist rail lines, stations, passenger lounges and policy recommendations. It encourages a shift from passenger to guest, emphasising care, comfort and attention to detail. This shift helps operators create experience-centred and emotionally aligned services that reflect authenticity, sustainability and meaningful interaction. She noted that less than one percent of international tourist arrivals worldwide use rail as their mode

of transport and that adopting a guest oriented approach signals an untapped market with significant potential.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

García illustrated how the values of new luxury appear in the Tourist-Friendly Railway Awards. Experience-centred practices include seamless digital tools, accessible and comfortable stations, well-designed wayfinding, support and assistance, redesigned services, on-board storytelling and integration with local attractions. Authenticity is reflected through partnerships with local communities, use of regional food and materials and design elements that convey a sense of place and cultural continuity. She also presented examples of sustainability and purpose such as emission savings, circular practices, intermodal integration, renewable energy and access to rural and protected areas.

Further dimensions of post-material luxury included privacy and wellbeing, shown through quiet carriages, private compartments, panoramic windows, inclusive food options and

ambient design for rest. Personalisation was presented as flexible itineraries, seat and meal preferences during booking, hop-on hop-off itineraries, seasonal passes, special packages and real-time assistance. These features give travellers a sense of control, which plays an important role in perceived comfort.

She concluded by explaining how the Tourist-Friendly framework embeds hospitality principles into every stage of the journey to create intangible luxury. When travellers feel seen, heard and supported, rail becomes a compelling option in the leisure tourism landscape, offering experiences built around authenticity, care and emotional value.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

## 2.6. TOUR&RAIL: Accessing Rural Areas and Low-Traffic Lines

### Maria Villodre, UPM

Maria Villodre introduced the Erasmus + **TOUR&RAIL** project, which aims to revitalise rural regions by improving access to low-traffic railway lines and strengthening their tourism potential. She explained that many rural areas hold valuable cultural and natural assets yet remain difficult to reach because transport options are limited. **TOUR&RAIL**

positions rail as a key element for developing sustainable mobility and promoting lesser-known destinations.

Villodre outlined the central aims of TOUR&RAIL, explaining that the project is building a tool to assess the condition of low-traffic railway lines and to understand their potential future roles. The methodology is being applied first in Spain, where the team is examining how these lines can support mobility in rural territories. She emphasised the value of engaging local communities and raising public awareness about the challenges and possibilities linked to these networks. The project also encourages stronger cooperation between transport providers and tourism organisations so that rural railways gain visibility and become part of broader development strategies.

She also provided an overview of the project's work structure, noting that WP2 (led by UPM) develops a methodology and a physical-digital inventory for classifying low-traffic lines, WP3 (led by UCM) analyses social cohesion and territorial capital to produce an interactive atlas of tourism potential, WP4 (coordinated by UIC) identifies successful revitalisation cases across Europe and compares two selected lines and WP5 (led by the University of Évora) studies community-based governance models and compiles a good-practice manual.

Building on this framework, Villodre then presented the progress of Work Package 2, which is almost complete. A physical and digital inventory of low-traffic lines in Spain

has been produced and the lines have been classified into categories from A1 to C2 based on factors such as maintenance, electrification and level of use. The map shown during the presentation illustrated the distribution of these lines across the country and highlighted differences in their current condition. This case study forms the foundation for the next stages of the project.

She noted that **low-traffic lines can become meaningful tourism corridors when integrated with complementary services** such as bus links, cycling paths and walking routes. This multimodal approach strengthens rural accessibility and encourages visitors to explore areas that are often overlooked.

At the end of the intervention, Vanessa Perez highlighted the importance of identifying the tourist attractiveness of certain rural lines in order to preserve them and to fix population. since, once a line is closed, it becomes extremely difficult to recover it, which makes initiatives like TOUR&RAIL essential for protecting regional mobility options.



Source: TOUR&RAIL project ([tourandrail.com](http://tourandrail.com))

## 2.7. Multimodality for Rural Accessibility

### Marco Genovese, Trenitalia

Marco Genovese, who has also collaborated in the Future Rail Tourism project, presented how **Trenitalia Regionale** supports territorial accessibility through a broad and capillary mobility network that plays a decisive role in connecting Italy's rural areas. He began by outlining the scale of Trenitalia Regionale's operations, noting that the company runs around 6,000 regional services every day and transports more than 1.5 million passengers. With more than 1,300 trains in its fleet and over 30,000 employees involved in the regional division, Trenitalia is not only a rail operator but a daily mobility system that guarantees essential transport for students, workers and tourists. He underlined that this capillarity makes Trenitalia the largest mobility player in Italy and, in many rural territories, the only public transport option available. Such widespread coverage helps reduce social and economic imbalances by ensuring that even isolated communities remain linked to larger urban centres.

Genovese then showed how this extensive network supports tourism, especially in regions with strong cultural and natural attractions. He illustrated this through the **Tuscany Line**, a standard regional service that Trenitalia has developed into a recognisable tourism product. By creating a clear identity for the line and highlighting connections between Florence and towns such as Lucca and Montecatini, Trenitalia helps visitors understand how to

discover authentic villages and landscape areas through rail. The approach promotes slow and sustainable travel, encouraging tourists to explore smaller destinations beyond the well-known city centres.



*Source: Gruppo FS Italiane (fsnews.it)*

A central part of his presentation focused on the Link services, a portfolio of more than 180 multimodal connections that extend the reach of regional trains. Genovese explained that in many rural areas train services alone are not sufficient, which is why Trenitalia has signed numerous agreements with transport operators under public service contracts. Through these partnerships, stations are linked with buses, ferries and planes. This makes it possible to reach beaches, natural parks, archaeological areas and historic towns that are not directly served by rail. He emphasised that the objective is not simply to align timetables, but to remove barriers altogether and provide a practical and continuous travel chain for passengers.

Among the examples presented, the Cortona Link stood out as a demonstration of integrated mobility. Cortona is a village in Tuscany whose station lies far from the historic centre. Trenitalia therefore created an agreement with the local bus operator to offer a direct

connection from the station to the town centre. Passengers can buy a single ticket through the Trenitalia app or website, combining the train fare with a small add-on of 1.7 euro for the bus. Genovese described this as a way to make the entire journey seamless, avoiding the need to purchase separate tickets and simplifying the travel experience for tourists.

To further support tourism in rural areas, Trenitalia produces a thematic travel book that offers curated itineraries. This publication, *Borghi* (meaning small villages), presents journeys that can be made by train or through multimodal services to reach small Italian villages. Genovese explained that promoting these places is essential because accessibility becomes meaningful only when travellers are aware of the possibilities. This publication therefore complements the mobility services by inspiring travellers to explore lesser-known destinations.

The experience of Trenitalia Regionale offers a practical example of how integrated transport solutions can encourage slow travel, strengthen local economies and ensure equitable mobility across territories.



Source: Trenitalia (FS Italiane Group)

## 2.8. Cyclists Love Trains: Accessibility for Bicycle Tourism

**Fabian Küster, European Cyclists' Federation (ECF)**

Fabian Küster began by acknowledging the earlier work of Marco Danzi, who contributed to ECF's first long-distance bicycle-carriage report and helped establish this topic within the organisation's long-standing agenda. He explained that ECF has worked on bicycle carriage on trains for more than two decades, recalling that the very first report was issued in 2006, at the time when the EU was preparing the first generation of the Rail Passenger Rights Regulation. Although the initial attempt to include bicycle requirements in that regulation did not succeed, the provisions were finally introduced in the 2021 revision, coinciding with the first edition of the *Cyclists Love Trains* report. The 2025 update therefore builds on a long trajectory of advocacy and monitoring, while maintaining methodological consistency with the 2021 edition.

To introduce the practical challenges faced by cyclists, Küster shared a personal experience from a cycling sabbatical in Denmark and Norway. After reserving a bicycle space on a Norwegian night train, the service broke down in the middle of the night and passengers were transferred by replacement buses. As he recounted, cyclists often find themselves “last in the queue” when space allocation is decided during disruptions. In this case he was fortunate, as the bus driver allowed him to load the bicycle, but he emphasised that very few operators have explicit rules guaranteeing that bicycles are accepted on replacement buses. This gap in policy is representative of the broader inconsistencies identified in the study and illustrated why clear and cyclist-friendly procedures are essential.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Dennis G. Jarvis (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Küster then presented insights from a cycling tourism survey in the Danube Region, conducted within an Interreg project, which collected more than 5,000 responses from cycle tourists. According to the findings, 53% of respondents used rail to reach or depart from their destination, making trains the dominant long-distance mode supporting cycle tourism in

that region. About 35% also used public transport during their holiday, mainly trains, although the satisfaction with public transport reached only 3.3 out of 5, which was lower than their general satisfaction with the cycling holiday itself. This indicated both the strong reliance on rail and the presence of barriers that reduce user experience, reinforcing the need for improved integration between cycling and long-distance rail services.

The *Cyclists Love Trains* report evaluated 67 European long-distance rail operators using six indicators divided into hardware (60%) and software (40%) categories. Hardware captures the physical aspects, with a major focus on bicycle spaces on trains, while software covers cost, booking channels, languages, and website or app functionality. The methodology also applied bonus and malus points: operators were rewarded for good practices such as allowing bicycles on replacement buses or accommodating non-standard bicycles and penalised for restrictive rules such as strict weight or size limits, surcharges for folded bikes or stringent peak-hour prohibitions. Data was collected from official operator websites, complemented by customer service inquiries and supported by a survey run with the assistance of CER and UIC.

The performance of different train categories showed substantial variation. High-speed trains with nine out of fourteen operators not allowing bicycles at all, resulting in a category average of 14.5 points, classified as very poor. Only DB and ÖBB achieved a “good” rating, and ÖBB was the only operator permitting bicycles on all

its high-speed services. Night trains performed considerably better, with an average of 40.6 points, categorised as moderate, and five operators receiving a “good” score. When looking at the overall ranking, Küster focused on the top 50%, highlighting the leading operators: NMBS/SNCB (Belgium) and SBB (Switzerland) both scoring 88%, followed by MÁV-START (Hungary) at 82%. These operators combine strong physical capacity with good digital information and pricing systems.

Küster then summarised the indicator results, noting that bicycle spaces remained the core determinant of performance. On average, operators provided 4.3 spaces per train, amounting to 21.6 out of 50 points. Eight operators achieved the maximum score by offering ten or more spaces. Bicycle-sharing integration was the weakest indicator, with a score of 1 out of 10 and only one operator, Dutch NS, achieving full points for providing comprehensive linkages to bicycle-sharing services. Cost performed the best among software indicators, scoring 6.2 out of 10, corresponding to an average price below €10, with 20 operators offering free bicycle carriage. Booking channels scored 5 out of 10, typically corresponding to the availability of two or three channels such as counters, websites or apps. Languages scored 2.7 out of 10, showing that on average, bicycle-carriage information is provided in only a little more than two languages (usually the national language and English). Website and app functionality reached 4.2 out of 10, meaning that digital tools

met only slightly more than two out of five functionality criteria. A map of national operators illustrated a pattern where higher scoring operators were concentrated in central Europe.

He concluded by presenting a set of recommendations specifically directed at bicycle tourism, noting that cycle tourism is a rapidly growing sector that offers rail operators a clear opportunity to attract new customers. He explained that operators should anticipate rising demand by ensuring a minimum bicycle offer throughout the year and increasing capacity during the summer season through flexible multi-purpose spaces. He stressed the importance of clear and centralised rules on bicycle carriage available in several languages so that international travellers can easily understand how to use the service. He added that journey planners should include a bicycle search function to help users identify suitable trains and that reservation policies should allow bookings up to six months in advance, reflecting the way many cyclists organise their trips. He emphasised that operators need to provide multiple booking channels because relying only on a physical counter is a significant barrier for travellers. He closed by expressing the hope that a European bicycle ticket will be developed in the future. He noted that the European Commission is preparing a ticketing package that will revive discussion on through tickets, aimed at ensuring that tickets purchased from different operators for the same journey are treated as a single contract with

passengers rights attached, which would greatly benefit those travelling with bicycles.



*Source: Trenitalia (FS Italiane Group)*

## **2.9. Vall de Núria Case Study: Sustainability and Multimodality**

### **Ricardo Palou, FGC**

Ricardo Palou from FGC, who has been an active part of the Future Rail Tourism project, presented the case of Núria Rack Railway. He described it as a reference touristic destination in the northern region of Catalonia and as a case study of sustainable and multimodal transportation to a nature protected area with almost one hundred years of history, since it was inaugurated in 1931. He explained that Vall de Núria is very popular in Catalonia, the Pyrenees and the rest of Spain because it combines a natural park and a mountain resort with many activities such as ski and other winter sports in winter and numerous trails for hiking and running. The surrounding peaks reach elevations close to 3,000 metres above sea level and the destination also hosts a minor basilica of the Catholic Church, which contributes to its attraction for nature, culture, spirituality and sports.

Palou explained that the rolling stock operates all year long and it has a section of normal railway transportation and another section that becomes steep in the mountains with a cogwheel segment of about 8 kilometres where passengers have panoramic views from their seats. He noted that FGC also has heritage rolling stock from the former Matterhorn Gotthard line in Switzerland that has been restored and is used in guided heritage circulations on selected days, especially weekends and vacation periods.

He then presented the railway scheme. The line is almost 12.5 kilometres long and the trip takes about 40 minutes. It runs from Ribes de Freser to the Vall de Núria resort and has two main stations in Ribes de Freser, one connecting with the regional Renfe service from Barcelona towards Puigcerdà and the other in the town centre. From Ribes to Núria the ascent covers about 11 kilometres and a vertical difference of about 1,000 metres, from roughly 950 metres above sea level in Ribes to around 2,000 metres in Núria. There are 4 stations, and the cogwheel section begins around kilometre 6.4441 up to Núria. This part of the journey is about 20 minutes long and reaches a maximum gradient of 15 percent.

When explaining multimodality, Palou showed the railway map of Catalonia. He highlighted the regional line from Barcelona to Ribes de Freser, which allows visitors and foreign travellers staying in Barcelona to reach Vall de Núria in less than a 3 hour combined trip. The regional train from Barcelona takes about 2 hours and 130 kilometres and the Cremallera de

Núria train takes 40 minutes and 12.5 kilometres. Integrated tickets combine both services and there is daily service for this connection.



*Source: Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat de Catalunya (FGC)*

He then discussed quality standards, excellence criteria and service pledge. For information accessibility, he mentioned the website to plan the trip and book tickets, an extensive number of screens in stations and in the resort with timetables and service information, the wayfinding system that guides people from Barcelona to Vall de Núria and recent investments in PRM accessibility in stations including an inclusive changing room in the destination. Regarding facilities, he mentioned toilets in all stations and in the resort, comfortable seats with guaranteed seating for all passengers, safe areas to store baggage and ski material, cleanliness monitoring systems and restaurants and vending machines at all four stations and in the mountain resort. To enhance the journey experience, he referred to panoramic windows in all rolling stock, a free digital audio guide that visitors download on their smartphones, and the inclusion in the ticket of entrance to the rolling stock heritage

exhibition in Ribes de Freser as well as the historic circulations with the Matterhorn Gotthard trainset on weekends and in vacation periods.

Palou showed the trip planning section of the website and the audio guide interface, explaining that the guide works with geofences so that when travellers cross specific points the multimedia content plays automatically with video, audio, photographs and text. He also showed images of the heritage exhibition and the moments when the MGB trainset is used for guided visits.

To conclude, Palou underlined that the Núria railway is powered 100 percent by green energy and that this forms part of FGC's commitment with the Natural Park of les Capçaleres del Ter i del Freser. Because the railway is the only way to access the resort, it also works as a regulator of visitor flows to this protected area. He explained that this approach is reinforced by **FGC's Ecovall programme**, which supports the goal of an ecological valley and strengthens the role of the rack railway as a sustainable access system. These actions are linked with agreements with the Headwaters of the Rivers Ter and Freser Natural Park and with the Regional Natural Park of the Catalan Pyrenees to ensure coordinated conservation and responsible visitor management. He ended by showing the EcoVall project video, which offers a glimpse of Vall de Núria.



Source: Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat de Catalunya (FGC)

## 2.10. Concluding Remarks

Francesca Pagliara closed the workshop by thanking all speakers and offering a brief reflection on the main messages emerging from each contribution. She returned to the idea that building trust is fundamental in rail tourism, stressing the importance of the sentence heard earlier that when passengers stop worrying they start feeling. She noted that *trust is created when travellers feel informed, supported and included and that this emotional dimension is central to the passenger experience*. She then addressed the presentations on digitalisation, agreeing with the view that demand is booming while complexity remains a barrier due to different languages, currencies, regulations and prices. She highlighted the need to make European rail connections simpler and underlined the value of combining technologies with data and storytelling to improve the travel experience. Turning to the presentation on luxury travel, she appreciated the shift from considering people as passengers to considering them as guests, with attention to privacy, personalisation and well-being. She remarked that when tourists feel heard and do not feel

alone, rail becomes a compelling option for leisure travel.

Pagliara then commented on the sections concerning rural access, noting the relevance of connecting territories through regional services and multimodal solutions. She highlighted the example of the Tuscan line and the Cortona link as an effective way to reach places that are otherwise difficult to access. She followed with remarks on sustainability and the increasing demand from cyclists, observing that many tourists use public transport to reach cycling destinations and that operators are being asked to adapt trains more effectively to bicycle carriage. She noted the need to satisfy this growing demand through appropriate supply.

She concluded with the Vall de Núria case study, recognising the wide range of facilities and services offered to visitors and the attention to information and accessibility. She underlined the importance of providing a protected and comfortable experience for tourists and emphasised that the Núria railway is powered 100 percent by green energy, which is an essential element for sustainability. She also highlighted the Ecovall project and the agreements with the natural park as an important example of coordinated management and environmental commitment.

In closing, she noted that the themes emerging in the workshop align fully with the current tourism trends identified in the Future Rail Tourism project and that the rail sector is progressively adapting to them.

### **3. Cross-Cutting Insights**

The workshop presentations revealed a shared understanding of how rail tourism is evolving and how operators and institutions are repositioning their services within a changing travel landscape. Although each contribution approached the topic from a different angle, several common themes emerged. Together, these themes align closely with the main drivers identified in the Future Rail Tourism study and show how demand for sustainable, digital and experience-oriented travel is reshaping the sector.

#### **3.1. Rail Tourism as a Platform for Sustainable Mobility**

Sustainability appeared consistently as a defining element of rail tourism. Presentations showed that railways not only reduce environmental impact but also act as tools to regulate visitor flows in sensitive areas, as demonstrated by destinations where rail is the only access mode to natural parks. Regional rail networks provide a low-impact alternative to private cars and support slow travel practices that encourage visitors to explore landscapes, heritage sites and smaller communities. Active tourism, including cycling, reinforced the role of rail as an enabler of low-carbon mobility. These perspectives echoed the sustainability driver in the FRT study, which identified rail as a responsible mode that balances environmental stewardship with comfort and experience.

#### **3.2. Digitalisation as a Gateway to Awareness and Trust**

Digitalisation emerged as a decisive enabler in both visibility and user experience. Integrated booking platforms, real-time information, journey planners and intuitive wayfinding tools reduce uncertainty and help travellers navigate complex networks. Digital services also shape how visitors discover new destinations through storytelling, inspiration campaigns, audio guides and user-friendly interfaces that support seamless door-to-door travel. The workshop reinforced the FRT conclusion that digitalisation strengthens trust by providing transparency, predictability and ease of use, which are essential attributes for non-domestic travellers and younger audiences.

#### **3.3. The Emotional and Human Dimension of Rail Travel**

A strong emotional undercurrent ran through the workshop discussions. Several presentations highlighted how travellers associate rail journeys with feelings of comfort, safety, calmness and freedom from stress, especially when staff interactions are empathetic and services feel predictable. When operational concerns fade, travellers become receptive to scenery, atmosphere and cultural context, which transforms movement into experience. This human-centred view corresponds to the FRT drivers of trust, luxury and comfort, where emotional value and personalised attention shape the perceived quality of a trip.

### **3.4. Multimodality as a Foundation for Accessibility**

Multimodality appeared as a strategic requirement for reaching dispersed destinations, particularly in rural and mountainous areas where rail alone cannot provide door-to-door coverage. Presentations showed how integrated connections with buses, ferries and local mobility systems expand the catchment area of regional lines and ensure continuity of service. Multimodality also supports cycling tourism by facilitating transitions between active mobility and long-distance rail. The workshop demonstrated that multimodality is not only technical integration but also a way to broaden the accessibility and appeal of rail-based tourism experiences.

### **3.5. Rail as a Driver of Rural Tourism and Local Development**

Several presentations highlighted the transformative potential of rail for rural development. Rail services enable access to lesser-known destinations, distribute tourism flows more evenly and stimulate local economies by attracting visitors to small towns and heritage landscapes. The ability of rail to offer predictable and sustainable access gives rural territories a competitive advantage, supporting the decentralisation trend observed in the FRT study. This role strengthens the position of rail as both a mobility service and a regional development instrument.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Champer (CC BY-SA 3.0)*

### **3.6. The Rising Importance of Active and Slow Travel**

Cycling tourism and slow travel trends appeared prominently during the workshop. Growing demand for bicycle carriage on trains and the increasing appeal of scenic routes reflect societal preferences for healthier and more immersive travel experiences. These preferences align with the decentralisation and rural access trends identified in the FRT study, where travellers seek routes that allow them to move at a slower pace, connect with landscapes and explore destinations that lie beyond major urban centres.

## **4. Challenges for the Future**

While the workshop showcased promising developments, it also highlighted several challenges that need to be addressed to strengthen the competitiveness and relevance of rail tourism. These challenges relate to digital integration, operational reliability, multimodal coordination, customer experience and environmental management.

#### **4.1. Fragmentation of Digital Platforms and Information Sources**

A recurring issue concerned the fragmentation of digital systems across Europe. Travellers often need to navigate multiple websites, fare structures, reservation rules and language barriers when planning international journeys. This lack of integration reduces clarity and can discourage potential rail users. Fragmented bicycle carriage rules further complicate long-distance planning and weaken customer confidence.

#### **4.2. Limitations in Multimodal Integration**

Despite successful examples of multimodal corridors, full integration between trains, air, buses, boats, and local mobility systems remains uneven. Challenges include inadequate transport infrastructure—such as the absence of direct rail connections to major airports, limited integration of bus services, and insufficient port and ferry facilities—along with uncoordinated timetables, separate ticketing systems, inconsistent signage and limited real-time information. Rural regions face additional complexities due to lower service frequencies and limited local transport coverage, which make end-to-end journeys less predictable.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

#### **4.3. Operational Reliability and Capacity Constraints**

Trust depends on operational performance, and this remains challenging when delays, capacity shortages and seasonal peaks continue to affect the reliability of rail tourism services. Scenic destinations experience fluctuations in demand that place pressure on both infrastructure and staff. Capacity constraints, especially in long distance trains, for bicycle carriage remain a major barrier despite growing interest from active tourists.

#### **4.4. Visibility and Market Positioning of Rail Tourism**

Many tourism-oriented rail products lack the visibility needed to attract international audiences. Scenic routes, heritage lines and regional services often remain overshadowed by high-speed or metropolitan rail. Without targeted marketing and clear positioning, these products risk remaining underutilised despite their potential.

#### **4.5. Environmental Pressures and Managing Visitor Flows**

Destinations located in natural parks or protected areas face the challenge of balancing accessibility with conservation. Rail can regulate visitor flows, but doing so effectively requires close cooperation with local authorities and long-term planning to protect ecosystems while supporting tourism growth.

## 5. Opportunities and Recommendations

The workshop discussions and the FRT study point to several opportunities that can guide the evolution of rail tourism in the coming years. These opportunities highlight where investments and strategic planning can have the greatest impact.

### 5.1. Strengthening Digital Integration

Expanding integrated digital platforms can simplify international travel and increase the visibility of tourism-focused routes. Providing multilingual support, transparent information and real-time updates will improve user experience and attract a broader audience. Harmonising digital standards for bicycle carriage and multimodal planning can help reduce uncertainties for active travellers.

### 5.2. Designing Emotionally Engaging Journeys

Investing in the emotional and sensory aspects of travel can enhance the perceived value of rail tourism. Features such as panoramic windows, onboard storytelling, calm interiors and attentive staff interactions can strengthen the feeling of care and authenticity. These elements correspond to intangible forms of luxury that do not require major infrastructure upgrades but significantly enhance guest experience.



*Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)*

### 5.3. Expanding Multimodal Tourism Corridors

Building on successful examples of integrated links between rail and other modes, operators can expand multimodal corridors that connect railway stations to cultural sites, natural areas and rural villages. Branding these corridors clearly and offering integrated tickets help create easy and predictable journeys. Coordination between transport providers and tourism authorities is essential to develop coherent products that travellers can trust.

### 5.4. Supporting Rural Regeneration and Decentralisation

Rail can play a central role in promoting rural tourism by connecting visitors to smaller towns and natural attractions. Targeted marketing, improved signage and partnerships with local communities can help strengthen the appeal of these places. By improving accessibility, rail contributes to balanced tourism flows and supports regional development.

### 5.5. Improving Bicycle Integration

With demand for cycling tourism growing, operators have an opportunity to attract new

customer segments by enhancing bicycle facilities. Increasing capacity, improving reservation systems, offering clear rules and integrating bicycle search functions into journey planners will support this trend. Collaboration with cycling organisations can help harmonise practices across borders.



Source: Trenitalia (FS Italiane Group)

### 5.6. Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusiveness

Continuous improvements in station and train accessibility will make rail tourism more inclusive and attractive. Clear wayfinding, accessible toilets, ramps and dedicated spaces for travellers with reduced mobility contribute to a welcoming environment and reflect a commitment to universal service quality.



Source: Author's own creation (AI-generated)

## 6. Strategic Conclusions

The Future Rail Tourism Workshop confirmed the growing importance of rail as a cornerstone of sustainable and experience-driven tourism. Across the presentations, rail emerged as a mode capable of connecting regions, supporting rural revitalisation, enabling active travel and providing memorable journeys that combine comfort with environmental responsibility.

The workshop demonstrated that the future of rail tourism depends on strengthening trust, improving digital tools, enhancing multimodality and delivering emotionally engaging experiences. Achieving these goals requires cooperation between operators, tourism authorities and local communities, along with continued investment in accessible infrastructure, integrated systems and high-quality service design.

The insights gathered during the workshop reinforce the findings of the Future Rail Tourism study and show that rail is well positioned to lead the transition toward sustainable, inclusive and meaningful travel across Europe and beyond.

The presentations shared during the Workshop are available online at:

<https://uic.org/events/future-rail-tourism-workshop>

To know more about TopRail Initiative do not hesitate to consult: [www.toprail.org](http://www.toprail.org)