

BRITISH VISIT TO MARSEILLE

A party of members and former members of Railfuture, the rail passengers' organisation, visited Marseille by train between May 6th and 13th, 2026.

We used Eurostar to Lille Europe and although there was a sizeable queue at St Pancras International, it was constantly on the move and all were through the controls in good time. The return experience at Lille Europe as we left the Schengen area was also reasonably swift.

After lunch in a brasserie, we intrepid travellers then boarded Ouigo, the "no frills" SNCF train from nearby Lille Flandres station. There is no catering on Ouigo so it is best to obtain at least a drink beforehand, while there is a charge for excess baggage - and our travellers had prepared for that. Ouigo is operated by clearly branded TGVs, using the same high-speed lines as a normal high-speed train and we took the same time. On the way back, however, delays in Provence meant that we were just after half an hour late back in Lille, where large numbers of passengers were awaiting the southbound Ouigo service and this rather impeded a swift exit for us.



Our time in Marseille was blessed with warm spring weather and we used the opportunity to visit churches, museums, art galleries, the Corbusier house, a concert in the oldest abbey in Europe and other attractions. Excursions were also made to Aix-en-Provence, the resort of La Ciotat and the ancient city of Arles. Highlights included the beautifully kept station at La Ciotat (where in 1895 the Lumière brothers had produced one of the earliest films of a train arriving with visitors). Apparently they thought their invention would just be a short-lived novelty... An efficient and remarkably cheap bus service links the station to the seafront and historic port area.

To reach Arles we took the scenic route - the non-electrified line from Marseille to Miramar that hugs the coast to Fos-sur-Mer and then passes lakes and woods, including tunnels and viaducts, with some stunning views. It was not completed till 1915. The line deserves to be better known and a timetable would be welcome.

Indeed, there were also places where clearer and simpler street maps for visitors arriving by train could be provided.

Public transport within the Marseille conurbation was considered to be good value for money and the group made good use of the 24-hour ticket. There are two modern metro lines, both serving the main line St Charles station on the top of a hill; and three tram lines, one of which included a section in tunnel at Noailles. Marseille had once had an extensive tram network which had close been largely closed by the 1980s, with the exception of the line with the tunnel.; but in recent years two completely new lines have been built. Our group made good use of them.

Also to be recommended was the bus route along the corniche to the suburb of Prado - where it connects conveniently with the metro. Some of us also took a boat trip round the island on which the famous Château d'If is situated - in the interest of multimodality. Several other boats also ply these coastal waters. They are not part of the urban transport network, however, and you have to pay extra for them.

Thus the British visitors found Marseille (which most had not visited before) to be attractive, memorable and catering for many tastes and interests - and only one change of train from London!

One should add that other means of transport between London and Marseille are also available, although not all quite as “green” as ours: for example, a party of Rugby fans in our hotel had flown down from London for the weekend; and there are also two normal TGVs each way between Brussels and Marseille, calling at Lille Europe.

Trevor Garrod