Night trains in France hit record popularity

- A Monitor Desk Report   Date: 04 June, 2025

Dhaka: Night trains are experiencing a surge in popularity in France, with new data from Réseau Action Climat revealing that over one million passengers travelled on sleeper trains in 2024—a significant year-on-year increase. However, the report warns that this growth could stall without improvements in rolling stock availability.

Passenger numbers on night trains rose by 26pc year-on-year between 2023 and 2024, and sleeper services carried more than twice as many passengers as five years ago, the Federation of environmental, transport and energy groups found.

The record passenger numbers mean that night trains had a 76pc occupancy rate on average, while Paris-Toulouse and Paris-Nice routes were over 80pc full.

Indeed, the line between the City of Lights and the Ville Rose saw

extraordinary growth of 64% in the five years from 2019 to 2024.

What's more, passengers favouring the night train whether their journeys are for leisure or business. Business travellers composed 30pc of all passengers in 2023, the Réseau notes.

And even delays and a three-month timetable interruption on France's only two international lines (Paris-Vienna and Paris-Berlin), could not deter passengers.

The surge in use offers evidence, the Réseau says, that night trains have won over the public thanks to the simple, practical answer they provide when it comes to both transnational and regional journey planning.

But the sector is likely to be stymied by supply chain issues, the report warns, noting that a "lack of sleeping cars is preventing the creation of new national and international connections that could meet the high demand from passengers."

French rail operator SNCF operates just 129 sleeper cars at present, too few to meet demand on the most popular routes.

The French government called for contract bids in January 2025 to increase the fleet to 309 cars by 2030 – but the Réseau claims this is insufficient and should be boosted by another 31 carriages at least, with a view to creating annual capacity for 5.7 million passengers in 600 sleeper cars by 2035.

It also recommends redesigning the night train network to take it from a hub-and-spoke model, with all routes going in and out of Paris, to a true network which would see the country's other major cities such as Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Nantes, and Nice gain their own interconnections.

This strategy would save 800,000 tonnes of CO_2 equivalent, the Réseau says, as a first step towards 1,200 cars by 2040, with capacity for 12 million passengers and a potential saving of 2 million tons of CO_2 equivalent.

Increasing the number of international sleeper services, for example from Paris to Spanish, Italian, and UK cities, is also crucial to efforts to reduce aviation emissions, the group points out.

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