

Métropolitain: Trains in Paris

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Picture of a Art Nouveau station entrance (1)

Upon arriving to Paris, often the first thing a tourist is acquainted with is the Paris system of trains. In fact, Franz Kafka is quoted as saying "The Metro furnishes the best opportunity for the foreigner to imagine that he has understood, quickly and correctly, the essence of Paris" (2). The Métro, the largest public transit system in the world, covers the city itself while the RER or *Réseau Express Régional* allows transit between the city and its suburbs. These systems together allow for a variety of routes and make traveling around Paris simple for Parisians and visitors alike. Though it does have its faults, the trains of Paris have a substantial impact on the city and its people. In this paper, the history and span of the Métro of Paris will be explored, as well as its pros and cons and a new development. The RER system, as it interacts very closely with the Métro, will also be touched upon.

The Métro project was accepted in 1897 by Fulgence Bienvenüe who was the Chief Engineer for Bridges and Roadways at the time (1). He began the project on October 4 of the following year and managed to have the first line opened in 1900 (1). This line, from Porte de Vincennes to Porte de Maillot was opened just in time for the 1900 Olympic Games which were, interestingly enough, held in Vincennes that year (1). It is easy to imagine that the line was very popular for people and athletes traveling to and from the Games, as well as making visiting the city during the games much easier than it would have been otherwise.

The Métro system expanded quickly. It included ten lines by 1913, with a staggering 467 million passengers using the trains (1). At this time, the lines may have been a bit confusing to those trying to use them. Due to being run by two companies, Nord-Sud Company and CMP, or Compagnie de Métro Parisien, there were issues such as having two stations with the



Constructing the Métro involved tearing up many streets (7).

same name (1). Between World War I and World War II, however, these companies merged and three additional lines were created and opened (1). At this point, construction slowed down and no new lines were opened until October 15, 1999, when line 14 opened. Line 14 was the first automated line and brought passengers from Madeleine to gare Saint-Lazare (1).

The RER lines have a much shorter history. They began in 1961 to help people go to and from the suburbs (6). Currently, both the RER and the Métro are run by the same company in Paris, RATP or Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens.

The Métro is the largest and possibly the densest public transportation system in the world (2). It comprises 50 miles of corridors, 131 miles of tracks, approximately 380 stations (4). Its density is evident as it is said that every building in Paris is within 500



meters (approximately 3/5 of a mile) of a station (4). The Métro system within the city is also widely used, with about 6 million travelers using it per day (4). It also employs 15000 people (4). The RER consists of five lines radiating out into the suburbs and is expanding, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Like any system, the trains of Paris have their positives and negatives, but the pride Parisians take in their Métro and RER displayed that the belief

The Parisian train system is very dense (8). that the positives far outweigh the negatives is widely held. Francois Doniat, a Parisian who, as he put it, loves his city but is also very critical discussed the pros and cons of Paris's trains with me. The biggest and most obvious pro is that the system is so large and so dense. This allows for people to easily access a station and travel to any area they want (5). Included in this is the RER, which allows those living in the suburbs to travel to work in the city without contributing to the congestion of Paris, as well as tourist who can access sites such as Versailles using the RER system. Mr. Doniat's favorite aspect of the Métro system is

that it does not interfere with the cars, unlike the tramways. He explained that cars are still needed in Paris and with the already bad congestion, surface transportation like trams just makes traffic worse, whereas the underground Métro allows cars to move freely while giving people another way to travel (5). Thus, the Métro assists in taking traffic from the street by removing cars without replacing them; it is sustainable but also it coexists. According to Mr. Doniat, the corridors for the Métro are also very safe and are patrolled by guards. The trains themselves, while there are not guards walking them,



There are pieces from the Louvre museum in the station connected to it (10).

have cameras so that if any crime happens, the train can stop and someone can assist the victims (5). Overall, the system is well maintained and the stations are often decorated and completely customizable to their area (5). For example, at the Louvre/Rivoli station, there is an exhibit of some of the

art at the Louvre, the station at Liege has beautiful tile mosaics, and the station near the Musée d'Orsay has a replica of the Thinker and other art. One line, the Meteor line, even has underground live palm trees under special lights (2). Mr. Doniat also explained the subsidies used for the Paris train system. People pay for some of the upkeep, wages and development related to the train systems in their taxes, which decreases the out of pocket ticket price to about \$1.05 a ticket (2 and 5). People are overall happy with this system since most of them use the trains anyway, it defers the out of pocket costs, and further encourages travelers to take the train rather than drive since they've already paid for it, thus removing cars from the road (5). Additionally, the trains are electric but, as most electricity in France is nuclear, there are very low emissions (5).

Mr. Doniat also covered some of the cons related to the train system in Paris. The subterranean Métro lines are notoriously difficult to build and involve tearing up entire



The Liege station displays beautiful tile mosaics (9).

streets (5). Understandably, when a street has been torn up, it makes travel very difficult for pedestrians and motor vehicles to get around. Building, maintaining, supplying new cars, and hiring employees are all expensive for the train systems in Paris (5). Additionally, though relatively clean and well-maintained, the RER trains often smell bad due to the sheer number

of people using them and the Métro does not have air conditioning, making for some very hot summer rides (5). While there is a definite police presence in the corridors, there is often no one patrolling the trains themselves and sometimes, when the train is completely automated, no official on the train at all (5). This leads to minor crimes such as pickpockets and vandals. Of course, the whole system does occasionally shut-down as well when the workers do one of the many things Paris is famous for and goes on strike. Overall, however, it seems that the pros to far outweigh all of the cons.

The Métro itself is so dense that it would be difficult to expand it, however the RER has found room to grow. According to Beatley in his book *Green Urbanism*, a new system called ORBITALE or *Organisation Regionale dans le Bassin Interieur des Transports Annulaires Libres d'Encombremets*, is being considered. Because of the radial nature of the RER lines, passenger who needed to go from one suburb to another have formally had to either drive or take one train into Paris and another to their final destination. ORBITALE would be a circular line that connected the suburbs together, making travel between them much more efficient (13). This would help offset even more driving and make travel even easier around Paris.

Paris's trains help the city be the thriving place it is by allowing people to travel easier from place to place. Without this system, it can be inferred that the traffic would be a nightmare and tourists would never see many of the sites they wanted to see. Mr. Doniat mentioned that the Métro and RER in Paris are two of the things that make the



The Meteor Line depicts a station and train from the Métro (12).

city what it is, but one can easily imagine that tearing up streets to install a system like it in a modern and well-developed place would be cause major problem both with transportation and city design. As this is the case, it seems that well-developed cities that do not currently have a sophisticated subway system may not want to go through the trouble. As it is, developed cities generally have some method of public transportation for better or worse. Therefore, a system such as the Paris Métro might be better to place in a newer or less developed city before it has heavy automobile traffic. The Paris Métro works well in Paris and seems as though it would be a good system to install in developing cities around the world.

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- (8) Picture of Métro and RER Map from: <http://javamilk.com/img/paris-metro.jpg>
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