

Planned changes to Highland Explorer service

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ScotRail has announced that it is making changes to its Highland Explorer service to support active travel. From Spring 2023, ScotRail will remove the additional fare for the Highland Explorer service and introduce the carriages, which boast 20 cycle spaces and were a UK-first, to the Mallaig branch of the West Highland Line, resulting in more seats and enhanced on-board facilities for customers.

The carriages will operate on two services each day – the early morning service from Mallaig to Glasgow Queen Street and the evening Glasgow Queen Street to Mallaig from the start of the summer timetable at the end of March.

Northbound services will run Monday to Friday, whilst Southbound services will run Tuesday to Saturday.

The move is set to benefit local communities as well as adventure seeking cyclists, as the addition of the carriages on the route means customers will benefit from 15 per cent more seats, more luggage space, and access to an additional toilet on board. The Highland Explorer carriages have larger cushioned seats, USB and plug charging points, and also feature table maps detailing the route, with recommendations on where to walk, cycle, and visit. QR codes at each table also provide links for further inspiration on places to visit in Scotland.

The early morning service from Mallaig to Glasgow Queen Street will call at Fort William during the morning peak, providing more seats for commuters.

ScotRail has also announced that it is removing the additional charge for its Highland Explorer ticket from 1 April 2023, meaning customers using the service on the Mallaig line will have access to the active travel carriage without having to pay the £10 supplement.

The removal of the additional fare means that from Thursday, 9 February, customers will not be able to purchase the £10 Highland Explorer ticket for travel on 1 April onwards, and that all seats within in the carriage will then be available for the price of a standard class fare.

The supplemented Highland Explorer ticket had provided customers with guaranteed access to the carriage and a hospitality offering (subject to availability).

ScotRail is finalising its process for seat reservations on the carriages for travel on 1 April onwards and will share details with customers as soon as possible.

Lesley Kane, ScotRail commercial director, said: "Our Highland Explorer carriages were the first of their kind in the UK, and can accommodate up to 20 cycles, allowing more people before to enjoy the iconic scenery the West Highland Line has to offer.

"The changes we're making, by removing the additional fare for our Highland Explorer service and by introducing the carriages to the Mallaig line, proves that we've been listening to feedback from both customers and stakeholders on how make the most of these fantastic carriages and deliver the best service possible.

"Customers will benefit from more seats as the whole train will be accessible for the price of a standard class ticket, and customers will no longer have to pay an additional charge to sit with their bikes.

"These changes will help make the service a more attractive option, as well as support active travel and our continued recovery from the pandemic."

Karen McGregor, Scotland Director at Sustrans, added: "The Highland Explorer services have already shown the positive impact of public transport and active travel working hand in hand.

"From families planning days out on traffic-free National Cycle Network routes to experienced cyclists setting off along the iconic Caledonia Way, the Highland Explorer carriages make it easier to leave the car at home and experience the stunning west coast by foot or by bike.

"We're delighted to see more, sustainable travel options created for joined-up everyday journeys, and for everyone hoping to enjoy some of Scotland's most famous walking, wheeling and cycling routes."

John Barnes, Vice-President Friends of the West Highland Lines, said: "It is good news that the 153 carriages are now planned to provide a service north of Crianlarich over Rannoch Moor and onward to Fort William and Mallaig.

“It is important that the Outdoor Capital of the UK is served by these carriages, and we hope to be seeing them on even more trains in the future.

“Both Friends of the West Highland Lines and the West Highland Community Rail Partnership have raised our concerns about the Highland Explorer surcharge for some time, so we are delighted that it will now be removed.”

Photo credit: ScotRail