



Britain's 20 biggest rail operators, ranked from worst to best

The UK's train operating firms are (slowly) returning to public ownership. By 2027 the process will be complete, unless politicians have a change of heart. But has nationalisation improved services and what jargon-loving transport spin-doctors call the "user experience"? Yes – a bit – for [LNER](#) passengers. Not really for [Northern Trains](#) sufferers. Absolutely not, for [TransPennine Express](#) victims. The elemental truths are: this country's tracks are old or very old; the range of ticket options remains psychedelically confusing; punctuality is so-so and where it is satisfactory, frequency is an issue; overcrowding – of lines and of carriages – is woeful; the toilets are a mess; the food is rubbish; it's too expensive. Still, a lot of us use the train to get around. So, we thought we'd look at 20 of the biggest operators and rank them according to service and quality – based on data and my own extensive recent experiences – but also what they offer in terms of characterful stations, scenic sightseeing and holiday destinations.

20. CrossCountry Owned by Arriva, CrossCountry's network is vast, stretching from Aberdeen to Penzance (though the train doing the whole trip was axed in May) and from Stansted to Cardiff, calling at over 100 stations. Based in Birmingham, CrossCountry connects seven of Britain's 10 largest cities and delivers 240 services every weekday, equating to some 42 million passenger journeys a year. Impressive, except it cancels hundreds of them every month and, when improvements were demanded, simply reduced the timetable. The rolling stock is rundown, with lots of trains more than 20 years old. Overcrowding is a serious issue on CrossCountry; it scored 48/100 on the June 2025 Transport Focus survey, by some distance the worst in the country. It had the dirtiest trains too. A worrying result for such an important network.

19. [TransPennine Express](#) The only trans-Pennine routes operated by this firm are between Manchester and Leeds and Sheffield. The rest of the network stretches out on skinny, thinly branched lines to Scotland, the north-east coast of England and Liverpool Lime Street. In 2023, the company was in the news all the time for poor service and cancellations. Things have slightly improved – partly by cutting the number of services – and upgrades are afoot, but it still ranks as one of the worst operators in Britain for punctuality.

18. Great Northern GTR (Govia [Thameslink](#) Railway), which manages Southern, [Thameslink](#), Great Northern and Gatwick Express, operates 18 per cent of all the UK's passenger trains and 236 stations. Great Northern – named after a grand company created during the Railway Mania of the 1840s to connect London and York – only reaches as far north as Peterborough and King's Lynn. It's neither great nor northern. It fared poorly in the latest Transport Focus survey, receiving the second-lowest score for punctuality, and has a dismal average TrustPilot rating of 1.6 out of 5.

17. Southern A shadow of the famed Southern Railway of the 1926 grouping, this Govia sub-franchise also has as many lines going north of London as south. The UK's worst operator in 2016 to 2017, when a dispute with the RMT dragged on for ages, it has also taken flack for running trains to Brighton bereft of WCs and air con. The "Live Map" on the website is an annoying affectation, uploaded by some tech-loving car-driver. It came 21st out of 22 operators in the June 2025 Transport Focus survey, with the worst "value for money" score, just 41 out of 100.

16. Govia [Thameslink](#) Railway Born in 1997 to link Brighton and Bedford, rebranded as First Capital Connect for eight years and now a Govia operation, this routing helps people who want to cross



London without hauling cases or old limbs up and down Tube stairways or catching buses they don't know. Sort of. Because far more people come into the capital at big stations like Paddington and Waterloo than via Blackfriars. Still, it's a useful line for south-coast beach-seekers and those who have chosen to fly out of Luton Airport. Parts of the network, from Bedford to Three Bridges, runs through the night most days. It is a lower mid-table side for both punctuality (16th out of 24 operators according to the Office of Road and Rail) and overall customer satisfaction (16th out of 22 operators on the latest Transport Focus survey). 15. c2c Connecting London with South Essex, cryptically named c2c (city to city? coast to capital?) runs a functional service freighting in commuters from places like Basildon, Dagenham, Shoeburyness and Tilbury to the Monopoly station of Fenchurch Street. Once upon a time the same workers would have taken the train east at weekends to enjoy Southend, though nowadays they're more likely to go to Dubai – whether they're brokers or baristas. Its average TrustPilot rating is poor (1.5 out of 5), but it performed well in the June 2025 Transport Focus survey (89 per cent, coming sixth out of 22 operators) and was the third most punctual rail firm in Q1. 14. Northern Trains Visiting more than 500 stations in a massive area that stretches across the upper half of the country, from Liverpool to Hull and Nottingham to Newcastle, Northern is the UK's second largest train operator and the biggest outside London. However, the bruise-coloured trains routinely make headlines in the regional news for cancellations, delays, ancient rolling stock and dated operational systems – including fax machines . It came third from bottom in the most recent Transport Focus survey, has a dire average TrustPilot rating of 1.4 out of 5, and below-average punctuality (61.3 per cent). It's a great pity, as the Northern region includes several historic cradles of rail – Liverpool/Manchester, Stockton/Darlington, Crewe – as well as sublime holiday-making rides like the Cumbrian Coast and Settle-Carlisle lines . For commuters, the predominance of unelectrified lines is a source of great misery. For tourists, though, the slow travel and scenic options, and the heritage, have appeal. The website should have a much more prominent "Delay Repay" tab as it is used very often by Northern passengers. Recommended How England's greatest railway line was saved 13. South Western Railway State owned since May, SWR runs trains into one of London's busiest terminals – Waterloo – and the UK's busiest interchange – Clapham Junction. Stops include Guildford, Woking, Basingstoke and Surbiton; the SWR once sent millions of bowler-hatted, brolly-toting commuters down into The Drain for the City. At the other end of the line, it helped transform Southampton into the modern port city of today and runs services to major towns in Hampshire and Dorset. The SWR provides an oft-stopping back-door route to Exeter that tends to be cheaper than GWR's expresses. Much of the track west of Salisbury is single, though, so any breakdown or fault soon becomes a drama. Due to lack of rain, the London-Exeter service was recently reduced from hourly to two hourly; it's also an hour slower. SWR runs the Isle of Wight's Island Line, connecting to the Portsmouth ferry. The website needs a looking at; the only live map link when we checked was for accessible toilet services. It is a middling performer when it comes to punctuality and customer satisfaction. 12. East Midlands Railway Formerly known as East Midlands Trains, this franchise – owned by a company called Transport UK, which also runs part of Merseyrail and a slightly bigger part of Greater Anglia – connects the regional powerhouses of Leicester, Derby and Nottingham with Liverpool, Sheffield, Norwich and London. Compared to its historic precursors, Midland Railway and the massive London, Midland and Scottish Railway, EMR's looks like an unprepossessing network, but it stretches for 963 miles and the company manages 912 stations –



including handsome, Grade II-listed Cromford, on the Derwent Valley Line. Matlock is a lovely inland destination, and Cleethorpes and Skegness are east coast terminals. EMR is currently trialling a cutting-edge ticket-less GPS-based fare concept on its inter-city routes, already used in Denmark and Switzerland. It came 14th out of 22 operators on the latest Transport Focus survey, but its punctuality (58 per cent) is below par. 11. Southeastern This state-owned firm operates services to destinations in London, Kent and East Sussex as well as domestic HS1 trains. Overcrowding is an issue on some trains, and the high ticket/pass prices irk strap-dangling commuters. All other metrics, from punctuality (65.3 per cent; 12th out of 24) to overall customer satisfaction (86 per cent; 9th out of 22), it is a middle-of-the-pack performer. 10. London Overground (Arriva Rail London) Two decades ago, no one had ever heard of the Lioness Line, the Mildmay Line or the Suffragette Line, and the London Overground was a few orange branches to help inner and outer London residents avoid tourists and taxis. Stations have doubled and the rolling stock has been upgraded. This 113-station cobweb is now an impressive network linking up leafy Metro-Land, des-res Richmond, the regenerated East and the fast-evolving New Cross-Croydon area. Its punctuality is solid (71.7 per cent) and the Transport Focus survey saw it tie for third place. 9. Chiltern Railways The word "Chiltern" evokes Home Counties' misty pastoralism and cutesy tumps that stand in for mountains for affluent southern softies. But this firm, born in 1996 as M40 Trains (the worst brand name ever), provides a curious combination of oft-stopping commuter services to Metro-landian places like Ruislip and Aylesbury and longer rides to the West Midlands. London Marylebone, its home port, is calmer and more pleasant than the larger London stations. Key leisure stops, depending on your desires, include Bicester Village, Warwick and Wembley Stadium. Its punctuality (82.7 per cent) is second only to Greater Anglia, but its passengers are often critical of its high prices and crowded carriages. 8. West Midlands Railway/London Northwestern This operator is owned by Dutch firm Abellio, the Japan-based JR East (which runs bullet trains) and Mitsui & Co (which runs all sorts). Has any of this globalist glamour rubbed off on the trains that shunt around the UK's second largest city? Not really, as WMR is still heavily reliant on diesel trains (but committed to the elimination of diesel-only trains by 2040) and, while the network is packed full of handy stops and is well integrated with local buses in some areas, a lot of journeys are quite circuitous and time-consuming; it's much easier to get into Birmingham than to go round it. Hereford, Shrewsbury and Stratford-upon-Avon are the three tourist-enticing extremities on the network map, but for the most part this is an inter-urban experience. West Midlands Trains also runs the trains on the London Northwestern Railway, the routes of which overlap with its main map and extend to Liverpool. 7. Greater Anglia Due to be nationalised on Oct 12, Greater Anglia runs services on Network Rail's Anglia route from Cromer to Chelmsford and from Cambridge to Clacton. It's an interesting mix of commuter trains hurtling into Liverpool Street – the UK's busiest station – via Shenfield and Stratford, meandering rural routes across deepest Essex and little branches that wind down to the fashionable coast resorts of Norfolk and Suffolk. GA runs slow and fast services, so the ride into the capital from Ipswich can involve three or nine stops; with a 23.30pm service on weekdays, London is a very doable day trip or theatre outing. Rolling stock is generally fair to good, with Swiss-built bi-modal Flirts on the Great Eastern Main Line (and Stansted Express), enabling seamless switching between electric and diesel tracks. It was the most punctual operator from Jan to Mar 2025 (83.8 per cent of services were on time), according to the Office of Rail and Road. 6. Avanti West Coast The railway up the west of England



was once known as the “premier line”, because it began with the history-making Liverpool and Manchester and because the old London and North Western Railway, as it was known, launched the first major service between London, Birmingham and Lancashire in the 1840s. The modern West Coast Main Line (WCML), with 35 million intercity journeys a year and 40 per cent of the country’s freight traffic, is the UK’s busiest major line and carries more traffic than any other high-speed line in Europe. Avanti, the First Group-Trenitalia consortium that took over operations from Virgin Trains in 2019, runs 56 Pendolinos trains and 23 new Hitachi Everos. With non-stop trains between London Euston and Warrington taking just 1h 44 mins (they used to stop at Rugby, Crewe, Milton Keynes and other stations), Avanti’s Pendolinos could seem to have made the northern half of HS2 pointless. But traffic on the southern part of the WCML, unlike the entire East Coast Main Line, is considered too heavy for open-access services; proposals from Lumo NW, Virgin and the Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway Company Limited were recently rejected by the [Office of Rail and Road](#). For now, Avanti has a virtual monopoly, and has been criticised for persistent delays and cancellations, and poor reliability. It’s on-time percentage (41.6 per cent) for the first three months of the year was worse than any other operator. Tourism-wise, Avanti’s network is more suited to city breaks and post-industrial explorations than holidays, though Blackpool North and North Wales resorts are covered. The Lune Gorge section of the line is quite lovely, if short. Glasgow Central is a fine terminus but Euston station is a dump.

5. London North Eastern Railway This “[LNER](#)” follows in the footsteps – or steam-wake – of the mighty London and North Eastern Railway, which operated almost 8,000 locomotives, as well as ships and river boats, part-owned the Forth Bridge, and made headlines with beautiful fire-eating beasts like the Flying Scotsman and Mallard. Cut to today and it’s a much smaller, but vital train firm, connecting King’s Cross to Hull, Leeds, Edinburgh and Inverness. The current fleet of old Class 91s and flashier Hitachi Azumas doesn’t make trainspotters hearts race like the old steam trains or InterCity 125s, but they’re smooth, as fast as is lawful on the UK system, and generally comfortable. The north-east coast section of track is a visual highlight and several of the big-city stations are eye-pleasers. According to TrustPilot reviews, it is the best rail operator in Britain.

4. Transport for Wales Owned by the Welsh Government since 2021, TFW manages 248 stations, including all 223 in Wales, and operates all passenger mainline services wholly inside Wales as well as services along the England-Wales borders and trains to Bristol, Birmingham and Manchester. Tourism hot lines include the Heart of Wales (running just three to four times a day), North Wales Coast and Cambrian Line. Top holiday stations range from Llandudno on the north coast to hiker hub Betws y Coed to Gavin & Stacey location Barry Island near Cardiff. Parts of Wales are rail deserts, with no stations in Cardigan, Mold or Ruthin and some Welsh people are riled that a journey from north to south necessitates travel via England.

3. Great Western Railway GWR is the most enduring brand in UK rail, thanks to associations with Isambard Kingdom Brunel and engineering landmarks such as London Paddington’s three-span shed and the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol. Nostalgic rail fans like to ride the line for the Steam Museum in Swindon and Didcot Railway Centre in Oxfordshire; they were chuffed when the company re-liveried in racing green in 2015, and dropped the First from its name. The line built its dashing reputation on record-breaking steam expresses, bolstered in the Seventies when the UK’s first passenger-carrying InterCity 125s started using the line in the mid-1970s. In July, a GWR electric train ran for 200 miles on a single battery charge. The GWR firm is, of course, no longer the same as the line, which is now the



Network Rail-managed Wales and Western – but the sleek green trains still open up seaside holiday hotspots in Devon, Cornwall and Pembrokeshire, popular touristy cities including Bath and Oxford, and cultural capitals like Cardiff and Bristol. From Exeter, several lines are much loved by leisure passengers, including the pastoral ride north to Barnstaple, the short line to Okehampton north of Dartmoor, reopened in 2021, and the beach-skirting track between Dawlish and Teignmouth. The GWR operates one of the UK's two sleeper services, the Night Riviera. True, it recently finished bottom of the pile in a price comparison of 27 European rail companies by campaign group Transport & Environment (T&E), but high fares are a UK-wide issue, not exclusive to GWR. 2. ScotRail Nationalised since 2022, ScotRail runs most of the in-country services in Scotland, operating busy commuter lines into Edinburgh and Glasgow and slow, scenic trains up to Wick, Fort William and Kyle of Lochalsh. The 42-mile section to Mallaig has become a tourist magnet thanks to the Harry Potter film franchise, though the "Hogwarts Express" vintage trains are not run by ScotRail. In June 2024, the £116 million Levenmouth Rail Link, funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by Network Rail and ScotRail, reconnected Leven and Cameron Bridge to Scotland's railway network for the first time in more than half a century. Some of the UK's most admired stations are in Scotland, including Wemyss Bay – one of only 10 to be awarded the maximum five stars in Simon Jenkins' Britain's 100 Best Railway Stations. 1. Merseyrail Boasting probably the ugliest train and station livery in the country – whoever chose infant-crayon yellow should be honoured with a massive pink plaque on their house – Merseyrail links the old mining towns of Lancashire and the Wirral with Liverpool city centre. The tiny centre has the same number of stations it had a century ago (when a dockside line also operated) but the network reaches out to lovely Southport and historic Chester – with a short, easy connection to John Lennon airport. Looks aren't everything. Merseyrail came top in the latest Transport Focus report on punctuality/reliability with 89 points and top for frequency with 86 points; many other firms were in the low 70s and 60s for each category. It also came top for cleanliness, with 93; CrossCountry scored 66. How we calculated the points Service: This covers reliability, punctuality, frequency and likelihood of cancellations, according to Office for Rail and Road data. Price: This covers raw price for a standard ticket, passes, discounts, and passenger feedback on value for money. Destinations and stations: As well as heritage value of the line and its rural stations and, major city terminals, this covers scenic potential for the window-gazer and the number of resorts, Unesco sites and cultural hubs reached on the train network Comfort: This also covers convenience (for, say bicycle users and suitcase-draggers) and conveniences (ie WCs), plus Wi-Fi and plug points, air-con and on-board food. Practicalities: Considered in this category are questions like: How user-friendly is its website? Can you get a refund without fuss? The also-rans There are 32 passenger train operating companies in the UK (though fewer parent companies), not counting heritage lines. We wanted to keep this ranking down to 20 major services so omitted London Underground, as well as the pricey airport lines (Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted Expresses), tiny open-access firms Grand Central, Lumo, the Isle of Wight's Island Lines (owned by South Western) and Hull Trains, and the dashing but logistically limited Eurostar, Elizabeth Line and Caledonian Sleeper services. London and North Western's performance has been merged with that of its sister firm West Midland. A TransPennine express train crossing the viaduct at Brownhill,, heading for Manchester The London Overground serves 113 stations. Photographed above is a Banksy artwork on the side of an Overground bridge in Shoreditch CrossCountry's network stretches from Aberdeen



to Penzance TransPennine scores poorly on value Thameslink scored well on punctuality Northern is the UK's second largest train operator SWR runs services to major towns in Hampshire and Dorset London Overground trains scored highly for punctuality A WMR service at Stratford upon Avon Avanti operates non-stop trains between London Euston and north west England According to TrustPilot reviews, LNER is the best rail operator in Britain Great Western Railway trains at platform in Paddington Merseyrail links the old mining towns of Lancashire and the Wirral with Liverpool city centre Britain's 20 biggest rail operators, ranked from worst to best This country's tracks are old and the 'user experience' varies greatly depending on who you travel with