

On The Way – Benjamin Martinie, Hourrail (English Version)

Hello! On The Way, I'm Benjamin Martinie. I've been a travel YouTuber for ten years and I also founded Hourrail, the leading low-carbon travel media platform. I came across videography by chance. I don't have a degree in audio-visual studies. I went to business school and I went to Mexico on an exchange for one semester, and that's where I started making little unpretentious travel videos and saw that I was getting the hang of it and was enjoying it.

And so, a few years later, that led me to doing it professionally. I started by making videos by myself, as a YouTuber, to showcase far-flung destinations that people had preconceived ideas about, like Iran, Algeria and so on. When I started making videos, I didn't necessarily set out to become a YouTuber.

What I wanted to do is be a director. What I wanted to do is make videos and films to showcase travel experiences and destinations. At the time, I didn't appear in the videos at all, which I liked. For me, it was about creating beautiful images, telling beautiful stories and not really appearing on camera.

The way remuneration worked was that I was paid to make videos.

And at the time, I used to fly a lot, certainly out of denial, but also out of ignorance. I don't think I had any idea at the time of the impact of the airline industry, but I was already quite mindful of these issues.

But we keep hearing about how all we have to do is sort our rubbish, get on a bike a few times and that's enough. So I didn't really understand how I needed to change my habits just so that our planet could remain livable. The more I looked into it, the more I was faced with this contradiction, because in private I was talking about how I was trying to achieve zero waste, how I was trying to reduce my footprint on the planet.

In 2018- 2019 I worked quite a bit with airlines and it was really straightforward. I'd make promotional videos for destinations serviced by the airline, inserted a little logo or

something like that and they paid me for it. Slowly but surely, I began to learn more about the impact of air travel, which led to a bit of cognitive dissonance.

I stopped feeling fulfilled doing this and so I took the decision to stop flying and promoting flying, bearing in mind that at the time it wasn't a trivial decision, as it represented about half of my income. In the end, we just happened to have a pandemic that helped me make this transition, because at the time, we couldn't fly anyway.

Or rather, we didn't have the option, and in the end it worked out really well. I launched a series on the French departments where I reused the 'don't go to' injunction that I had created for faraway destinations and applied it to places in France. This series then evolved a little. It became more of a documentary series and it ended up working out very well.

It allowed me to make a living for several years. And because I had decided to stop flying, I had to start organising my long-distance train travel and so I was confronted in a very real way with how difficult it was to organise this type of travel. I very quickly realised that if I wanted to go somewhere, and at that time, I wanted to go to Iran,

it was going to be very complicated to do it by train. I spent hours on specialised blogs, specialised websites, etc. to find information, find out how to book tickets, find timetables, and so on. To find the information, find out how to book tickets, find timetables, etc. And that's how the seed was planted, I asked myself how come that today, when we're talking about artificial intelligence and all sorts of technological developments, there isn't a website where you can easily find this information? I launched Hourrail in 2023 precisely to respond to this challenge and to at least get rid of this purely logistical and organisational hurdle.

Hourrail has three objectives. The first is to simplify low-carbon travel. As I said at the beginning, it's really the organisational and logistical aspect. The second objective is to share and disseminate ideas that are compatible with the limits of our planet. Because today, the travel inspiration circulated everywhere by traditional media, on social networks and so on, is completely incompatible with what we need to do if we want to live in a sustainable world.

It's ridiculous, if you type "travel" into Google Images all you get is pictures of planes, even though, unless I can be proved wrong, travel doesn't have to involve planes. So we're working hard to address that. That's really the mission of our media platform, to make these modes of travel, rail, cycling, hiking, sailing, etc., that are much more compatible with the limits of our planet, just as desirable, if not more desirable than those that pose a danger to our future.

We have a media model. In practical terms, we are paid by advertisers. They can be train operators, tourist offices or brands that pay us to create content and get messages out across our networks and to our community. For me, that's on my own networks, so all the Tolt networks.

I didn't want to spread myself too thin and have two projects going at the same time, so this is an axis that's integrated into the media platform, which means that we can sometimes have slightly different offers with different stakeholders, because on my social networks I am the face of the content. So there you go, that's where I can maybe adopt a slightly different tone, which allows me to have a slightly wider range of offers.

But in any case, I didn't want to have two projects at the same time. Honestly, I changed editorial hats very easily, in terms of my working methods, obviously, changing where I could travel to, but also in financial terms, because I had done the maths. Between 2019 and 2020, turnover plateaued somewhat, which was inevitably linked to Covid.

But if we don't take into account this Covid year, the year between 2019 and 2021, which was a bit of a special year, I had a turnover of more than 80%. That's a figure I come back to quite often. The fact that I've brought my business more into line with the Paris Agreement did not have a negative impact on my earnings at all.

On the contrary, I'm convinced that having an extremely clear editorial line makes you stand out, that's for sure. Today, I think that anyone in the travel industry who thinks, "I'd like to promote low-carbon, sustainable offers", will think of Hourrail right straight away. That doesn't mean that we're definitely going to work together, but in any case, I think people think of us when it comes to this topic because we have positioned ourselves very clearly.

Our definition of low-carbon travel is travel that does not involve combustion-powered cars or planes. This means that sometimes, for some itineraries, there will be ferries. Ferries cannot be considered truly low-carbon or even environmentally-friendly. Sometimes, there will be buses, which are the same.

An internal combustion bus isn't particularly environmentally friendly, but the fact is that, in general, the legs of the trip that involve ferries or buses only do so because they are the only option. If we take the example of Paris-Tunis: someone who does Paris-Tunis by taking the train to Palermo and making the short trip from Palermo to Tunis by ferry cannot be compared to someone who does Paris-Tunis by plane, I mean, there's no contest.

The carbon footprint of the train plus ferry itinerary will be lower. More than that, it's something that we're comfortable with, because it's part of a drive to travel closer to home, because when you take a ferry, when you refuse to fly, you're not going to go to Tunis for the weekend. So this is actually making us reconsider how we think about travel time and distances.

That's another reason why we're comfortable with it, but to give you an idea of the order of magnitude, a Paris - New York return flight is about 6 hours, and that's the equivalent of two tonnes of carbon. Today, a French person emits the equivalent of around ten tonnes of carbon per year. And the objective, if we want to live in a sustainable world, is to reduce it to two tonnes.

All you have to do is look at these simple figures to realise that flying on a very regular basis is absolutely incompatible with living sustainably in terms of greenhouse gas emissions. In terms of comparing trains and planes, it's difficult to come up with an average figure because it depends on a lot of factors.

But in France there is no contest, we have electric trains and electricity is largely decarbonised, up to 80 or 90%. Obviously, if we go to another country like Germany, where a lot of the electricity is produced using coal, things won't be the same. But in any case, we made all the calculations we could make and, whatever the itinerary, even itineraries that pass through countries with more carbon-intensive electricity, even in countries where there are still a lot of diesel trains, etc.,

trains always win. Their emissions are always at least half of those of planes. So there's no doubt about it, trains have a much lower carbon footprint than planes. Our third objective is really a community objective, because we believe strongly in the social aspect of accelerating these changes.

I think that in many social milieus, particularly those a bit like mine, let's say a group of ten friends, well, there are already three or four people who don't fly anymore. That's already happening, so soon we'll get to five or six people, and then it's all going to happen very quickly, because we'll have passed that tipping point and people who fly will be in the minority and so they'll just disappear into the crowd a bit.

We believe strongly in this community aspect, especially when it comes to ensuring that travel patterns evolve rapidly. Because the day when it's cooler to share a train or biking reel, things will go a lot quicker. We're not there yet, but at least we can see that when we post about night trains or other topics like that, we get millions of views.

So I think that train travel is now starting to catch on.

Train travel can already be competitive. For certain itineraries and at certain times, you can get train tickets that are cheaper than flying or driving. There's a bit of a cliché these days about trains being expensive. Yes, trains can be very expensive, but only at very specific times, namely when there is a lot of demand.

So it's at the weekend, during holidays and for very popular routes. Just to give you a very recent example, the Paris-Milan line reopens on 31 March. Well, today, as we speak, you can find Paris-Milan tickets for €20. So obviously you have to be a bit flexible with your dates and not want to leave on a Friday or Saturday.

Although I did see that tickets were available even for Fridays and Saturdays at around €40, which is still very reasonable. So my first point is that we have to get away from the idea that trains are always expensive. That's completely false. You can find good deals for trains, and we're trying to share a whole bunch of practical tips on how to find cheaper train tickets.

First of all, you need to choose the right type of train. The high-speed TGV in France can be quite expensive because it is a non-contracted service, so it's subject to supply and

demand. It can be quite expensive at weekends, and so on. On the other hand, you can find some very well-priced tickets for trains such as the TER, Intercités and Ouigo.

This is a really political issue. Train travel is expensive today because there's no political will to make it cheaper. For ticket prices to fall, there would have to be more rolling stock, so there would have to be more on offer and more tickets to sell. Rail tolls also need to come down, because as it stands, rail tolls represent around 40% of a TGV ticket.

These rail tolls serve a purpose, they are paid to SNCF Réseau, who manages the rail infrastructure. Today, the rail network in France is approximately 30 years old on average. It really needs to be maintained and refurbished. And that requires investments that are absolutely enormous. Except that today, almost all of these investments are covered by SNCF Voyageurs, so the transport company.

As it stands, SNCF Voyageurs and SNCF Réseau are entities that are supposed to be independent. This is the result of the European drive to open up competition. So, just to finish up a little on this subject, today we have SNCF Voyageurs, who works the same way as all the carriers that operate in France, whether it's Tren Italia or Renfe, etc.

They pay fees to SNCF Réseau, so the infamous rail tolls. And on top of that, the government is now asking SNCF Voyageurs to pay back a large part of its profits to maintain the network. In other words, the profits will be paid to the SNCF group, and will then be reinvested in the network because the government does not want to be out of pocket.

And that's why train fares are so high. On top of that, it's very unfair in terms of tax, since there is no tax on jet fuel, and certain flights are exempt from VAT. Also important to know, many airports in France survive thanks to public funding.

There are many loss-making airports in France that survive because they are supported by various public budgets. I think it's absolutely unacceptable that our taxes should be used to fund modes of transport that threaten our future. I say we should all stand up against this. Today, 80% of the world's population has never flown before.

In France, things are a little more balanced. But I've seen a figure showing that in 2019, only 34% of French people had travelled by plane. As you can see, that's a third. And two-thirds of the people who fly are executives. So even in France, where it's a bit more balanced, flying is mainly for the well-off.

It's an elitist mode of transport, you might say. The other issue I'm often presented with is that all of this is true, but it brings in tourists. And it keeps certain regions alive. It's the same thing, it's actually not true. If we take Marseille airport as an example, there are many more French people who fly out of Marseille airport than foreigners who fly into Marseille.

So it's actually scaring off potential French tourists. Because the balance is clearly not in our favour. Today, there are really no valid arguments to defend the air transport sector, apart from one, which I can totally understand, and that's that it employs a lot of people. And so obviously, these people who work in the airline industry cannot just be left out in the cold overnight.

So the idea is for the public authorities to provide the resources needed for these people to requalify and be redeployed to sectors that are a little more compatible with our climate objectives. We make no secret of the fact that we are a militant media platform, we want air traffic to shrink. Because today the scientific data we have on the subject shows that the only way to quickly reduce emissions from the aviation sector is to reduce traffic.

Today, all the technological developments in the works for the sector will not be scaled up quickly enough.

If you've never taken a low-carbon trip, the best place to start is with a train. In France, for example, there are currently no fewer than ten overnight Intercités trains. This will maybe mean taking a night train to go and discover a new corner of France, and we're lucky enough to live in a very beautiful country.

And if not, the three trips that have really made an impression on me in recent years - there was the trip to Lapland that I went on for the second time with my family last December. There is a 100% night train option. You can take a night train from Paris to Berlin and then

take a night train from Berlin to Stockholm, which I think is a good option because if you travel at night you save on hotel costs.

Plus, it's absolutely magical. Taking a train in Stockholm and waking up a few hours later in the winter wonderland of Lapland is truly magical. What else? The other option is to travel via Cologne and Hamburg, and then take an overnight train from Hamburg to Stockholm. The second trip I'd definitely recommend is sailing to Corsica.

It's an absolutely magical experience and I think it's something we should all do at least once in our lives. In other words, we're no longer talking about getting from point A to point B. We're talking about a real experience. There is now actually an operator, a sailing cooperative that offers round trips between France and Calvi.

I think they've brought out the statistics for the first season and they saw dolphins on 80% of the routes. Falling asleep under the stars is a truly magical experience. You really have to think outside the box and I think it does lead you to think that maybe you can adjust how you look at travel. The third trip I'd recommend, which is really affordable and easy to organise, is going to Sicily by night train.

So the first stage is to go to Milan and then take a night train from Milan and wake up 19 hours later in Sicily. I think this is one of the most original trains in Europe, because you leave Milan in the evening and the next morning you wake up in Calabria, which is still on the continent, so to speak, and the train and its carriages are separated to be loaded onto a ferry.

Then there's a short 15-20-minute crossing and you're in Sicily. And then the carriages are put together again so you can continue the trip in Sicily. I think it's hard to find such an original trip in Europe. Honestly, it may seem a long time, but you have to remember that out of the 19 hours, there are about eight hours of sleep.

There are three to four hours where you think to yourself, what is this amazing landscape? Then there's the ferry crossing. You don't feel at all like you're wasting your time, it's really an experience.

For me, there are several barriers to taking the night train. There is the safety barrier, which affects especially women. We see that in the comments we get. And on that, honestly... Well, obviously, I'm a man, so it's easy for me to talk, but we have arguments to reassure women.

The first is that you can book cabins reserved for women, on all carriers. Normally, women-only cabins can be booked. So that's one of the reassuring things about it. The second point is that the compartments can be locked from the inside. That's reassuring too. Secondly, we have plenty of testimonials from women who have travelled by night train, and all the feedback has been positive.

Another way to feel safer is to travel as a group. It is possible to reserve compartments, or even to privatise a compartment. Or if there are five or six of you, the question doesn't even arise, you take up the whole compartment. So I think that today there are several ways of reassuring people about safety.

Beyond that, the other thing that can cause problems is sexual harassment. Well, in France today, there aren't too many solutions to this problem, as there are only compartments for four or six people. So it is an issue, unless you're going away with friends or family. I don't really have a solution for this, but there are initiatives in Europe that have been introduced precisely to deal with this.

An Austrian company has launched what they call mini-cabins. These are little sleeping capsules that have a bed on top. And you can have the whole sleeping cabin to yourself. And then there's something else that comes up often, and that's the question of hygiene. Because a lot of night trains don't have showers, especially in France.

There are quite a few lines in Europe that offer showers on trains. Otherwise, if you buy a first-class ticket in France on the Paris-Toulouse line, you can use the shower facilities at the Austerlitz station and the Toulouse Matabiau station. In France, these are old train cars that have been given a bit of a makeover.

So really, it's very good. I think it's great because I'm not desperate for comfort. But it's true that there aren't really any options for a slightly more upmarket clientele in France. In Europe, however, there's the Austrian company OBB, that we were talking about. It's a

company who decided, at a time when everyone wanted to give up the night train, "We're going to bet on the night train".

So they were quite visionary in a way, because they made that choice in 2015 or 2016, at a time when it was really difficult to make night trains profitable. And then there was Covid and all this environmental awakening. And in the end, the future proved them right, as there is now renewed interest in the night train.

I don't know all the ins and outs, but I believe that rail tolls have been reduced for night trains in Austria, for OBB in any case. I believe that they are entitled to at least a few tax breaks and public subsidies. But what is certain is that in France, I think we've never been so close.

But I think we've been waiting a really long time for a new order, because the Intercités lines are actually contracted lines. So it's the government that gives the orders and places the orders. It really depends on the government. And we've been waiting four or five years for the government to order new trains so that we can offer slightly different train options.

But what is certain is that there is a boom in train travel. Last year, SNCF Voyageurs sold more train tickets than ever before, and this was already the case in 2023. Train load rates have never been so good. The train boom is undeniable. Now, the nuance we're going to bring to this is that it's not a train travel boom, it's a mobility boom.

At the same time, there is also a boom in air travel. So the issue is going to be a modal shift. If train travel develops while carbon-intensive modes of transport also develop, we won't have solved the problem of greenhouse gas emissions at all. So it's really important. And it's one of the metrics we monitor a little when we survey our community.

What we will be measuring is not the number of train tickets purchased. Because if, once again, people travel to the other side of the world, we won't have solved anything. What we will be measuring is how often people have replaced flying and driving combustion-engine cars with low-carbon trips.

In fact, the figure we got was from the last survey carried out on our Instagram followers. At the time of the survey, we must have had around 150,000 followers and 18% of those polled said they had already replaced a plane trip with a low-carbon one thanks to one of our posts. Because we wanted to establish a fairly clear causal link.

So that's really interesting. This means that even on our scale, which is still fairly small, we can prevent thousands of tonnes of greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere. So it shows that there's still a lot of potential in providing solutions and showing that in the end it's just as enjoyable as taking the plane.

What we'd like is to succeed in developing the ultimate tool for organising this kind of low-carbon travel. In other words, people will no longer have to think about how they are going to organise their low-carbon trips. They're just going to use our tool, whether it's an app or a website. For the moment, we're not entirely sure, but ...

But here's what we're aiming for in the next 3 to 4-5 years: to have this essential tool that you can use to make bookings, find key information, etc. in just a few clicks. So that's really our long-term goal. We're not particularly keen to offer direct bookings because that's a different job that comes with its own challenges.

It's by no means certain that we'll be doing this in the next 3 to 5 years. On the other hand, what's really important for us is to be exhaustive to some extent, which we are not today, even though we have several hundred itineraries. There are lots of people who may not find what they're looking for on our website, and we're well aware of that.

So this would be a first step. And then to be able to answer all your questions. Because there's the question of how you book your train tickets and what the steps are. But there's also the question of where can I find a luggage locker? Where can I find an eco-friendly hotel two steps away from the train station?

That's really our long-term dream, to have a tool that answers all these questions in a very simple way. We want to make sustainable travel easier than travel that pollutes. As a next step and before we can achieve that, at the end of last year we published a book called *Travelling by train with Hourrail*.

We're really happy with the project, it sold really well and we topped the charts. Well, we were one of the best sellers, at least for several weeks with many distributors. So that's a first victory. It shows that there is interest in the subject. But the next steps are going to be to build on what we've already achieved, to ensure that our book becomes a reference in the tourism industry, and grow our community as fast as possible.

Because there is obviously a commercial aspect to this. If we really want to become the leading media platform in the industry, we need to have the biggest community possible. And there's also a question of impact: the larger the community, the more we can encourage people to make modal shifts. I think that yes, in the very short term, it's really a question of consolidating what we've already achieved, in other words having a good enough turnover to be able to pay our teams properly.

Because, at this stage, we're still a very young company and we're living off the money we generate, we haven't raised any funds or anything like that, so our cashflow is obviously a bit strained. Today, there are nine of us working on the project, some of us part-time. There's obviously a lot of money going out every month and that means we have to bring in contracts every month.

Right now, we have no plans to raise funds, but that's not something we're ruling out - on the contrary, it's something we may be considering in the coming months. But before we do that, we feel that we have to come up with some guarantees for this project. We need to show that we already have a first version that is sophisticated enough to have the potential to be scaled up.

And right now, that's our problem. We've shown that we can have a media platform that sells projects and so on. But the more projects you sell, the more people you need to hire, so your costs increase as your income increases. So I think that today, if we want to be able to raise funds from institutional players, unfortunately we need to have these guarantees already in place, in terms of scalability and the ability to ensure returns on investment.

After that, there are things that we will have to be very careful about, such as working with partners who share our values and then, of course, there are other aspects, such as involving our community. But it's the same thing with the community, people will want something in return. There has to be a tool behind it that brings them something.

So we don't want to get ahead of ourselves, we want to build on this very encouraging first year and then we'll see how we can scale up.

Like you who are listening to me, I was born into a world and I grew up in a world where flying was a trivial choice in the well-to-do Western world. For many of you who are listening to me, I imagine that taking a plane is just a habit and not something that bothers you. The truth is that today, the laws of physics tell us that this is unfortunately a real problem.

We need to fly less if we want to still have a livable planet. That said, I've gone through it myself. Giving up flying doesn't mean you have to stop travelling, it doesn't mean you have to stop being happy, on the contrary. Personally, I feel much more fulfilled since I stopped flying, because I've brought my activity and my holidays into line with my desire to live in a sustainable world.

And this completely got rid of the cognitive dissonance and discomfort that travelling used to cause. It's also allowed me to rediscover things, to rediscover new ways of travelling, to have some really different experiences. I don't feel I'm missing out at all and, on the contrary, I find that I'm much happier and I think that the best way to convince yourself of this is to try out one of our low-carbon adventures that you can discover either in the book, on our website or on our social networks.