Online Booking of Caledonian Sleeper Tickets - Major Barriers To Use

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Executive Summary

Online ticket booking sites should represent a significant (arguably **the** most significant) outlet for Caledonian Sleeper bookings. However the booking process is cumbersome, confusing and virtually inaccessible to inexperienced users such as tourists.

Potential new users are unlikely to know which TOC operates Anglo-Scottish sleeper services (if they even know that such services exist), so ScotRail is unlikely to be the first web site they visit when seeking rail tickets. However, most other UK rail booking sites do not sell sleeper tickets. Furthermore, instead of clearly directing them to the ScotRail site, many of these other sites mislead potential sleeper customers into believing that sleeper tickets are not available or that they are prohibitively expensive.

If a potential user **does** reach the ScotRail site, they still have to overcome numerous barriers before purchasing a suitable ticket. The user interface assumes that users have certain prior knowledge of the sleeper, such as:
- Which London Terminal the sleeper departs from.
- On which dates tickets go on sale.
- Which types of ticket correspond to which types of accommodation.

Thus new or inexperienced users will find it very difficult to obtain a suitable ticket.

Furthermore, information given by the site is frequently incorrect, incomplete, misleading or incomprehensible to all but the most experienced users.

This report outlines a large list of problems in some detail, and recommends solutions to make online booking available to tourists and other inexperienced users.

Introduction

Public transport ticket sales (especially rail) are increasingly dependent on internet booking facilities. This trend is inevitable as station ticketing facilities are downgraded while broadband becomes ever faster and more available.

Online booking is especially important for the Caledonian Sleeper tourist market because many potential customers live outside the area – in many cases outside the UK – and will be making their travel plans well in advance of travel, comparing various different modes of transport to the Highlands. However, online booking facilities for the ScotRail Caledonian Sleepers are extremely poor and are almost certainly stifling ticket sales.

In autumn 2012, ScotRail introduced a brand new booking web site. This solved a few previous long-standing problems but left most unsolved and introduced a number of new problems. Furthermore, the new site was not adequately tested and contained a number of software bugs and usability problems. More than a year later, insufficient attention has been devoted to these bugs and the site remains incredibly hard to use by prospective new users of the sleeper.

In Spring 2014, ScotRail made matters worse by introducing a new front page or 'landing page' to their web site. While the main booking engine remains the same, many/most users will start their booking experience using the new landing page, which is poorly designed and inconvenient to use.

The following pages detail a large number of specific online booking difficulties, listed in roughly the order in which a typical prospective sleeper user would encounter them. Only after overcoming all these difficulties would the user obtain a ticket. While experienced or professional users may be able to overcome some or all of these issues, most new/casual users are unlikely to be able to book a ticket and will probably be put off using the sleeper altogether.

Each issue is accompanied by a suggested solution. These should be urgently addressed by ScotRail and the other relevant Train Operating Companies in order to make sleeper travel easily available to the general public.

The document is divided into two parts: Part A describes the difficulty of finding the correct web site on which to book a sleeper ticket; Part B describes the problems of booking a ticket using the correct (ScotRail) web site.

The issues detailed in this document are specific, repeatable problems. However, the ScotRail site is additionally prone to non-specific reliability problems such as "Service Unavailable", which normally go away if the user waits a while and retries.

In the near future, a separate document will be produced, listing online booking problems with Scottish daytime services.

NOTE: All issues described were tested using the Firefox web browser, Version 26.0.

Summary of Recommendations

ScotRail Site

- *The site should cater for users who do not know in advance which London Terminal they need to use.*
- *If the user does not select a specific terminal, the most generic choice available should be selected by default, i.e. 'London Terminals', etc.*
- *The booking system should clearly differentiate between tickets which are 'Not Available', 'Sold Out' and 'Not Yet Released'.*
- *On-sale dates should be clearly advertised in advance (and strictly observed).*
- *An email notification service should be provided to notify customers when specific tickets go on sale, similar to that provided by East Coast Trains.*
- *The online rail ticket booking system should show the cheapest (or range) of fares available for each date across a week or month either side of the user's chosen travel date.*
- *If a user wishes to book more than one sleeper berth, they should be offered the cheapest available ticket for each person.*
- *Tickets for the Fort William seated sleeper tickets should be sold via the web as they are for all other seated sleeper routes.*
- *For any given ticket, the web site should make clear whether a bed or just a seat is provided.*
- *The web site should indicate unambiguously whether sleeper supplements are available.*
- *The web site should make clear the cost of such a supplement before the user is asked to make a purchase decision.*
- *The web site should at the same time state how and where the supplement may be purchased.*
- *The word 'seat' should never be used to describe a sleeper berth.*
- *Sleeper fares should only be offered for travel on trains where sleeper travel is available.*
- *When displaying messages, the entire text should be viewable.*
- *Sleeper fares should be standardised amongst English stations. Ideally tickets to/from London should also be valid (or available at equal price) to/from Watford Jn, Crewe or Preston.*
- *Sites selling National Rail tickets should display the correct National Rail logo.*
- *Entering a return date should be optional. The default return date should be the date of outward travel.*

National Rail Site

- *The National Rail site should show the lowest available fare for all journeys.*
- *Fares to Fort William should be displayed, when available, as they are for other sleeper destinations.*
- *Passengers wishing to book a ticket on a sleeper train should be directed to ScotRail and NOT to Virgin Trains.*

Virgin Trains Site

- *The Virgin Trains web site should display all trains, including the sleeper, irrespective of whether Virgin sells tickets for such trains.*
- *If Virgin do not sell tickets for a service, they should make it clear that tickets may be available elsewhere.*

East Coast Trains Site

- *East Coast Trains should improve their user interface to make it clear that the sleeper information can be accessed via ScotRail.*

Part A: Choosing A Web Site

This part assumes that a prospective customer has decided to look for a rail ticket to Scotland online. Their likely steps in trying to find a suitable web site are summarised in the following sections.

1. Search Engine

Putting the search "Train ticket to Scotland" into Google returns the following results:
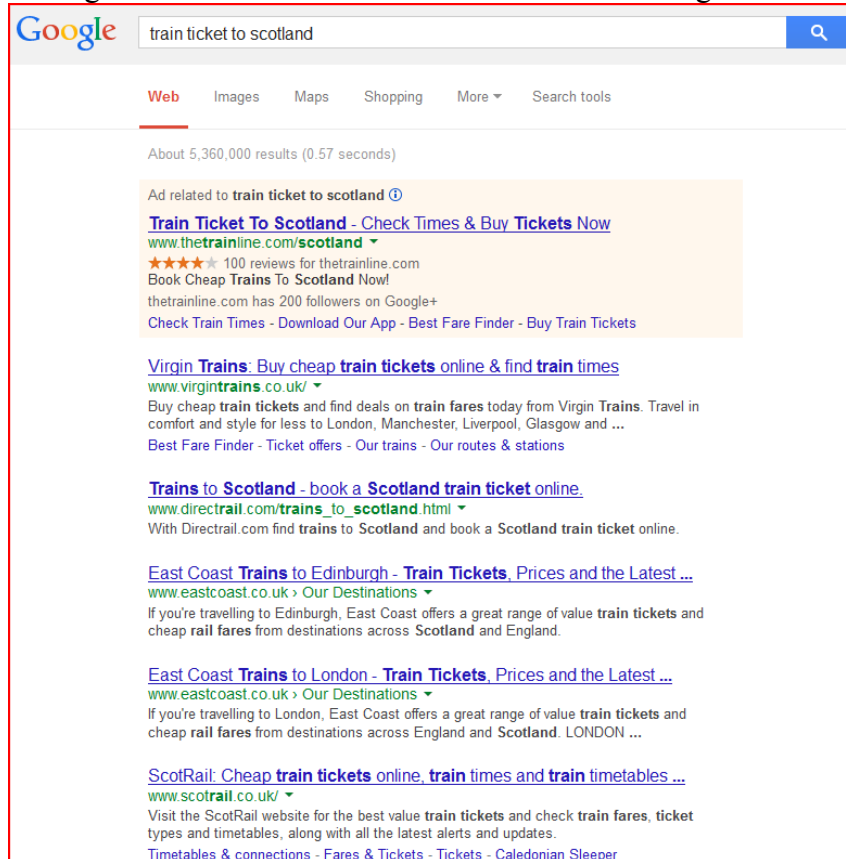
The list includes two TOC-independent sites - TheTrainLine and DirectRail which fortunately DO sell sleeper tickets. TOC-specific sites of the three Anglo-Scottish TOCs also appear, with Virgin shown first, then East Coast and ScotRail last. This ordering is reasonable since ScotRail runs the least number of services. The problem, however, is that while ScotRail sells all tickets for the other TOCs, Virgin and East Coast do NOT sell ScotRail's sleeper tickets.

NOTE: The exact ordering of search results may depend on previous searches and previously visited sites. However, for most new users it is reasonable to assume that any potential rail traveller to Scotland is more likely to visit the Virgin Trains or East Coast Trains web sites than Scotrail's.

2. National Rail Web Site

For many users, this is likely to be the first place they look when planning rail journeys. Unfortunately attempting to book a night journey via this site generally leads ultimately to the user being told that no tickets are available (even when they ARE available). Requesting journey information for a night-time journey from London to Scotland leads to a response such as the following:

There are three major problems with the above response:

1. For sleeper journeys (except to Fort William on the direct sleeper), a non-sleeper fare is shown (in this case the 'Off-Peak' single fare at £155.30). In many cases, much cheaper sleeper tickets will be available but these are not shown and users will not be aware of them. In fact the wording 'Off-Peak' may suggest to most users that the fare shown is the cheapest fare.

   In the above case, a sleeper fare is available on the ScotRail site, for the same journey, at £102.50 as shown right.
   Sadly most users will not be aware of this as the £155.30 fare will deter them from further investigation of options.

2. If the user wishes to book a journey on the direct sleeper to Fort William, NO fare at all is shown (irrespective of whether tickets **are** available). Since fares are shown for other sleeper routes, but not Fort William, the user will likely conclude that no sleeper is available.

3. For **any** sleeper journey, if the user clicks the 'Buy Now' option shown on the National Rail site, they are immediately directed to the Virgin Trains web site, which **always** displays the message "No tickets are available, please refine your search." (see below). This more or less guarantees that any user will abandon the search for sleeper tickets at this point.
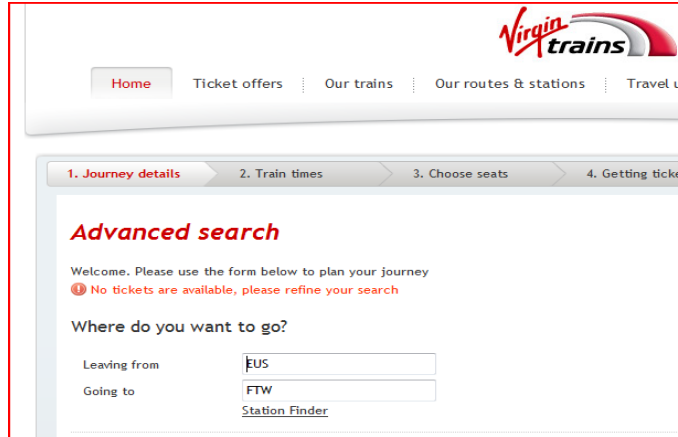
NOTE: If the user instead clicks the yellow information triangle next to the fare on the National Rail site, they receive a message advising them to contact ScotRail. This is reasonable in itself, but it should be realised that most users will **not** click for further information because they have already been led to believe that the fare is extremely expensive and, in the case of Fort William, not available anyway.

Solutions:
- *The National Rail site should show the lowest available fare for all journeys.*
- *Fares to Fort William should be displayed, when available, as they are for other sleeper destinations.*
- *Passengers wishing to book a ticket on a sleeper train should be directed to ScotRail and NOT to Virgin Trains.*

3. Virgin Trains Web Site

Virgin is probably the most well-known brand selling Anglo-Scottish tickets and may be the first site many people visit to purchase a rail ticket to Scotland. Unfortunately this site does not sell ScotRail sleeper tickets. Furthermore, this site gives users the strong impression that there are no trains between Virgin's own late evening service and the next morning:

This misleading information is compounded by the fact that Virgin's site claims that:
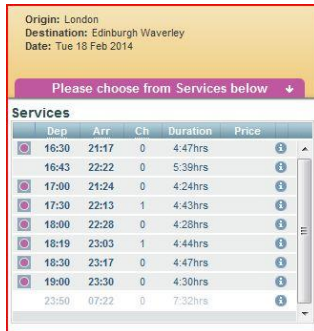
By claiming to sell **all** TOCs' tickets, while **not** showing the sleeper, Virgin reinforce the false impression that sleeper tickets are unavailable.

Solutions:

- *The Virgin Trains web site should display all trains, including the sleeper, irrespective of whether Virgin sells tickets on such trains.*
- *If Virgin do not sell tickets for a service, they should make it clear that they may be available elsewhere.*

4. East Coast Trains Web Site

East Coast also does not sell ScotRail sleeper tickets. Unlike Virgin, they do show the sleeper trains, but these are always disabled in the results table (shown as light grey text with a white background):

The user is presumably intended to click the 'i' icon, which shows a message directing them to the First ScotRail site. Unfortunately this is unlikely to happen in practice because the white background suggests to users that the entire sleeper entry in the table is disabled ('greyed out'). Common user interface / web site design practice is that greyed out entries cannot be clicked at all so most users will not attempt to click any part of this entry.

Solutions:

- *East Coast Trains should improve their user interface to make it clear that the sleeper information can be accessed via ScotRail.*

Part B: ScotRail Web Site

This part assumes that the prospective customer has realised that the best site on which to purchase tickets is ScotRail's site. It describes problems encountered by the potential user in booking a sleeper journey using this site.

All snapshots in this section are taken from the ScotRail Site in late 2013 and early 2014, except where stated.
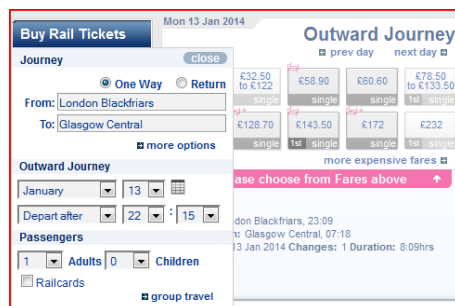
5. Choice of Departure Station

The first problem with using ScotRail's site for sleeper bookings is that the site assumes that the user knows from which London Terminal the sleeper departs.

Depending on the search engine or bookmark used to reach the site, users may start the booking process at either the main ScotRail landing page (www.scotrail.co.uk) or at the main ticket booking page (known as the 'Mixing Deck').

If they start at the main landing page and type in 'London' as the departure point, a pop up menu offers 28 different station choices. The web page does not offer any generic option such as 'London Terminals' so the user has to pick a specific station.

Knowledgeable users can easily select Euston. However, new customers are given no guidance and are unlikely to pick Euston as it is 7th in the list of 28. Naturally selecting the wrong station generates timetable results which require at least one change of trains, and a reduced range of fares (Bargain Berths are never available from stations other than Euston).

If the user reaches the mixing deck page and enters 'London' here, they are now offered a choice of 25 stations. This time they are not required to select any London terminal but if they do not do so, the booking system picks the first in the alphabetical list (i.e. London Blackfriars). Again, Blackfriars is not a convenient station from which to start an Anglo-Scottish journey − especially on the sleeper − so fares and journey times are less attractive than from Euston.

Note: The above issue applies to other towns/cities with multiple stations, e.g. typing 'Glasgow' causes Glasgow Airport via City Centre to be selected by default.

Solutions:

- *The site should cater for users who do not know in advance which London Terminal they need to use.*
- *If the user does not select a specific terminal, the most generic choice available should be selected by default, i.e. 'London Terminals', etc.*

6. 'Sold Out' vs 'Not Yet Available'

Sleeper and other rail tickets are not available until approx 12 weeks before travel (the exact on-sale dates are variable). Furthermore, the most expensive tickets are often released before cheaper tickets.

However, the online booking system does not currently differentiate between tickets which have not yet been released and tickets which are permanently unavailable (i.e. sold out, or no trains running that day, etc). The web site simply shows tickets as unavailable (or does not show them at all) so most users assume that tickets will **never** be available for their required dates.

In other cases, more expensive sleeper tickets go on sale a few weeks before the cheaper tickets. People may try to book, note the cost as too expensive and choose a different mode of travel. In reality, a much lower priced sleeper ticket may become available later.

The adjacent snapshot shows availability for March 2014, observed in November 2013 when sleeper tickets have not yet been released. Observe that:

1. No sleeper tickets are shown.
2. When one clicks on any of the fares shown, the sleeper (very bottom entry in the table) is greyed out.

The user is given no indication that tickets will become available in due course. Most users would conclude that sleeper travel is simply unavailable or sold out on their desired date of travel.

Solutions:
- *The booking system should clearly differentiate between tickets which are 'Not Available', 'Sold Out' and 'Not Yet Released'.*
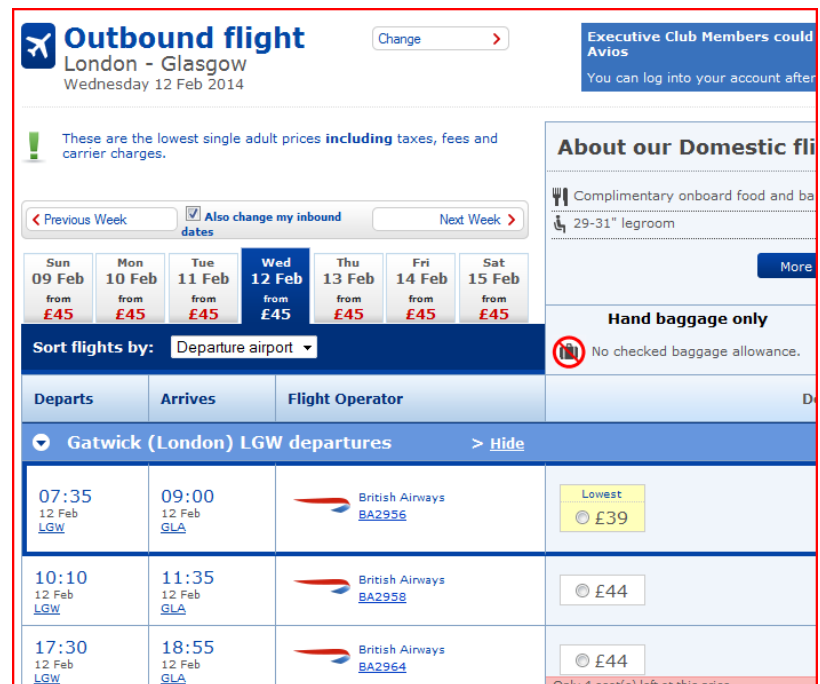
- *On-sale dates should be clearly advertised in advance (and strictly observed).*
- *An email notification service should be provided to notify customers when specific tickets go on sale, similar to that provided by East Coast Trains.*

7. Flexible Date of Travel

Many prospective travellers have a degree of flexibility over their dates of travel and would prefer to choose a low-demand date when prices are typically lower. Most airlines provide a simple mechanism to compare the process between multiple dates but the ScotRail site provides only a next or previous day facility. Users must go through a laborious process of checking each date individually.
NOTE: This issue is not specific to the sleeper– it applies to all long distance rail travel.

By way of example, this snapshot shows the **British Airways** site. The lower half of the screen shows fares for different flights on the currently selected date. In addition, the lowest available fare on every day that week is also shown above, allowing a user to easily choose the cheapest day to travel.

Solutions:
- *The online rail ticket booking system should show the cheapest (or range) of fares available for each date across a week or month either side of the user's chosen travel date.*

8. Combining Ticket Types

People travelling together may be required to purchase the same type of ticket, even if there is one ticket available at a lower price. The following example shows that one Bargain Berth is available at £39, and also an Advance ticket at £68.10:

However, if the user attempts to book two places together, they are only offered two Advance tickets at a combined price of £136.20 (i.e. 2 X £68.10):

This problem can be circumvented by making two separate bookings for the two passengers, but this is likely to result in the passengers being allocated separate cabins, certainly so if they are of different genders. In practice, this may be overcome asking the berth steward to adjust the cabin allocations at the time of boarding if space permits. However many users will not be aware of this trick. Inexperienced potential travellers will simply pay the more expensive combined price or be deterred from booking at all.

Solutions:
- *If a user wishes to book more than one sleeper berth, they should be offered the cheapest available ticket for each person.*

9. Fort William Seated Sleeper

Seated sleeper tickets to and from Fort William appear **never** to be available to book online. This has been tested repeatedly for numerous dates and despite the fact that space is clearly available[1], there is no facility for booking through seated tickets to Fort William from the web site. Anecdotal evidence suggests that they cannot even be bought at most stations (except at stations such Fort William and Mallaig where local staff know how to get around the problems).

This issue likely arises from the fact that Fort William seated passengers are required to change coaches when the Highland Sleeper is divided/combined at Edinburgh. This is in itself an inconvenient arrangement for passengers, however that is the arrangement officially sanctioned by ScotRail so it should be possible to book tickets for it.

It appears that some knowledgeable users and station staff get around this problem by booking two separate tickets:

1. A ticket between between London and a station on the Inverness or Aberdeen route (e.g. Inverkeithing). This ticket is used only as far as Edinburgh.
2. A separate ticket from Edinburgh to Fort William.

This is a highly complex way to get around the issue and inexperienced users − such as tourists visiting Fort William − will have neither the knowledge nor the patience to do this. It should be noted that users cannot book separate London-Edinburgh and Edinburgh-Fort William tickets, because the booking system does not allow users to book tickets to Edinburgh on the Highland sleeper. Furthermore the practice described above is, strictly speaking, not allowed for Advance tickets because the London-Inverkeithing ticket does not allow the journey to be broken or 'cut short' at Edinburgh.

Solution: *Tickets for the Fort William seated sleeper tickets should be sold via the web as they are for all other seated sleeper routes.*

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[1] Seated space is seen to be available in both the Aberdeen and Inverness seating coaches between London and Edinburgh and space is also available in the seated coach between Edinburgh and Fort William.

10. "Berth or Seat"

It is often unclear whether a certain ticket offers a berth or a seat.

In the example on the right, the £106.70 Sleeper Standard Single fare includes a sleeper berth but the text says "…berth or seat…".
It is quite unreasonable to expect people to purchase such a ticket if they are not told whether they are buying a bed in a cabin or just a seat.

Solution: *For any given ticket, the web site should make clear whether a bed or just a seat is provided.*

11. Hidden Sleeper Supplement Information

For tickets that may be purchased in conjunction with supplements, the Mixing Deck shows both of the following statements:
- "Sleeper Supplements available"
- *(By hovering the mouse over the fare)* "Sleeper Supplements **may be** available"

In the example on the right, it is very confusing to see that supplements **are** available, but that also they **may** be available.
No indication is given on this page as to where one can find out whether they are indeed available or where these supplements can be purchased; users may take this to mean that they can purchase the supplement on the train. Further confusion arises from the fact that no price is given for the supplement and there is nothing to indicate whether the fare displayed includes the supplement or not.

Apparently the only way to find the answers to the above questions is to press 'Buy Now' and proceed to the next step. This is of little use because many users would regard pressing 'Buy Now' as indicating a commitment to purchase. They are therefore unlikely to press 'Buy Now' until **after** they have been given sufficient information to decide whether to buy the ticket or not.

Solutions:
- *The web site should indicate unambiguously whether sleeper supplements are available.*
- *The web site should make clear the cost of such a supplement before the user is asked to make a purchase decision.*
- *The web site should at the same time state how and where the supplement may be purchased.*

12. "Reserve a Seat" message for Sleeper Berth

Yet further confusion arises from the message "Only select a service if you want to reserve a seat."
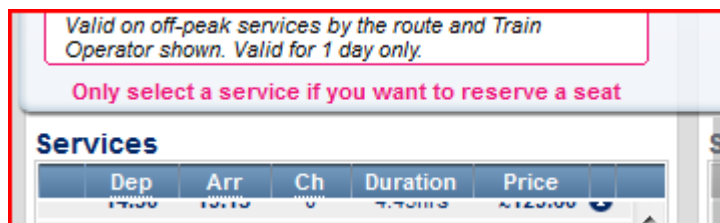
This is incredibly confusing for a prospective sleeper customer. Should they assume 'reserve a seat' includes sleeper berths? Or that they should not select the service unless they want to travel in **seated** accommodation?

Solution: *The word 'seat' should never be used to describe a sleeper berth.*

13. Sleeper supplements for non-sleeper trains & non-sleeper routes

The 'pink bed' sleeper icon and the message "Sleeper supplements available" can be shown for journeys on which sleeper travel is **never** available. See below:

In the first example above, the user is led to believe that sleeper supplements are available between Fort William and Crianlarich, despite the fact that one is not allowed to travel in a berth for this journey. In the second example, the user has chosen a day train (which obviously does not convey sleeper coaches) but the sleeper supplement fare remains selected and the message "Sleeper supplements may be available" still pops up when hovering the mouse over it.

Solution: *Sleeper fares should **only** be offered for travel on trains where sleeper travel is available.*

14. Truncated Message

The web site may attempt to show a message which is too long to display. No facility is provided for scrolling down:

The adjacent example includes the information "Refundable and". Clearly the message is supposed to continue but there is no way to read the rest of it.

Solution: *When displaying messages, the entire text should be viewable.*

15. Intermediate Stations

The cheapest sleeper tickets (Bargain Berths) are only available to/from London Euston. This creates the anomalous situation where it is often cheaper to travel to Scotland from London than from, for example, Crewe. This in turn discriminates against potential passengers from large English conurbations (e.g. Birmingham and Manchester) who may wish to use the sleeper but who, for obvious reasons, prefer to travel via Crewe/Preston than via London).
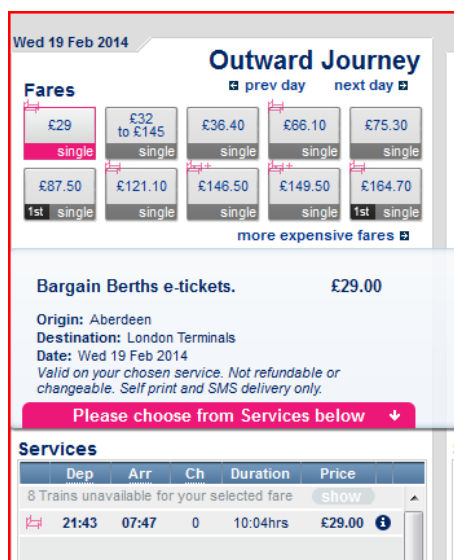
The above example shows that on 19 Feb, it is twice as expensive to travel from Aberdeen to Crewe as from Aberdeen to London using the same train.

Solution: *Sleeper fares should be standardised amongst English stations. Ideally tickets to/from London should also be valid (or available at equal price) to/from Watford Jn, Crewe or Preston.*

16. Landing Page - Return Date

The process of entering booking details on the new ScotRail 'landing page' is inconvenient and frustrating, especially in respect of return travel dates.
On most other transport booking web sites, the default return time/date are on the same date as outward travel. However, on the ScotRail page the default return travel date is midnight on the day of booking. Therefore the user has to manually select the date and time for both outward and return (even if they plan to return the same day).

Furthermore, the user is forced to open up the return date selection page, even if they do not wish to enter a return date (an error message appears if they do not). Thus if the user wants a single journey, they have to press 'Select Return Journey', select 'I only want a Single Journey' and then close the calendar again.
If the user wants a return journey but does not know the return date, there is apparently no way to enter this into the landing page. Such users need to enter a **random** return date into the landing page, then later go back and remove the date on the Mixing Deck page.
Such inconvenience is likely to irritate and confuse most potential new users of the site.

Solution:

- *Entering a return date should be optional. The default return date should be the date of outward travel.*

17. Reversed National Rail Sign

Under the 'Collect from Station' option for ticket collection, the National Rail icon is shown back to front. While this does not cause actual problems to users, it certainly reinforces the impression that inadequate care was paid to developing and testing the web site.
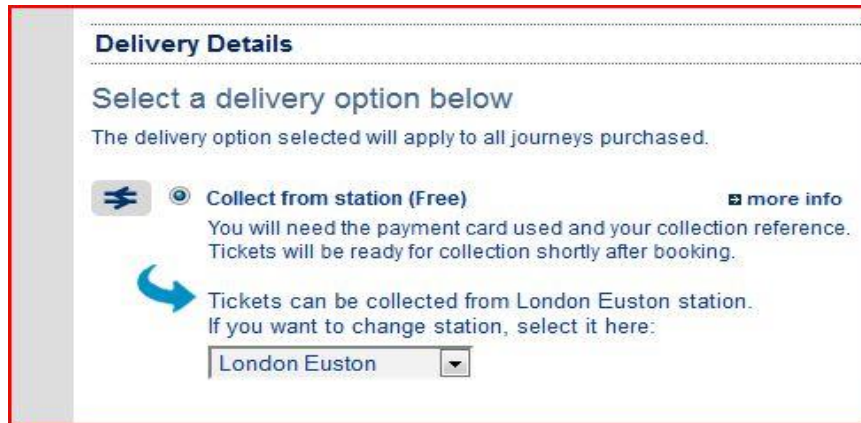
Solution:

- *Sites selling National Rail tickets should display the correct National Rail logo.*