



## TROUBLE-FREE TRAVEL TO POITIERS

BY DAVID LOWE

I wake up at 5am, a bit too early, but I must get to Montparnasse in time to catch the 08.51 TGV to Poitiers. I have breakfast, mess about until I'm nearly late, wake my teenage son up with difficulty, get in the car and set off to Monfort l'Amaury railway station. I have to cross seven kilometres of forest and last week I met a man who told me that while driving in Canada he'd hit a caribou, knocking it off its legs and narrowly avoiding being crushed to death as 800 kg of caribou hurtled through his windscreen. This has worried me ever since, even though I don't live in Canada and there are no caribous in Rambouillet forest. I survive the journey, park the car in the car park, relieved that I have found a space, even though I have always found a space and it's only quarter past six in the morning. The fact that the sun has always risen doesn't prove that it will rise tomorrow. We rush into the station, going back to the car once to check that I had indeed locked it. We arrive seven minutes early. My son complains that he could have stayed another five minutes in bed, but "what if?", I reply. He looks at me as if I'm mad. "What if what?" I decide to get my TGV ticket for Poitiers from the automatic ticket machine here instead of at Montparnasse. I'd printed out three pages of text just for the one dossier reference number which the machine requires to issue my ticket. I make the mistake of typing in the reference number of the travel agent and not that of the SNCF [French railways]. The machine tells me that I don't exist. I worry that there's a computer error, or that some malevolent force wants to ruin my day. Adding to my distress is the impending arrival of the 06.25 TER to Montparnasse. A series of catastrophic scenarios flits through my mind:

1. TER arrives, ticket still in machine; I run to catch train, losing ticket,
2. TER arrives, I wait for ticket to come out; I get ticket but miss train,
3. I send son to hold up TER, while I get ticket; I run quickly to get train and forget my bag by the ticket machine,
4. The family of a badly injured caribou gallop into the ticket office looking for revenge.

Got it!! I snatch my ticket and head for the platform – plenty of time but "what if?". There is something relentless about railway timetables. We want trains to behave like taxis for ourselves, understanding and accommodating, but as strict timetable-observing-public-transport-automatons for others. I got on the TER, but did something subconsciously with my ticket that I'd pay for later. We sit down. My son sleeps calmly; I read nervously, look at emails, check the platform number of the TGV with SNCF Direct, but it's too early, so I check emails again, read, look around, read, check for platform number... and so on for 39 of the 40-minute train journey. Then just before we arrive in Montparnasse, I say, "Where's my ticket?". I panic. I look in my bag and find three pairs of reading glasses that I never wear, a magazine that I intended to read but haven't, my wallet (I get out 10 euros for my son's breakfast), my portable phone (I check my emails), computer, an old sweet (I eat it), a handkerchief (I blow my nose) and a few receipts. Forgetting about my ticket, I close my bag, stand up as the train slows down, head for the door and only then realize that I'd not found what I was looking for – my ticket! I continue walking while clumsily checking whether the ticket is in my bag. Of course not, because it's in my jacket pocket – where I'd put it! I get off the TER and head for the Poitiers TGV, saying a rather too rapid goodbye to my son which I regret later ("What if?"). I'd received two calls from the journalist I was working with. I don't reply; let him deal with his own neuroses. I get my ticket out of my pocket for the third time with the intention of checking the carriage number but still don't remember it. I try to punch my ticket in the machine. I quickly insert the ticket. *Veillez retourner votre billet*. I turn my ticket over, and put it back in. It tells me to turn it over again. I turn it round and turn it over, then put it in, getting more and more agitated. Then I remember that you must just ignore the request to turn the ticket over, and insert the ticket slowly and gently. The machine accepts me and my ticket. This is a crafty SNCF method for making sure you're calm before getting on the train. I walk to my carriage, take my seat, and pretend with everyone else that I am a normal human being with heroic potential and not a paranoid neurotic...