



At Cologne, the Hamburg-Köln-Express (left) waits to enter the station while a high speed ICE train sails by. Three photos, TRAINS: Matt Van Hatten

## GERMANY It's David versus Goliath

**Each month, every German Railways** (Deutsche Bahn) Intercity-Express train makes the equivalent of a trip around the world — perhaps not surprising for one of the world's most renowned railroad brands. And there's still no better high speed experience in Europe than a ride between Frankfurt and Cologne in the front lounge of an EMU-style ICE 3 trainset, where you can watch the engineer run the train at 186 mph. Yet, after spending several days aboard ICE trains, I noticed that a few hiccups have worked their way into what had been a finely tuned system — gremlins such as those incorrectly arranged trainsets, restaurant car food shortages, and a host of delays.

So far, only one David has dared to challenge this Goliath of railroading — the

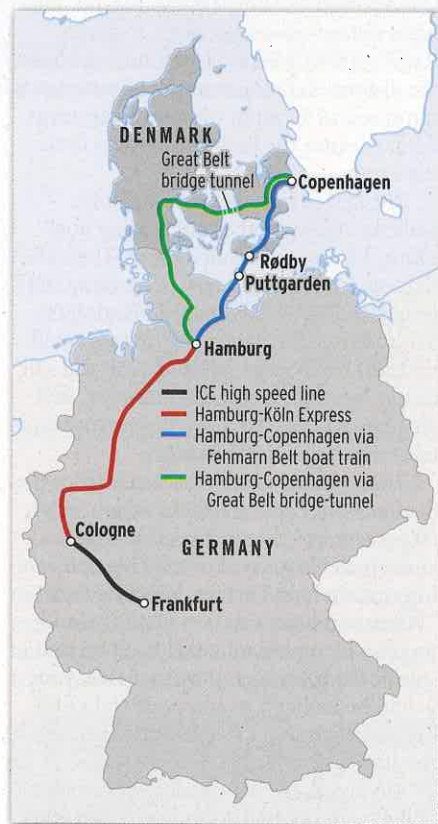


Leased HKX coaches have private compartments with plush interiors.

Hamburg-Köln-Express (or HKX), where the top speed is a mere 87 mph. HKX runs one to three round trips a day between Hamburg, Germany's second-largest city, and Cologne, fourth largest. The idea came from managing director Carsten Carstensen, while he was working for the rail company Veolia: "I saw all these low-cost air carriers, and thought, why can't we do that on rail?" U.S.-based Railroad Development Corporation (owner of the Iowa Interstate) provided the majority of the startup capital. Trains began running on July 23, 2012, but with leased equipment, since the Austrian cars purchased for the service are still being refurbished.

Indeed, the motley collection of old-style cars that arrives in Hamburg on a Saturday morning as HKX train 1800 looks decidedly out of place amid the uniform ICE trains. But 199 riders have gotten up early for this 6:49 a.m. departure, and they seem to appreciate the comfortably upholstered seats and private compartments on this 10-car, push-pull train. Carstensen says 15 to 25 percent of HKX riders are new to rail. Still, he concedes there's more work to do. Automobile travel between the two cities outnumbers train trips by about 10 to 1, and the endpoints are right at the 300-mile threshold where travelers often choose to fly instead. "Value-for-money service is what people want," Carstensen says.

And in that regard, HKX delivers. In fact, with its vintage, well-appointed equipment, the Hamburg-Köln-Express somewhat hearkens to America's Pullman Rail Journeys — only at SEPTA-style prices.



A diesel-powered ICE TD train pauses at Hamburg Central Station, built in 1906.