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Virgin Trains takes off in contest against airlines

Virgin Trains is putting airline competition to flight in speed, frequency, cost and convenience between London and Manchester, with train passenger numbers soaring since the launch of faster and more frequent services last September.

A 29 per cent increase in passenger numbers has followed the introduction of a half-hourly train service, with the train journey taking around two hours 16 minutes.

The faster trains and more frequent services have given the train the edge on city-centre to city-centre travel on this key business route.

Corporate clients are switching allegiance to the railways as business travellers take advantage of being able to plug in laptops and mobile 'phones, enabling them to work throughout their journey. The growth figures, comparing September-January 04/05 with the corresponding period a year before, are among the highest on the rail network and come despite heavy competition from coach and air operators, as well as the car.

Virgin Trains runs services at least every 30 minutes out of London Euston to Manchester between 07:05 and 20:05, with further services before and after these times. In contrast, air passengers must choose between five airlines using four London airports and, if they miss a flight, may have to wait up to eight hours for the next service with the same carrier. (See attached timetable.) British Airways, which boasts the most frequent service between the cities, runs an hourly service only at peak times to Heathrow, but every two hours off-peak.

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Charles Belcher, managing director of the West Coast Mainline franchise, said: "It has never been easier or quicker to catch the train between these key cities.

"Passengers clearly value a short, seamless journey without speed cameras, airport check-ins, congestion charges and the hassle of transferring to and from the city centre. We have fares as low as £24 return, and we are giving a 20 per cent discount on first class journeys booked just a day in advance. This shows another advantage, that we can tailor fares to a wide range of customer needs."

Virgin Trains has doubled frequency with its fleet of 125mph tilting Pendolino trains and now provides 33 weekday services each way compared to a total of 19 flights between Heathrow and Manchester, split between rival airlines.

Business travellers also now benefit from the Business Advance First Class return fare from £225, which can be booked up to 18:00 on the day before travel and is significantly cheaper than British Airways' £285 Traveller Flexible fare.

Pendolino travellers can enjoy the convenience of First Class direct travel to and from city centres, at-seat catering which includes full breakfast during morning peak and a spacious working environment in which laptop computers and mobile phones may be used from power points at every seat. Also, a wide range of audio entertainment is available for moments of relaxation.

For those booking 14 days in advance, the Virgin Value Advance 14 Return fare costs just £24 compared to the cheapest British Airways return fare of £65. For extra luxury, the Virgin Value Advance First 14 provides return travel for £54, less than VLM's cheapest standard class airline single fare of £50 plus £8.40 tax.

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Six reasons to say “Yes” to the train

	Train	Car	Airline	Coach
Work easily throughout the journey	Yes	No	No	No
Eat and drink on the journey (without being fined)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
£24 return fare	Yes	No	No	Yes
2hrs 36mins central Manchester to central London (including onward travel)	Yes	No	No	No
Plug in your lap-top and mobile phone	Yes	No	No	No
Tax-free travel	Yes	No	No	Yes

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For further media information contact the Virgin Trains Press Office on
0870 789 1111 or visit our media web site at www.vtmediaroom.com

Images of Virgin Trains

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