

Why rail is the way to go

The trip to Dublin, as anyone who's driven a car on this island at any time during the past 15 years can testify to, is a test of body and soul.

There are those of us who enjoy driving - and I count myself among them - but there have been times when I've pondered should I open a rent book during my tenancy on the Naas Road.

There can be few more bored-to-tears way of existing than being stuck behind a mile of cars, quietly cursing at the gobsheen motorists availing of the bus lane they've no business being in.

As time passes slowly behind the wheel, as one's age physically creeps up on you like a crouching tiger about to pounce on its prey, there have been times when I've wondered why I didn't take the train.

There can be few more leisurely ways of getting from A to B than being cosied up in a carriage, reading a book, occasionally glancing at the landscape whooshing by you.

When travelling between Waterford and Dublin, the indigenous rail user can afford a grin when visitors wonder why the train goes 'backwards' after its Kilkenny stop.

Their pondering the meaning of Muine Bheag, never mind deciphering what the announcer is saying can also prove a tad amusing (Muine Bheag means 'Small Thicket' as opposed to 'Small Ticket', which would be too ironic).

When enjoying daydreams of a Michael Palin-like existence, traversing the planet by every imaginable means - icebreaker, military transport, yak, etc, the rail appeals most.

From a writing perspective, it's enormously appealing, as even the most crowded carriage still affords one space for a pen and notebook.

And on those overnight rail trips I long for (would I long for it as much after experiencing it, I wonder?), describing the sights, sounds and smells around me would excite me greatly.

It might even entice that book I've long thought about writing to spring into hardback-bound reality.

There's something slightly old school about getting to your chosen destination via rail, although the new fleet of trains bound for Waterford will make for a most welcome arrival.

That there's no commercial railway in use across county Waterford is, of course, lamentable.

One looks at the flow of traffic between Waterford, Tramore and Dungarvan on a daily basis and one wonders how many cars would be taken off the road were the old lines restored to active service.

During a recent visit to Waterford, CIE boss John Lynch was asked about possible improvements to services linking the city and Clonmel, which would also stop at Carrick-on-Suir.

This is one of the lines which Mr Lynch described as being of 'lighter use' but it can't be tagged as anything else until such time as intensifying its use is appropriately addressed.

It also brought to mind how many customers would be enticed into using a service stopping at either Ballyhale or Mullinavat on the existing Waterford line, a point raised on several occasions by our 'Echoes from South Kilkenny' column.

"Well I don't see any of (these potential customers) using buses which already service these areas regularly," he said.

It's difficult to dispute that addressing the intercity routes was the appropriate course of action.

But once all this is done, the idea of rejuvenating the lesser used lines is intriguing.

It could also act as a way of staving off the so-called 'death of rural Ireland' which has been mooted again of late. After all, the re-opening of the western corridor has been long identified as an economic defibrillator for Connacht.

And while it would be wonderful to envisage a restoration of the Waterford-Cork service, with a spur connecting Tramore to the line, utilising the existing 'lighter use' lines is a more realistic and feasible ambition.

The National Spatial Strategy ought to have signalled a Waterford-Cork rail connection as an ambition at the very least, but surely it's not too late to see this being pursued.

Given that the green agenda has never been more regularly addressed, getting more cars off the road and getting more people availing of public transport is in everyone's interest.

And rail surely represents the best way of achieving that particular objective. That this sort of restorative work would have a minimal affect on existing infrastructure is also an enormous plus in its favour.

From a political perspective, this is a genuine all-party issue that no-one occupying a representative seat locally or nationally could logically disagree with.

Of course, the biggest barrier standing in the way of such progress is finance, and at a time when Brian Cowen is busy with talk of belt-tightening, there's little chance of the purse strings being opened.

And that's a shame, because rail is, without doubt, the way to go.