



S The S-Bahn

The term "S-Bahn" is an abbreviation for "city express train." The first S-Bahn system was introduced in 1930 as Berlin expanded its electrified rail network. After the smoke and noise of the original steam locomotives became a nuisance, Berlin opened an electrified system (third rail, 800-volt direct current) in 1924. Today many cities throughout Germany, Austria and German-speaking Switzerland have an S-Bahn system.

In larger German cities, the S-Bahn is also part of a rail network that includes subway lines. In Berlin, for example, at some train stations you can change from the S-Bahn to the U-Bahn (or vice versa) with the same ticket. The Berlin S-Bahn, Germany's largest system, has 15 lines with a 330-kilometer-long network, most of which runs above ground. A round green sign with a white S indicates an S-Bahn station.

Berlin residents have gotten used to hearing the announcement "Stay back, please!" before an S-Bahn or U-Bahn train closes its doors before departure. The S-Bahn is the hub of Berlin's local transport. The 15 S-Bahn lines cross the huge urban area of Köpenick in the southeast to Spandau in the northwest. The "Ring" lines (41 and 42) enclose Zone A, the central part of Berlin, and are connected to all other lines. The S-Bahn runs every ten minutes during rush hour and every 20 minutes the rest of the time. It is the best way to cover longer distances, sometimes in combination with the subway.

U The subway

U-Bahn (short for "underground railway") is the German term for what is known in English as "metro," "subway," "underground" or "tube." Although subway trains typically travel underground, they can also be seen above ground, often on elevated steel viaducts. A blue sign with a white U indicates a subway station.

The world's first electrified subway line opened in London on November 4, 1890. In Germany, the first subway was put into operation in Berlin in 1902. The Berlin subway network was gradually expanded into the largest network in Germany. It includes nine lines with a total length of 155.4 kilometers and 175 subway stations. The recent extension of the U5 line between the Brandenburg Gate and Alexanderplatz added an additional distance of around 2 km.

Today, only four German cities (and Vienna in Austria) have subway lines: Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Nuremberg. Some cities like Cologne, Hanover and Stuttgart have light rail lines that sometimes run underground, but these are not true subway lines. The subway is a quick way to get around Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Nuremberg and Vienna, with trains running every five to ten minutes during peak hours.

The rules for purchasing and validating tickets for the S-Bahn described above also apply to the U-Bahn.

H Buses and trams

A round sign with a green H in a yellow circle indicates a stop (see photo). Some stops may have an electronic sign showing the route number and arrival time of the next bus or tram. In almost all cases you will find a framed timetable on a post at the stop.

If you already have a ticket, show it to the bus driver when you get on the bus and validate it at a yellow, orange or red machine in the aisle marked "Please validate here." Skip this step if you have already validated your ticket. If you don't have a ticket, you can usually buy one from the bus driver (but not on trams, which have a ticket machine in every car). In some systems, electronic time cards are validated by holding them against a red circle at a special machine near the entrance.

There are buttons along the aisle that you press to signal that you want to get out. Modern buses and trams have an electronic sign above the driver's seat that shows the name of the next stop and says "bus is stopping" when someone has pressed the stop button. In some cases you will hear a gong and a recorded voice announcing the name of the next stop. Always exit through the rear door. You may have to press a button to open the door if you are the first person to get out.

U The light rail

Some German cities have a light rail system known as "Stadtbahn." The light rail concept uses a mix of dedicated and regular trams, using underground tunnels and stations to increase the speed of the system by bypassing automobile traffic. In contrast to a normal tram, the light rail in some cases runs on its own track bed, often on a green median so that it is not obstructed by road traffic.

In cities where there is no real subway, such as in Düsseldorf, Frankfurt am Main and Stuttgart, the light rail system with its tunnels offers a cheaper alternative to building a complete subway system like in Berlin or Munich.

These systems even use signs with a white "U" on a blue background, similar to the real subway lines in Germany. By using rail lines that are separate from road traffic and regular trams, light rail can provide faster service than a regular tram.

In other cities it can be difficult to distinguish between a light rail and a regular tram. In cities like Chemnitz, Erfurt and Freiburg, the light rail consists of normal trams that run on tracks that are separate from the road but without tunnels. In some cases, the light rail trams have low-floor trams that run just a few centimeters above the ground, eliminating the need for special platforms.