

Planes, trains and automobiles, and the winner is ...

Analysis Carl Mortished

It sounds like some terrible stunt on *Top Gear*, in which the three presenters put a high-speed train through its paces against an Airbus jet and a Ferrari in a chase between, say, Milan and Rome.

We know that Jeremy Clarkson's Italian stallion will disappear for hours in a traffic jam on the outskirts of the Italian capital, so is the excitement about whether the train pips the plane?

Of course, says Nuovo Trasporto Viaggiatori (NTV), a private venture that is building 25 blood-red locos at a cost of €1 billion for a super-fast service that eventually will run from Turin to Naples. Alstom, which makes TGV trains for SNCF, is supplying NTV with AGV trains, Alstom's cutting-edge technology, a lighter, more energy-efficient rail vehicle than

the old TGV. The new service, to be called Italo when it is launched in two years, will shorten the Milan-Rome journey to three hours, centre to centre, fast enough to obliterate Alitalia's shuttles.

Alstom reckons that for any journey of less than 600 miles, a high-speed train is the clear winner door-to-door. That has been the case for several years and Air France has bowed to the inevitable, quietly shelving its Lyons-Paris and Paris-Brussels services.

And this is where the *Top Gear* fantasy ends and a new race begins, because the airlines are trying to beat railways at their own game. By 2015, European high-speed rail networks become open to cross-border competition and Air France has teamed up with Veolia, a freight rail operator, to

launch a competing high-speed service to bring passengers from Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris to London's St Pancras terminal. Eurostar is already taking the lion's share of London-Paris traffic and is eating away at the Brussels market. Airlines make little or no money on short-haul European routes, so it makes sense to let the train take the pain by decorating leased locos in airline livery. From St Pancras, Air France is in pole position to steal BA customers in Essex and Kent who resent the troublesome trek to Heathrow.

And then there is climate change — in France, with the nuclear-powered electricity grid, the railways can claim a low-carbon advantage. In Britain, it is not so simple, but the convenience of the train is hard to beat.

