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"AVEC"- KEEPING SMALL STATIONS ALIVE



*A very clean and welcoming station in the small rural village of Schüpfen on the line from Bern to Biel.
Photo: Goerge Hoekstra*

Times change. Today we have a lot of people travelling on season tickets and passes. Information and bookings are available over the phone and on the Internet. The "Easy Ride" project will allow passengers to travel with a chip-card: scanners note your travel and you get a monthly bill. All this means that fewer people will go to the ticket office at their local station. This commercial pressure - Mrs Thatcher used to call it "economic reality" - makes it hard to keep small stations staffed. Even a yearly sales volume of four hundred thousand Francs (that is eleven hundred francs every day of the year!), puts a station in the danger zone. But we all know what happens to a closed station: first the graffiti sprayers take over, then the vandals. The site, which should be a welcoming focal point for the railway then becomes a total disgrace and an incentive to buy a car. Contrary to the Blue Lady, the SBB decided something had to be done. A work group was set up in the Winter of 1997 to find additional as well as alternative uses. Just over a year later, in the spring of 1999, three pilot schemes were

set up: Brugg, Schüpfen and Mettmenstetten. The slogan, and later SBB-owned brand name, was "avec", which means "with" in French, a language almost everybody in Switzerland can understand. Together with the supermarket chain "Migros" and the newsagents "Kiosk", a totally new set up was formed. The SBB is responsible for the building, the railway and ticketing, Migros is responsible for high class food and other groceries, Kiosk takes care of the coffee-bar and newsagents. The three partners then took in "Sunrise" to look after telephone and Internet services. "avec" is set up as a joint venture and the big firms stay in the background. "avec" is operated as a sort of franchise, it owns and maintains the complete infrastructure including the fittings and is responsible for proper training (ticketing, catering, trading) of the operators. But from then on these independent traders operate at their own risk although financial help is given during the starting phase. The stations are open 365 days a year and until at least 8 pm. We were received by the team at Schüpfen station. It was very encouraging to

see how clean and full of life the station was even in the middle of the day, with all the commuters gone. In the first six months, 5000 people a week came through the doors and spend 70 thousand Francs, 25 % over budget.

When asked about competition, it appeared the local petrol station had the only other shop in the village. Not only the old station staff, who would otherwise been on the dole, were working here, but even some new jobs were created. After a year, all three stations have proved to be a success. It is now planned that a total of 50 local stations will have been converted to "avec"s by 2003 and thus ... saved!



Actually it is not normally this full, only when railway journalists invade. You can see that the coffee bar is popular. In the background the ticket office with full terminal and behind that the large self service shop. Out of view on the left are the newsagents, telephone and internet terminal. All staff help out wherever they are needed.

Photo: George Hoekstra

ICN NOW COMPLETE WITH RESTAURANT

The long awaited restaurant car for the Swiss tilting train ICN (see Swiss Express June 2000, pages 40-1) was presented to the press on the 6th July 2000. The exterior of the car merges with the rest of the train, only the red surrounds of the windows of the restaurant part (part of the coach has normal 1st class seats) immediately make it identifiable, as does the stylish emblem of a place setting next to the door. The interior is very much like the mark IV restaurant cars with their alternative large and small tables seating 230. This does break the corridor effect, but does make it more difficult for the crew on their zig-zag route during serving. A first for Switzerland on purely SBB trains will be the possibility for the first class passengers to be served at their seats. A minibar serves second class passengers. The occasion was also used to baptise the set "Heinrich Pestalozzi" after the Swiss teacher and "father of the children-villages". More than 20 of his sayings grace the walls above the windows in the train. This one was above my seat: "If man is to become what he should be, he should be allowed as a child to be and do such as to make him happy". There is nothing more I would like to add to that!

Photos: George Hoekstra



THE REAL GLACIER EXPRESS THE RHÔNE GLACIER SEEN AGAIN FROM A STEAM TRAIN!



There is nothing express about it, but it is the real glacier: just visible on the left. On the right is the famous Belvedere Hotel (partly in the fog) What a great day, most people did not even care about the weather!

Photo: George Hoekstra

On the 14th of July, French Bastille day, when all the citizens remember the storming of the bastion of their oppressive regime with the slogan of “ça ira” (it will be possible), the heritage Dampfbahn Furka did indeed do it: they managed to transport the 200 guests, press, volunteers and shareholders through the summit tunnel past the glacier and down to Gletsch (see Swiss Express Dec. 1999 pages 8-9). Unfortunately, the Furka did everything to defend its formidable barrier: pouring rain, snow on the Pass and a sudden fall in temperature dominated the day. All this, however, did not in the least dampen the enthusiasm of the countless volunteers who had spent an incredible total of well over 180,000 hours of unpaid

work (equivalent to more than 90 man years). Not to forget the over 11,000 shareholders, who amongst them spend almost 12 million Francs on shares in support. What almost nobody thought possible (including your correspondent, who is on record to have called them quite mad), did in fact come about: steam trains running from Realp (5130 ft) to Gletsch (5860 ft) “over the top” (Furka station, 7200 ft). I thus really eat my words and humbly tip my hat and bow my head to this tremendous effort. All they need now is lots of passengers, let's hope they get them!

Information.: DFB, PO.Box 35, CH-3999 Oberwald, Switzerland -

Internet: www.net4u.ch/dfbfurka.

COOP RAIL SHOP



The new Coop-Railshop in Olten.

One of the newest attractions on Swiss railways is the mobile shop on the Bern-Zürich line. It is operated by the Coop, one of the biggest supermarket chains in Switzerland. The two ex-McDonald's restaurant cars, out of use since May 1999 were completely gutted inside and refitted as self-service stores.

Over 800 products ranging from newspapers and magazines to every day groceries such as rice, noo-

dles, canned produce and pet food, freshly baked bread, chilled drinks and sandwiches are stocked and sold at the same prices as in the normal stores. Hot drinks are also available together with a small bar with four seats and some standing room. There is even an internet terminal! The two cars are in service between Zürich and Bern from 6 in the morning till 8 at night, on the semi-fast services, stopping in Baden, Brugg, Aarau, Olten, Langenthal, Herzogenbuchsee and Burgdorf on the way. I sampled a midday and an early evening service. The railshop car is usually at one end of the train and the exact location is announced on the station, so most of the customers board the shop straight from the platform. During the day, most people bought items for consumption on the train (there is no trolley service on these trains), with occasional take-home items thrown in. In the evening there was more take-home shopping as one would expect. The majority of people I talked to said they used the shop regularly. The manager confirmed this. The shop does not yet pay for itself, but the publicity effect of the car itself, riding on Switzerland's busiest line, the station and train announcements, the media interest and people visiting the shop itself make it worth while. As one of the sponsors of the Swiss Expo 02, Coop will then put the cars on routes to the Expo-sites. Together with the Expo itself, though, the Railshops will disappear in 2003. Do have a look inside, the trains carrying these cars are marked in the time-table with the trolley symbol in brackets.

Photo: George Hoekstra

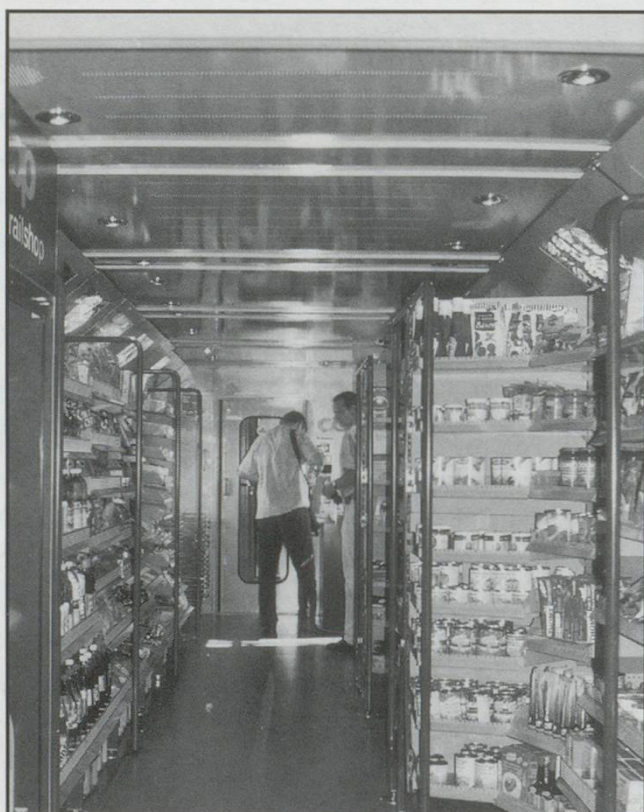


Photo: GH