

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2003)
Heft: [1]

Artikel: A journey on the Voralpen Express : Luzern - Arth-Goldau [to be continued]
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855130>

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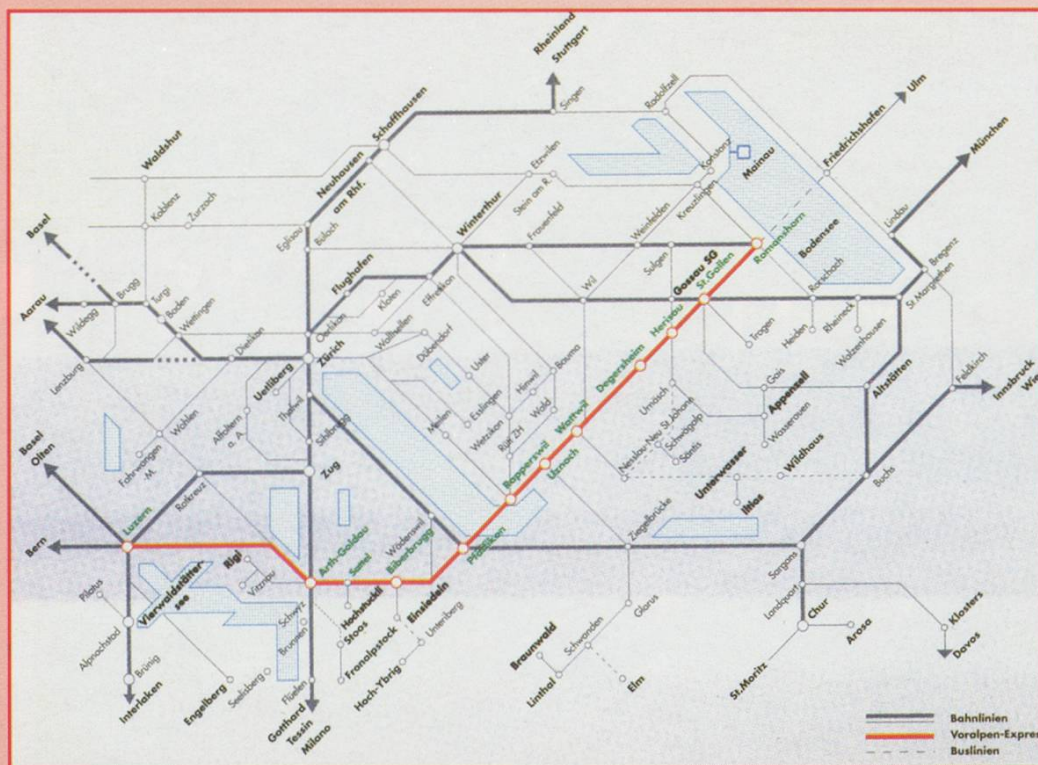
Malcolm Hardy-Randall

A JOURNEY ON THE VORALPEN EXPRESS



LUZERN - ARTH-GOLDAU

Approaching Luzern main station from the lakeside the view is of an ultra-modern building - opened in February 1991 - that replaced



the entrance to the old station built in 1896.

Inside the station is a sight that makes any railway enthusiast feel elated, for on the left are metre gauge trains for the Brünig line to Interlaken and the Stans-Engelberg line, immediately in front are trains of all descriptions to all parts of the country. However, on the

the old station destroyed by fire in February 1971. In front of the building and now housing the exhausts for the underground air-conditioning and car park ventilation systems is the Gothic style portal that once formed part of

right hand side of the station, sitting proudly in platform four resplendent in its distinctive livery is the train that is the subject of this article the Südostbahn "Voralpen-Express" (VAE).

A Voralpen leaves Luzern in the charge of the then BT Re456-033 in the St Anton Ski livery. May 2001.

Photo: Toggenburg



The VAE runs hourly in each direction between Luzern and Romanshorn, operated by the Südostbahn [South East Railway] - formed by the merger of the Südostbahn (SOB) and the Bodensee Toggenberg Bahn in 2002 - and now based in St Gallen. The consist of this train is a five car push-pull unit powered by a range of locomotives from not only the SOB but also the Swiss Federal Railway [known by the initials SBB for Schweizerische Bundesbahnen] itself. The coaches are all modified Mk IV

Immensee, July 2002. A Voralpen, hauled by ex BT Re4/4 456-092 heads for Romanshorn.

Photo: Malcolm Hardy-Randall



main line at Gütsch junction the train turns eastwards and immediately crosses the river Reuss via the Reussbrücke. This single-track route, opened in 1897, and built by the Gotthardbahn to link Gütsch with Immensee via Meggen and Küsnacht-am-Rigi, then

units and are fully air-conditioned with both Bistro catering and trolley service on board.

The coaches, each painted white with a wide blue and green stripe down the side are emblazoned in large letters "Voralpen-Express". However, the first thing that is really noticeable is the size of the windows - greatly enlarged to allow a proper view of the scenery en-route - followed by the roomy seating in the coaches and the route maps by the windows.

At the front of the express is a locomotive of either, a type Re 4/4^{II} on loan from the Swiss Federal Railway, or an ex BT Re 4/4 or a SOB Re 4/4^{IV} [ex SBB]. The liveries of the SOB locomotives are too varied to describe as the majority are *werbelok* or advertising locomotives, but suffice it to say they are colourful in the extreme. One of the Re 4/4^{IV} locomotives used on this service is painted red with a large Voralpen Express emblem displayed on the side.

As the clock shows 44 minutes past the hour the express starts to ease out of the station and proceeds down the right hand track into a cutting through the suburbs of Luzern with its high walls on either side and, on into the tunnels of Schönheim and Gütsch. Leaving the

enters the 2 km long Musegg tunnel under the suburbs of Luzern.

The interior of a Voralpen coach, first class. Very comfortable they are too. July 2002.

Photo: Malcolm Hardy-Randall



Upon leaving the tunnel the train races along, sandwiched between two roads, passing the Swiss Transport museum with its outdoor railway exhibits clearly visible on the right hand side. Also on the right hand side is a view of Lake Lucerne, the northern arm of the Vierwaldstättersee (Lake of the four wooded Cantons). Here the passenger's view really benefits from the extra wide windows.

Passing through three short tunnels the express then travels through Meggen station with the scenery changing to a superb view of the Küssnachersee while dominating the back-

ground is the full majesty of the Rigi Mountain. The train hurries on through Merlischachen with the village of Greppen visible on the opposite shore and the Rigi still providing the backdrop. The first stop for the express is in Küssnacht-am-Rigi, 19.18km from Luzern, where it pauses for a VAE service from Romanshorn to pass.

In the town are many half-timbered houses dating back over 300 years that have been carefully preserved. In this area is the old road to Immensee called "Hohle Gasse" considered to be the area for the story William Tell.

After this brief interlude the journey continues on through the short Schwarzenbach tunnel after which there is a total change of scenery. Gone is the view of the Vierwaldstättersee to be replaced by the Zugersee on the left hand side, and the Rigi no longer is in view as the train starts its journey around the base of the mountain.

At this point the train enters the station of Immensee, the location of the zero kilometre marker of the Gotthardbahn. It is also the

junction with the line from Rotkreuz from where express trains and heavy freight trains come before they start the long haul over the Gotthard. The village of Immensee is visible down below nestling on the southern shore of the lake, while on the opposite shore can be seen the village of Walchwil with the 1,558 metre high Gnipen mountain providing the backdrop. At certain times of the hour express trains can be seen travelling along the eastern shore of the lake, between Zug and the main junction of Arth-Goldau which is also the next stop for the Voralpen Express.

From Immensee the now twin track railway line, the autobahn and the Cantonal road all compete for the space between the Rigi mountain and the lake as they weave their way around the mountain. The railway with its elevated position allows the passenger to look down on both roads and gaze across the lake with its ferries scurrying between the shores.

Soon after passing above the villages of Arth - the original starting point of the Arth-Rigi Bahn - and Oberarth the express

Then BT Re456-091 in radio aktuell livery preapres to leave Quai 6 at Arth-Goldau. May 2002.

Photo: Toggenburg



slows to a halt in platform six of the main junction station of Arth-Goldau. This area was totally devastated in September 1806 when the side of the Goldauer Mountain collapsed and

background on the horizon the snow on the Titlis Mountain. All of which can be identified with the aid of the large maps laid out by the windows of each coach.



Art-Goldau July 2002. The Luzern-Romanshorn service arrives in time to interchange with Gotthard line services.

Photo: Malcolm Hardy-Randall

covered the town of Goldau killing 457 people and destroying 102 buildings.

After a stop to allow interchange of passengers with the Gotthard and Zürich services, the train leaves the station, passing as it does so the local zoo with its striking large stork statue that sits at the entrance. Crossing to the left hand side of the junction the train passes behind the locomotive depot built for the Süd Aargauischebahn later used by the Gotthardbahn. As it does so it starts the climb up the Rossberg mountains at a gradient of 42‰. This steady climb continues for the next 14 km making good use of the 6,500 horsepower of the locomotive as it maintains a steady speed up the ramp.

Here the passenger is afforded a superb view of the northern approaches to the Gotthard, the Mythen Mountain to the south, the Rigi in the foreground and in the far distant

After 3 km the train having climbed 82 metres in altitude passes through the station of Steinerberg. From here the gradient increases for the next 5 km to 45‰ as the train continues through the countryside with the view opening out as the climb progresses. At Sattel - the home of the largest outdoor Roller rink in Europe - just 8 km from Arth-Goldau the train is 772 metres above sea level having climbed 252 metres since its last stop, not bad for a standard gauge adhesion only railway! From Sattel the original construction plan was for the railway from Rapperswil to start its decent down to the Gotthard and to join up at Brunnen before proceeding around the southern flank of the Rigi mountain into Luzern. What a view that route would have given the passenger, but lack of finance changed all that and the plan was altered to the present one into Arth-Goldau.

(TO BE CONTINUED)