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George M. Hoekstra

CAR POSTAL FRANCE

- but it is really Swiss!



The service is operated by Minibuses "Maxirider" from the French firm Renault. They carry the name "Car Postal France" on the side. But, just below the yellow indicator light, the well-known Swiss Postauto emblem can be spotted! The bus is seen here at the terminus "Camping".

Photographs: George Hoekstra

PostAuto Schweiz AG, the largest operator of Swiss scheduled bus services, has been successful and innovative. Others and I have written about various parts of this now 100 years old institution. Although cross-border services have been operated for a long time, in the last few years, the company was able to win several contracts (in open competition with other operators) in neighbouring France, mainly due to its excellent reputation, its innovative technology and operating systems. Since 2001, PostAuto now operates or manages five operations in France, mainly in small towns or rural areas, some with a "Rufbus" (dial a bus) system, which it so successfully introduced in Switzerland – I have already written about this system in "Swiss Express". The total turnover of these

five operations is about SFr15 million. This is achieved with 132 people and 64 vehicles. In the beginning of September, a delegation of the Swiss Railway Journalists was invited to sample one of the smaller operations, the one managed by Swiss PostAuto in the small town of Obernai. This town, which has 12,000 inhabitants, is situated in north-eastern France, in the Alsace Region near the town of Strasbourg.

The Obernai operation consists of only 4 low-entry buses, 7 driver/ticket sellers, one manager (Swiss) and one hostess, to take care of the many small groups that visit Obernai. In barely one year, his small team has covered over 125,000 km (78,000 miles) of scheduled running and managed a turnover of SFr 650,000 (£285,000). Not bad, for such a small operation! Inside the

7.5 m (25 ft) long minibuses, there is room for 14 seated passengers, one of which is specially equipped for the handicapped, and a maximum of 9 standing. Due to the wide aisle on the side, there is also room for shopping carts, kiddie-strollers and folded up wheelchairs, without having to lift them into a box with a high railings, a curse of many British buses. To combat pollution, they are equipped with the latest type of particle-filters. On the route, there are 25 - 38 stops, depending on whether they run to the industrial sites. The buses run from the camping site, via the centre of town and the station, where they connect 16 times a day with the trains to Strasbourg and Selestat. Then they run on to the industrial areas to finish off at the other end in a small suburb. The service operates 7 days a week, a rarity in France. Monday to Friday, they run three times an hour, from 6.30 - 20.30. Frequencies on Saturdays are twice an hour from 7.30 - 19.30 and on Sundays once an hour from 8.30 - 18.30. Prices are cheap: one way tickets cost 0.50 Euro, (35p), monthly 15 Euro (£10) and yearly 120 Euro (£80). This is partly possible by a special transportation tax French Industries have to pay on the amount of their wages. As Obernai has several industrial operations, which the bus services at the times the workers need them, it qualifies for some of the money. The buses carry the logo "Pass O" on the side, loosely translated as oxygen-pass. The mascot is a giant hamster, which is a protected species in the area. The operation has a website in French: www.passo.fr

Obernai itself is a very attractive small town. The style of the buildings reminds one of many small late medieval towns in Germany. This is no wonder: the Alsace region changed hands between Germany and France several times during the ages. The town website is: www.obernai.fr. As the

Alsace is known for its wines, its beers as well as its food, the region, which is only between 30 min and two hours by train from Basel, it is well worth a visit. The website for the whole region is: www.tourisme-alsace.com



Inside the bus, there is room for a maximum of 23 passengers. The lady in pink is the deputy mayoress of Obernai; the other bored-looking passengers on this bus are my colleagues... Paradoxically, we take lots of pictures of other people, but loathe to be photographed ourselves!



This is the main square. Over the ages, the Region of Alsace has been part of Germany several times, which manifests itself in the half-timbered style of the buildings.