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MULHOUSE - ALMOST SWITZERLAND

George Hoekstra

Photos: George Hoekstra



Inside the National Railway Museum where the very wide aisles allow visitors to get far enough back to photograph the magnificent exhibits.

In the first week of September, the Alsace Tourist Office invited some Swiss Railway Journalists to visit this area in north eastern France. The town of Mulhouse is of particular interest to our readers, as it is only 35 min away on the train from Basel – an easy day-trip - and there really is a lot to see. The Railway and Automobile Museums have been a major attraction for quite a few years. Both are now under the same management of the (private) institution “Culturespaces”, which looks after many of France’s Monuments. Have a look on their Website: www.culturespaces.com.

Thankfully, they have left the main collection alone. The huge halls, with their incredible collection of perfectly restored old-timers, are intact. As we are, after all, a railway society I found you a steam driven car...



The museums have been re-vamped with sound and light shows. In this way it is hoped to attract younger visitors. I personally find these areas too dark and prefer the old style, but then I am already 70... The main thing to say, though, is that in both museums, the core collections are still on display. In the ex National Railway Museum, now called “Cité du Train”, the huge and lovingly restored collection of locomotives, train cars and artefacts is still displayed on the very

wide aisles, which makes it possible to view – and photograph – them from an appropriate distance. In my opinion, it is still one of the finest railway museums in the world. One very welcome new edition is an inspection pit underneath one of the large steam engines. Never before, have I been able to get underneath

a steam engine to see the inside pistons on the drive shaft, without getting absolutely filthy! Only the section where the fire engines used to be displayed is now taken up by the “dark” sound and light shows. I was unable to find out what has happened to the fire engines. The hall is now kept in almost total darkness. The huge arrows on the ground are very necessary to find your way. In the eerie atmosphere, several scenes are set. Some are narrated with the help of videos. The Museum’s website is www.citedutrain.com.

The National Automobile Museum – can again be called “Schlumpf”, after the (Swiss) brothers, industrial tycoons of the textile industry in the Alsace and multi-millionaires, who collected and restored the largest collection of old-timers in the world in memory of their mother. Later it was confiscated by the French Government after they closed their factories. Here too, all the meticulously-restored original old-timers are still displayed in the enormous hall lit by imitation gas-lamps. The sight of the sheer numbers is breath-taking. Other museums are proud to have 20, 30 even 50 old-timers. Here there are 400!! I am certainly not an automobile fan, but I can spend hours just admiring these examples of early mechanical propulsion, as well as the craftsmanship on the bodywork. Sadly, nowadays, the people still capable of this type of artisan craftsmanship are very thin on the ground indeed. The website is www.collection-schlumpf.com. If you plan to visit both museums – and who would not – there is a reduced combined ticket. Mulhouse has lots of other museums, like the paper and textile printing museums, the “electropolis” electricity museum (near the railway museum).

But the town itself does certainly not live in the past. I was particularly interested in the new tramway system. The tram runs on standard gauge tracks and the loading gauge of its route through the town is large enough to accommodate the planned tram-train from the neighbouring town straight into the city – for instance like they do in Karlsruhe. The local population was involved in the planning of the routes, as well as in the design: they even voted

on the final design of the nose. I must say, the front looks better than those on many other trams I have seen. The stops are visible from a long way off as they are marked by huge arches decorated in different colours by a local artist. Mulhouse naturally also has a website: www.tourism-mulhouse.com. Take a day off Switzerland and have a day out in France. As I said before, Mulhouse is really close-by and there is a lot to see.



Mulhouse has a very modern tram system. Unlike tram lines in Switzerland, which are normally metre gauge, these are standard gauge vehicles. All stops have these multicoloured arches, all in different colours, the work of a local artist.

As the vehicles are standard gauge, there is a lot of room inside. There are seating and standing areas, as well as lean-to areas for passengers with kiddie-strollers or luggage. I am grateful to the Mulhouse Tram Corporation SITRAM for this picture. The trams I travelled on were always so full I was unable to take a meaningful picture!

