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RhB - A MOUNTAIN TRAMWAY?

Rufus Stone

With the Rhätische Bahn entering a major modernisation programme we contemplate what this means for admirers of this organisation.

Ge4/4iii No.648 draws a mixed train into Tiefencastel on a May evening in 2005. PHOTOS: Rufus Stone.

We know that the intermodal Trans-Alpine routes require updating but the old routes are the reason so many of us travel to Switzerland, the scenery, the unique rolling stock and the visible engineering are what it is all about. The homogenisation of rolling stock, and the melding of our old favourite companies, is all reducing the special attraction of this wonderful national train set.

In the 1990s the RhB set about modernising its infrastructure, so much so that a good deal of the character of the Albula line has disappeared. New stations, signalling, and working practices have seen the passing of the stopping mixed passenger/goods trains, red hats, red satchels, staffed stations etc. Now we are to experience the Tram-atisation of the RhB. As a group member of the www.rhb-grischun.ca site I will share the following with those SRS members not able

to access the latest information. This is a précis of many forum members postings - too many to credit.

The RhB is now to modernise the Bernina line with stations and rolling stock being the main areas of change. Pontresina will be upgraded with a better underpass, Morteratsch will be a single road station with the passing loop moved back towards Pontresina and both Ospizio Bernina and Cadera are to receive the modernising brush; all in all a SFr.50m spend. New EMU rolling stock as on the Appenzeller Bahnen, built by Stadler/Bombardier, will be introduced from 2010 onwards, so expect the progressive withdrawal of all motor baggage cars as they come up for revision - excepting the 50 series and Museum/historic stock. Well the Bernina was always singular in its stock and working practices but if you want to see how it was operated for around a century, go soon.

However if you want to see loco-hauled trains on the main RhB you need to go now, as new EMUs will slowly replace most services on the Stamnetz over the next 5 years, even Regio Express EMUs are planned for the Albula line. If you like Ge 4/4Is Ge 4/4IIs, Gems, and Ge 6/6IIs book your trip soon, as the last Ge 6/6II hauled Albula expresses will be probably end this year. Do not forget these upcoming EMUs are air conditioned - so no opening windows!

If you have not accessed the RhB's website and looked at the UNESCO submission you will have missed THE most comprehensive piece of documentation in English on the Albula and Bernina lines, it is utterly fascinating. There are literally hundreds of pages. The most interesting piece of information is the future of the Albula Tunnel. I quote:-

"The vaults of the tunnels will also have to be renewed. The Albula tunnel in particular is in need of structural rehabilitation. However, extensive reconstruction work or the construction of a new, parallel, tunnel will be required to bring it up to the standards of

today's safety regulations for long railway tunnels"

These four lines have significance out of all proportion to their size. I have already been to Graubünden this year and will be going back twice again simply to see the railway I knew as the RhB and its engineering marvel the Albula line. If you like loco hauled expresses curving up above Bergun, or even loco powered push pull units on the other parts of the network, time is running out to see them. For me, this is a sad development but as there are no manufacturers of metre gauge locomotives left in Switzerland what else can the RhB do?

A modern railway is great if all you want to do is travel, but I fear many rail enthusiasts will mourn this new age in Switzerland, as it has all the same hallmarks as our very own dieselisation of BR. Book your trip now before Switzerland's Amazing Railway turns into a mountain tramway with identical flying carriages everywhere. Very efficient and comfortable - but so sterile.

Ge4/4ii No.617 slows for a regular stop at Kublis in May 2005.

