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BILINGUAL FUNICULARS

Ron Smith describes the Biel/Bienne operations



Two cars pass on the newly refurbished Leubringerbahn in November 2009.
PHOTO: Gerhild Kautsch.

Biel/Bienne is Switzerland's only officially bilingual town - all road signs, bus destinations, etc, are in both German and French (although the German always seems to be the leading one). In Swiss terms it is quite a large place with a population of some 50,000. It is located at the end of the large Bielersee and is an industrial community that was previously the centre of quite an important textile industry that grew-up where the mills could be powered by the water running off the steep southern flank of the Jura massive. Biel/Bienne is now a home of the watch industry, with Omega, Rolex and Swatch being there and it has an important railway workshop complex and a major marshalling yard.

In 1887 a seilbahn/ funicular was opened to climb up to the hillside village of Magglingen/Macolin to the northwest of the centre. This locality is home to Federal School of Gymnastics that was founded in 1944 and now boasts a research centre and some of the finest sports facilities in Switzerland. This area is a splendid natural belvedere with fine views across to the

Bernese Oberland on clear days. It is also the start of an extensive walking area that leads up to nearby Mt Sujet (at 1382m) and eventually to the summit of Chasseral, at 1607m high.

The metre-gauge Biel Magglingen Bahn funicular is 1.68km long, and rises 438m from the base station at 437m (this is easily reached from the main railway station using Bus 11) up to Magglingen at 875m. Power is provided to two 3.80m diameter cable wheels; each of the two 38mm diameter cables is 1693m long and together they weigh 8140kg. The whole trip takes some 9-minutes, and runs at a 10-minute frequency at peak times. Passengers can also alight at the very basic intermediate station of Hohfluh. This is approximately one-third of the way up the climb and is located in the middle of a delightful wooded area. The funicular is operated by FUNIC a subsidiary of VB-TPB the local transport provider. The two cars are of a modern panoramic design and date from the refurbishment of the line by Doppelmayr in 2001.

A pleasant stroll along the hillside above Biel/Bienne from Magglingen/Macolin brings walkers to the top station of the town's other much shorter funicular that links the suburb of Leubringen/Evilard at 697m directly down to the commercial centre and old town. This was opened in 1898, is 903m long and rises 242m, with the intermediate station at Beaumont/Hohfluh only opening in 1905. It had been modernised over the years with two new cars arriving in 1960/1; in 1994/96 the track and the short tunnel were refurbished; and in 2003 the motor and transmission in the upper station building were replaced. In 2000 it was combined with the other funicular into the FUNIC organisation. However, it was beginning to show its age, and was not compliant with legislation for access for mobility-impaired people, so in 2009 a CHF5.5m total rebuild was undertaken. CHF460,000 was simply to replace the original rails. Work started on 11th May, and the funicular was closed from 6th July (when the old cars were removed) to 28th August, during which time a replacement bus service was introduced. Following the new cars being placed on the rails at the Beaumont station the grand reopening took place on 29th August. The new system is fully automatic, and operates every ten minutes throughout the day. Tickets are valid for all the Biel/Bienne transport system, and there is a special day ticket giving unlimited travel at CHF25 (CHF15 after 1 pm) for "Downhill" riders, who take their mountain bikes up on the funiculars, hurtle down the tracks through the forest at breakneck speed, and go up again on the funicular.



1. The bottom terminus of the Leubringerbahn. PHOTO: Gerhild Kautsch.
2. Crossing a steel viaduct on the Macolin route. PHOTO Ernst Leutwiler.
3. The intermediate stop at Hohfluh on the Macolin funicular. PHOTO: Ernst Leutwiler.
4. The car leaves the top stop of the Macolin line. PHOTO: Ernst Leutwiler.