

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2010)
Heft: 102

Artikel: Dampfbahn Aaretal
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854419>

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DAMPFBAHN AARETAL

George Hoekstra

All photos George Hoekstra



The miniature railway complex “Suisse Vapeur Parc” in Le Bouveret on the south-eastern end of Lake Geneva must be well known to many SRS members. It is a fantastic experience with all its miniature buildings and many bridges. In my opinion there is only one thing wrong with it, which is that it gets very crowded in summer and families with small children have trouble staying together and getting around it.

However, there are a few other miniature railway complexes in Switzerland including the “Dampfbahn Aaretal” which is situated in the grounds of the psychiatric clinic “PZM” in Münsingen, between Thun and Bern. As the clinic has many buildings in vast grounds, you do not need to worry about security as the problematic patients are confined well away in a secure area. The railway tracks run around a large and quite safe area occupied by reception, administration, maintenance, visitor’s cafeteria buildings, as well as around some of the parking areas. The total

running length is 832 m. - more than half a mile and it even has a short tunnel to excite the children. Anyway I would say that this is the most child-friendly miniature railway I have seen in Switzerland. There are some small railways in parks, which are also fine for children, but not large complexes like this one. I was there at the Annual Steam Festival last August which featured lots of visiting engines and a lot of extra people, but at no time did children or adults have to wait a long time when queuing up for a ride. For a circular trip on the train children pay CHF1, adults CHF2, which makes the cost a lot less than Bouveret, unless you really want to ride around a lot.

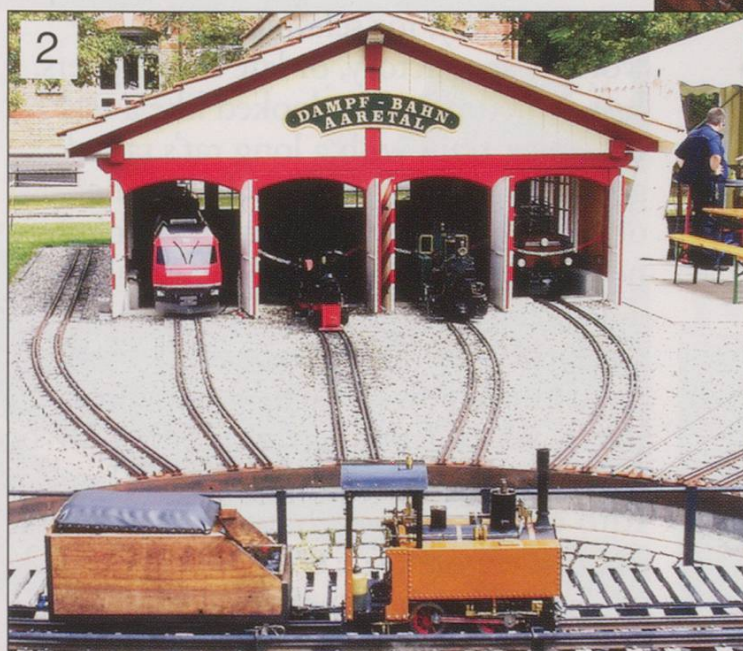
The members of the Club “Verein Dampfbahn Aaretal” laid all the trackwork that has proper ballast and sleepers and all the points and signals were also built by them. They operate and maintain the railway totally with their 25 volunteer members. It runs on every 2nd and 4th weekend from April

to October, from 13.30 until 17.30. On some operating days, there are no steam engines running, only electric traction – but see the website for details. The club has about 15 steam and electric locomotives and many different wagons at its disposal, either owned by the club or privately by its members. If needed, a special wheelchair-carrying wagon can be added to one of the trains. Although the PZM complex is only about a 15-20 minute walk from Münsingen SBB station, that is served by local “S-Bahn” trains between Bern and Thun, there is also a frequent local bus service - as the route numbers vary ask for “PZM”. As always in Switzerland your Swiss Pass or day tickets are valid on the bus as well. Have a look at the pictures and check their website: www.dampfbahn-aaretal.ch to get some idea - then you will have to go and visit them!



1. Part of the run is only a few hundred metres from the Bern - Thun main line. In the foreground a lady driver operates the RhB Mallet owned by the Club. In the background an SBB double-decker push-pull Intercity overtakes at speed!

2. There are models of steam, as well as electric outline engines. After all, we are in Switzerland, where almost all the railways run electric!



3. Another RhB steam loco comes out of the tunnel. This short ride in the almost dark provides a great thrill for the kids.

4. All engines need regular attention: filling up with oil or coal and water for the steamers and batteries for the electric outline ones. Regular lubrication is also very important. Every driver worth his salt carries his own kit full of bits and pieces!

5. The points and signals at the main station are worked from this ex SBB signal box. One side also serves as the ticket office.