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ESCAPE BY VORALPEN EXPRESS



Ron Smith made it to Germany to escape the February carnival

Re 456096-7 on a Voralpen Express at Luzern 08.31 21.2.12

All photos: Ron Smith

I like the Voralpen Express. The heavily re-engineered coaches in current use are very comfortable, the seats all line up with the large windows, and it is a relaxing way to see parts of Switzerland. My last trip started at 08.40 on Shrove Tuesday and the train was lightly loaded as we pulled out of Luzern station. I was using a one-day GA ticket to escape the noisy madness of Fastnacht, that was running up to its crescendo in the early morning of Ash Wednesday. I knew that I should not have stayed in Luzern during Carnival! The train started the trip as a local service stopping at the Verkehrshaus, Meggan Zentrum (what a grand title for the small town with its two stations), the modernised Küssnacht am Rigi station, and then into Arth Goldau for the hourly rush of several trains exchanging passengers. It then took-off across the main lines to climb steadily and spectacularly on a single track to traverse a land of deep snow and sparkling sunshine, passing small stations on the way. The stop at Biberbrugg for the connection to Einsiedeln is at the sharply curved and dark station, then off again, sweeping through Samstagern where the workshops are, with tantalising glimpses of Wagons Lits coaches, assorted locomotives and old railcars, to curve down towards the Zürichsee. On the way we stop at Wallerau. The station is deserted, no-one alights, no-one boards, so we quickly continue to enter Pfäffikon where suddenly the train fills up. Across the causeway to Rapperswil, another surge in activity, and a dash to Uznach for another exchange of passengers. From here we take the 8.6km Ricken Tunnel to burst out into a snow covered rural landscape, covered in a brittle freezing mist.

At Schachen track renewal work is going on and we slowly pass the work. Next comes Herisau, and we cross the town on a long high viaduct. Here is another depot with

interesting rolling stock visible, and also where the SOB meets the Appenzellerbahn, whose metre-gauge tracks are to one side of the main station. After this we cross one of the famous Sitter bridges and descend to St. Gallen, with its magnificent overall roof, where many passengers alight; then more at SG-St.Fiden where a SOB NPZ set is sitting with two Voralpen coaches in the middle. Wittenbach is next, with the SOB diesel shunter 936031-4 parked just across from the door of my coach, making an ideal photo, next to Draisine 236004-8. We have become a local train again with not many passengers and from now on the stations are request stops, but amazingly we stop at every one - usually for the benefit of just one passenger! Then we run into the vast fan of tracks at Romanshorn and journeys end.

A quick march through the underpass and alongside the dock takes one to the car ferry and a deserted customs post. A lady stands on the ramp festooned with bandoliers. She has two of those old-fashioned ticket racks, one each side, and another bandolier holds the cash bag and a machine. She is cold, and just nods me on board. I love these ferries. You cannot know if they are going backwards or forwards - nautical paranoia! There was one truck and one car. You climb up two levels to the cabin on the top deck with attractive seats and tables, and an enthusiastic crew serve meals snacks and drinks. The ship departed and navigated the narrow entrance to the harbour, then set off into the light haze and perfectly still Lake Constance. The journey takes 41 minutes, every hour, connecting with the *Voralpen Express*, local and Zürich trains. At Friedrichshafen three German customs men were standing at the top of the ramp and decided to check a

character with a large box strapped to his back, while the rest of us just walked off. The DB Hafen Bahnhof is well signed, two minutes walk away, and trains connect with the ferry. The ticket machine sold me a ticket for €1.90 as the two-car DMU rolled in for the 1km trip to Friedrichshafen Stadt station. Here a pair of DB Class 218 diesels were running round OBB coaches on a Salzburg to Münster train that comes in along the Bodensee from Lindau. There is a depot here for the Bodensee-Oberschwaben-Bahn, which has a small fleet of Stadler 'Regio-Shuttle' DMUs in a smart blue livery for its 42km local route to Aulendorf, while red DB DMUs of many varieties came and went. I had a very good lunch in the station buffet. The stained glass windows are very historic and interesting with railway scenes on them. However, it was strange in this day and age to have the majority of the dining room/bar, allocated to smokers, while just one lady and I occupied the small glassed-in non-smoking section.

I would recommend Friedrichshafen for a visit to anyone. Count Zeppelin came here to build airships, and the Airport is still operating. The spin-off industries generated by his 'Zeppelinwerk' includes MTU (engines - in UK HSTs), Dornier (aircraft), ZF (gearboxes, brake systems), Maybach (hydraulic engines). There are museums also, especially for Zeppelin. Of course, all this high tech engineering meant that it received frequent heavy bombing during the last war. The attractive town centre is therefore relatively modern, well laid out, spacious and clean, as are the lakeside promenades. I enjoyed the town so much that I missed my intended return ferry, and nearly missed the next one too! There is a fast catamaran to Konstanz, where it connects with the Zürich trains, and hence to Luzern. I intended checking whether my GA would work on it, but seeing it was modern, efficient and totally enclosed, I decided to catch the next car ferry back to Romanshorn, to experience the Voralpen Express again and travel in classic style.

Back at Romanshorn there was a lonely 2nd class coach at the buffer stops, but no Voralpen Express - it was late. Locals in the know were getting on the sole coach. Then our train arrived, the doors were opened, people descending even before the train stopped; it moved forward to couple to the single coach still with people getting off - no-one was hurt or injured of course. We boarded and were off, only around 4 minutes for the turn around. Passenger loadings for the return were a mirror of the outward journey and when we arrived back at Luzern I was alone in my coach. There is talk of reviewing the Voralpen Express route and certainly its outer ends were lightly loaded. New EMUs are apparently in the pipeline (the present coaches are rather old), so if the operation was cut back to the busy section, it would require much fewer train sets, reduce cost and make sense – but it would not be attractive. So, I recommend you try the Voralpen Express while you still can, but remember that there are no catering facilities on the train, just vending machines in one coach. This makes sense as most passengers use the train for short journeys, but it would be nice to have a meal in a dining car on this route. As it was, I bought a picnic at the supermarket next to Friedrichshafen-Hafen Bahnhof (where prices were cheaper than Switzerland – and the UK) and feasted on the

train. Back in Luzern Fastnacht was still in full swing, the station had hoards of bizarrely dressed folk and the noise from the many 'Guggelmusik' bands was deafening. All good fun, but I was glad to have escaped. 



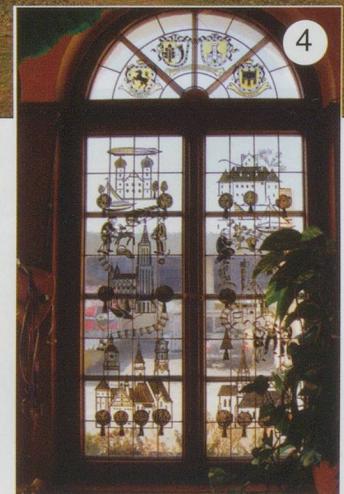
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1: Romanshorn at Romanshorn.

2: B-O-B Stadler Regio Shuttle No 65 at Friedrichshafen Stadt.

3: Friedrichshafen Stadt Bahnhof.

4: Bahnhof Buffet windows Friedrichshafen Stadt.