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LET'S WARN THE TRAVELLERS

Friday evening rush hour at Basel.

Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

SBB – A DIFFICULT TIME

Der Beobachter

SBB are always likely to be criticised, from left or right; staff or newspapers, commuters or tourist authorities. Recently, however, a broader-based discontent has been taking hold. This is always serious, because: a) it might be justified; and b) the dependence upon long term electoral goodwill, even of those who never travel, is in Switzerland always apparent. It started with an extraordinary series of accidents, some potentially serious, some more everyday, but all expensive and very public, causing delays and line blockages. Between December and mid-March thirteen major incidents on the network are being listed publicly: a derailment near Ecublens-Rue on the Palézieux –Payerne secondary line, following a landslide that led to a 9 day closure; a head-on collision in Neuhausen; two 'flanking' collisions in Lenzburg and at Zürich-Giesshübel (SZU); several derailments in shunting and trip working, and an embarrassing one with a pair of brand new double-deck coaches for the Genève S-Bahn, derailed in Bern Holligen on their delivery run, and stopping the lines to the west for the day. A very troubling one was in Schwerzenbach where a Zürich S-Bahn train was derailed, with pictures showing that a length of rail some 20m long appears to have broken in several places. That was alarming.


The one thing these incidents had in common was that they had little in common, except for three SPAD (signal passed at danger) incidents. At a news conference SBB were frank enough to say that they know the system is being fully exploited with few reserves of capacity; they are aware that personnel are subject to high demands for punctuality and productivity, but that this recent series of incidents was outside the downward long-term trend. SBB also noted that incidents such as suicides (on average 130/annum) are much more significant in causing delays and disruption, but are not usually publicised. One in January in the early hours at Schönenwerd, between Olten and Aarau, chose just about the most vulnerable part of the network to cause chaos. The

personal tragedy is one thing, but from Lausanne to Zürich, InterCity, commuter and freight stopped for most of the day. All you then hear as explanation is a discreet 'personal accident', but all-too-often the railway gets the blame for any delays. As in other countries vehicle drivers also risk their lives and ignore signals at grade crossings on a regular basis, and there were a number of these incidents (some fatal) this winter. The last incident - so far - with a Class Am 4/4 843 077 over-the-stops in Cossonay, ending up in a stream (and even reported in some UK newspapers) was not a disaster, but an expensive slip-up. The mood is sensitive, and it seems that every shunting mishap now gets headlines. However, a night of snow in early March had the St Gallen Police alone reporting nineteen injury-related road accidents in 2 hours, during the morning rush hour - but there were no questions in Parliament, or in the media, about these!

Other troubles abound too. There have been a spate of complaints about the combination of erratic ticket machines and less points-of-sale in stations, but more importantly about the recent strict enforcement of the (long established) policy that travellers must have a ticket on boarding. The penalties for not having one are drastically expensive (CHF100 penalty: a charge for expenses; plus the full-price fare). Most Swiss passengers have some sort of season ticket, GA, etc., but even with the widespread 'half-price' identity card, you still need a ticket. Buy a multi-journey ticket and it is quickly stamped. Rely on a ticket purchase at a station you are unfamiliar with and you can find yourself with problems if there is not a person to sell you one, or the machines are not working as is apparently often the case. Buying on-line by i-phone is popular, but doing this on the train, when at the last minute the station machine was out of action, is also not allowed. Even if you buy on-line before your train arrives the ticket is not valid until the payment has been cleared, so if the system is slow and this happens when you are already travelling you can still face a fine. The complaints are loud, but fortunately do not affect too many people, although SBB are losing the goodwill of many, as the draconian enforcement stories are spread by the press and those involved. Basically it is a political issue that has been badly handled by the operator.

The parliamentarians are reluctant to keep granting more and more subsidies when they perceive that the SBB is not collecting all the revenue due to it. The recent warning about ticket purchase problems at Zürich Airport in the March Swiss Express was however timely as the machines are often at the centre of a slightly puzzled multi-cultural crowd. Please think ahead for in Switzerland 'No Ticket' now means 'No Travel'.

The new trains for the Gotthard base tunnel are ordered, but the pattern of service is far from clear, especially around Luzern and the Zugersee, along with connections to Italy. On Sunday 17th March a press story broke that the fifty-nine new high-speed double-deck trains on order at Bombardier, and designed to be the next generation of InterCity 'People-Movers', are likely to be delayed more than the two-years already announced. Part of this is already due to SBB. Four months were lost to a redesign for cycles and baggage accommodation, and another eight months to a court ruling in favour of a public complaint, that the arrangements for handicapped access and accommodation were not adequate. The remaining 12-months were down to Bombardier. The supplier insists that the first trains will be delivered at the end of 2015, 2-years late, but that is not the same as in-fleet service, originally promised for December 2013. To SBB's aid comes the first passenger traffic down-turn (1% of passenger/km) since 2000. However, commuter demands still boom, reflecting demographic trends. The travel down-turn was in leisure, i.e. tourist travel, and is in fact much less than the worrying 6% loss of hotel nights in 2012.

There are positive things happening though. In an effort to understand more general delays on their system SBB Infrastruktur has introduced an analysis methodology. This has helped to separate out more precisely primary delays, such as excessive station time, technical reasons, etc., from secondary delays such as are caused by waiting connections, conflicting movements by delayed trains, and delays caused by following late-running trains. One result has been to better distinguish patterns and risks of delay and to permit better differentiated decisions. The process is complex, and computer-supported, with the whole operational timetable stored, even down to allowances for drivers' reaction time when given a clear signal, and tolerances for connections. 

SAFETY AND SECURITY

A few years ago we reported on an increasing incidence of on-train theft in Switzerland, an unwelcome trend that then appeared to diminish. At the time we warned readers that thefts at some busy stations in the south of Switzerland, such as Lausanne, were increasing. For example Visp became a 'hot spot' following the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel and the increasing use of this station by interchange travellers. It is understood that targeted action by the Cantonal Police has helped to reduce the problem here. However, over certain parts of the country things again seem to be getting worse, with reports of the theft of personal belongings on trains being significantly up on the year before. Canton Vaud has reported a 150% increase in 2012, Genève a 38% increase, and in Canton St Gallen the 100% increase

has prompted the Cantonal Police Chief to comment that public transport has become "a convenience store for the sticky-fingered". This comment applies especially to tourists, as many are less alert when travelling.

If you leave your suitcases in the luggage compartments behind closed doors at the end of each carriage, you are asking for trouble. Apparently travellers making their way to and from Zürich and Genève Airports are most at risk, as thieves scan luggage for tags indicating foreign travellers then alight with the stolen luggage at the city stop before the train moves off to the airport, or after it has left it. Switzerland Tourism notes that although Swiss railways have one of the lowest crime rates in the world they are not crime-free so foreign tourists are often amazed when crime happens. A leaked security report compiled last year for SBB shows there was an 80% increase in reported thefts (often involving tourists) on trains across the network in the first six months of 2012. The report blames criminal gangs from Eastern Europe and North Africa for this development and indicates that the company will be spending some CHF37m on increased security for passengers and staff in 2013.

The BLS notes that it too is affected by on-train theft with purses, mobile phones, handbags and unsupervised large luggage being the most commonly stolen items. The number of reported cases is rising, it says, with criminal bands roving the country. Regarding the risk to tourists having baggage stolen the BLS admits: "In the region of Interlaken, that risk is prevalent." Aside from the usual advice about never leaving luggage and valuables unattended, the railway operator warns people to be careful in large crowds, for example, when boarding a train. Travellers are advised to be careful when unknown people start talking to them on stations and in crowded trains, as this is often a form of distraction to enable their colleagues to pick the victims' pockets, or steal their bags.

Obviously constant vigilance is always necessary when travelling but there are some simple things that can be done to lessen the risk of being a victim. One is to travel light. Do you really need that large suitcase that has to travel out of sight in the rack at the end of the carriage? Cut down the amount you take away with you and simply travel with a carry-on bag that can go on a rack adjacent to your seat or, best of all, between the seat backs (and out of the way of the minibar!). If you must fill a suitcase then remove all forms of identification from it that may indicate that you are from outside the country, as proportionately the Swiss are far less likely to be victims of on-train theft than tourists. Always wear sensible clothing with zipped, or hidden, pockets to keep your money and documents on your person, not in a bag that could go missing. Gentlemen, do not hang coats, jackets with wallets, or massive camera bags on hooks where a passing thief can easily steal them. Ladies, do you really need that handbag? If you do find it necessary then secure it across your person and do not let it simply dangle on your shoulder as an easy target. Travelling light and wearing appropriate clothing as a part of taking sensible security precautions could actually make your holiday more enjoyable. The bottom line is that Switzerland is as safe as most other Northern European countries, but it is not crime-free as some imagine. 