

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2016)
Heft: 126

Artikel: Left hand, right hand... : ...Der Beobachter reports on the threatened, well-loved minibar service
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854033>

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Left Hand, Right Hand...

...Der Beobachter reports on the threatened, well-loved Minibar service.

Readers, and also the Swiss, value the reputation enjoyed by Swiss services and products. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing well... and we expect it to work. Behind the scenes energy and costs are readily committed in the knowledge that it must not only look good, but also be good. So it was with SBB's IC2000 double-deck cars, of which several hundred are in service, and also with the new



RABe 502 series of long-distance double-deck trains now being built (although three years late) by Bombardier. Double-deck means tight external clearances and optimal use of internal space, so a solution for the especially difficult problem of through access was to have the inter-car gangways at the upper level. Then - complicated as it was - to install service lifts to give access to the upper level to ensure Minibars, the well-known and well-loved, refreshment trolleys, could move through the train. With the new Class 502s this caused more problems; the structural constraints to achieve these ends required the pantographs to be positioned directly over the driving cabs, although this makes for poor aerodynamics at speed. The effort was however justified, for the Minibar service, as was made clear in a policy statement in 2014, was a valued part of the SBB passenger service. That was the left hand...

...then came the right hand, when we learned with some alarm from SBB in January 2016 that Minibars are uneconomic and unpractical, and are to be phased out by December 2017 - resulting in uproar in the press and other areas. The explanation comes in several parts; firstly habits change and turnover has fallen in recent years; it has also proved difficult to assure quality of service, as unreliable coffee machines with flat batteries were all too common; then frequent overcrowding at peak hours prevented movement of the trolley; finally the baggage of unthinking passengers placed in the walkways also compromised free

circulation. Also, many considered prices were high. Falling turnover is partly a vicious circle. Regulars, knowing that the Minibar might fail, or not turn up, increasingly buy their coffee and croissant before joining. The frequent strengthening of fixed-formation trains also has the effect of attaching a section with no passenger access to the main train for either the Minibar or to access the Buffet. Even the

popular Class 500 units run at busy times in pairs, but only one restaurant is staffed and unwitting travellers in the second unit are left high and dry. Being prepared and joining the train with pre-bought refreshments is then better than being thirsty or hungry.

However SBB has its plans. The Class 502 and the Class 503 (ex 610) will all have restaurant cars - fifty new ones in total, and experiments will be made with service at your seat in sections of the 1st. Class. Overall, SBB intends provision of on-train catering only in IC, ICN and EC train categories, but not in the more numerous IR trains; Minibars will be most missed. This too has its snags. Passengers with baggage do not, today, go to restaurant cars as we once did; baggage thieves would rejoice. Passengers with mobility problems can neither move freely, nor carry hot drinks at speed. We do not all travel 1st. Class, and perhaps most of all, with the Taktfahrplan, we take the first that comes - an IR or a 'better' train. The best advice is still then, to pack your rucksack in good time.

My view is not quite impartial as I love Minibars, and their usually cheerful (often immigrant) salespersons, with sixty-five of these losing their jobs. However, it would not be a surprise if a new variant appears, perhaps with a new concessionaire. Looking at the picture on P34 in SE 125, taken in Luzern in 1937, perhaps the best solution would be to re-introduce those wonderful platform trolleys of years gone by. 

Swiss Tip: Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

From Tim Mulhill

If you are staying in Bergün (or at Filisur) a must-see is the exhibition at Preda where the new Albula tunnel is being dug. There is a great display at a purpose-built visitor information centre, including a video showing the history of the tunnel; a viewing platform of the works; a chance to practice triggering explosions (!), and a free souvenir. Details have been given in previous editions of *Swiss Express*, but check opening times before you visit. 

