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The Rigibahnen – always upwards!

Ron Smith



BDhe2_4 No.11 (1949 ex.ARB) at summit. Photo: Jacob Jäger

The Rigibahnen, serving its eponymous mountain massive in Central Switzerland, has a long and successful history. It started as Europe's first rack railway and over the years it has developed many strands to its business.

Lifeline Services. The Rigi is car free, and has a resident all year round population. This means that the railway carries children to school each morning, home for lunch and back to school afterwards and home again in the evening. Every day it also carries milk down (in churns) from the many herds of cows, and the empty churns back up again. It carries the Post; food (including chilled and frozen); all the catering supplies for the hotels,

restaurants, bars and shops – including the essential beer; furniture; cattle, horses and sheep; plant and machinery for the seemingly continuous construction and repair work; all the aggregates, cement, timber, etc., and it also brings all the rubbish down the mountain as well.

Swiss Tourists. Swiss people account for 70% to 75% of the passengers on the Railway (see the article in September's *Swiss Express*). This is because the mountain is very accessible from Luzern, is only around 40-minutes from Zürich, and within two hours of most of the heavily populated areas of the country, making it very popular, enabling Swiss people to easily come at short notice if the weather forecast is good. This applies as much for fair weather walking as for winter sports. This is a stable and key market.

Foreign tourists. This is the segment that the Railway has worked hard to develop over the past few years and is now reaping the good results. The Swiss Travel Pass has been accepted on the Rigibahnen since December 2009, and the use of this is increasing rapidly, especially with Chinese and Asian customers. To encourage the tourists of all nationalities, the Rigibahnen has developed its catering offer.

Rigi Pic. This little café and shop was opened at the summit in September 2001. This was needed as the Kulm hotel is not always open, and sometimes guests Loading supplies at Vitznau.

Photo: Jacob Jäger



can be up there in inclement conditions. This café has become totally inadequate as numbers of tourists increase, and as it had been operated as a concession by a local company, development was out of the control of the railway. In October 2016 the lease ends and the Rigi bahnen will take it back in-house. The present building, and adjacent station building look rather like a concrete bunker – necessary for the weather – but not attractive. This will all be rebuilt in the next couple of years with a substantially enlarged catering and shop outlet. Incidentally, during summer 2016 the Kulm Hotel will be celebrating 200 years since it first opened, and there will be 6 to 8 weeks of events, designed to bring more guests to the Railway.

Rigi Event Marquee. Although it looks like a huge tent, it is a rigid building. This is at Rigi Staffel where the lines from Vitznau and Arth Goldau meet and continue together to the summit. This is used for product launches, conferences, weddings, company training sessions and is proving very useful for revenue, as well as attracting more customers to the railway as they access the facility.

Bahnhöfli. This is the large chalet type building between the Event Marquee and the railway station at Staffel. It provides self-service café-style catering and from personal experience is always very busy.

Berggnuss. This is the latest venture, and needs a little explanation. First of all, the name is just about unpronounceable to English or French speakers. This is deliberate. Going back to the second strand of the



Cows in Transit. They are obviously used to the ride.

Photo: Ron Smith



Bahnhöfli at Rigi Staffel.

Photo: Ron Smith

business, the Swiss would not want to go to a mountain that is full of McDonalds, or has 'attractions' similar to a fair ground. The catering must reflect typical Swiss food, which apart from appealing to the national guests, is a plus for foreign visitors as well. Also, the name of this, plus that of the Bahnhöfli is not just in German, but in the strong dialect of the local Schweizerdeutsch. The building here was a hotel that struggled. Despite being available for sale, no local people were interested so the Rigi bahnen acquired it in March 2016. The rooms had been let out as twenty-four holiday apartments and still will be. The ground floor has three restaurants with a total of 220 seats. Starting in June 2016, the two main dining rooms seating 160, plus the large sun terrace seating 150, will be serving full meals, with local produce and Swiss menus. There are obvious synergies in having the three catering outlets geographically close to each other.

Rigi Berggnuss.

Photo: Ron Smith





Bhe2/4 No.4 (ex.VRB 1954) descending to Kaltbad.

Photo: Ron Smith

Corporate Vision. The Rigibahnen has stated that it intends to move from being a railway company to being an integrated tourism business. The present CEO, Herr. Peter Pfenniger, has very successfully steered the Railway to its present profitable and dynamic position since he joined the company in 1987. He is shortly to retire with his replacement being Herr. Stefan Otz, a tourism professional from a 13-year career at Interlaken Tourism, who will take over from 1st September 2016. His task will include developing the Railway as a tourism business. This will have to be very carefully managed, so that it does not detract from the natural beauty that brings the vital Swiss core visitors and business guests, and that also attracts foreign tourists. As a railway it also needs to continue its successful focus on engineering.

Railway Operations. The Rigibahnen operates quite a collection of equipment. There are the two steam locos from the 1920s, which are still key elements of the equipment and operated again this year. Then there are the railcars from the 1930s that still perform front-line services, but will need to be replaced at some time in the near future. The newest railcars are thirty years old whilst the "Old Timer" coaches are also very popular. Then there is an eclectic collection of goods wagons, snowploughs and a snow blower. New trains are being considered, but they will have to be very

special, if not unique. The propulsion unit/locomotive will have to propel not just modern coaches, but all the existing historic vehicles and this will be a challenge to successfully achieve. However, this is the sort of unique challenge that the railway has proved it can overcome. For example, the organisation has successfully designed and developed a new point for the Riggensbach system – a world first. These points are in daily use at the new layout at Kaltbad. The railway's energy costs are significant, and it is progressing with a regenerative braking project, as mountain railways are obviously ideal for this with nearly half the running

being downhill. Although much of the older rolling stock is not capable of conversion it is considered that some modifications can be easily undertaken and these will still help the electricity costs.

Cable-car operations. The Rigibahnen operates several cable-car routes – the main one is from Weggis to Rigi Kaltbad operated with two large gondola cars, but the support pylons need renewal, a serious investment. The operation is normally suspended each April for major maintenance and annual testing. The present system has a capacity of 75 people/car, standing only, that equates to 650 people/hour. To replace this with a similar system would be the cheapest option at approx. CHF17m but this would not enhance the capacity. The large cars could be replaced with a continuous operation of twenty smaller ones, each with a capacity of 10 people seated. This would increase capacity to around 800 people/hour, and with an



Ta2/2 No.1 (ex.VRB 1982) battery-electric shunts at Vitznau.

Photo: Jacob Jäger

additional ten smaller cars the capacity would be 1200 people per hour. This is a more flexible option, and also the two stations would be rebuilt to avoid the use of lifts and give better access for mobility-impaired people. This is a long-term decision, with the new system expected to operate for 50 years, so care is being taken to ensure that the best option is chosen. However, whichever option is chosen it looks like the current dining-in-the-car option will disappear. This offer of enjoying an evening meal in the cars is very popular, and is booked up right throughout the summer season. As there is no heating in the cars it is not available in the winter. Diners set off gently from Weggis and the first courses are served as you watch the sun setting. At Rigi Kaltbad there is a "comfort break" (no facilities in the gondola of course) before slowly descending while the rest of your meal is served. A wonderful experience, which is on my "must do" list! There will, however, be some surprising new catering attraction in the new cars – to be revealed later. The rebuild is expected to take place from 2018 for a year or so. The cable car route Scheidegg down to Krebel will be rebuilt in the summer of 2017 and will subsequently be operated by the Rigibahnen, but not owned by them.


Commercial operations. 2015 was another record year for the Rigibahnen with some 785,000 passengers being carried, and in the 12 months up to end-July 2016 they reached the magic 1m passengers. The busiest single day was in July when 8,000 people travelled to and from the Swiss Wrestling Championships at Staffel. Good weather brought an increase in the core Swiss passenger market, although early-2016 had seen a slight fall in the numbers of Asian visitors. The acceptance of the Swiss Travel Pass has greatly helped too, and in the 5 years since it was introduced on the Rigi system it has been used by an increasing number of passengers. The Rigi and Rigibahnen are the only mountain and railway that are open to Swiss Pass holders 365 days a year. The increases in passengers can have unexpected consequences. For example, it is not unusual to have two bus loads of tourists arrive at Vitznau, say from Milan, and of course many need to use the toilet before boarding the train. The toilets in the 1913 ship-station building cannot cope with this influx, and this can result in unacceptable delays to the train setting off up the mountain. Temporary toilets have been installed and a



Unusual warning sign at Staffel.

Photo: Ron Smith

long-term solution is being worked on. Running the whole mixture of services, on a mountain with harsh weather, and constant wear and tear on stock, track and infrastructure, will certainly keep the 173 employees of the Rigibahnen busy. The strong engineering team keep it all running to the hourly timetable, 365 days per year. Developing the catering side will keep visitors on the mountain for longer, and who knows? - maybe the Rigibahnen will branch into hotels later; but keeping the trains and cable cars running will remain the focus of attention, while developing as a tourist business will have to be carefully managed, but is certainly a way to generate your own passengers.

As ever, the Rigibahnen is a fascinating railway, and more information is available at www.rigi.ch. 

Bhe2/4 No.4 in the mirror at the foot crossing by Staffelhohe.

Photo: Ron Smith



ABeh 2/6 7505

54 t	8 / 5 t
12 / 94 pl.	65 pl.

78 / 93 t	57 kN
AC	AD / CR

← 39 m →

60 km/h	MVR
20 km/h	01.12.2016 CHER

Don't say that *Swiss Express* is not up to date. Gordon Bannister spotted this ABeh 2/6 7505 sitting at

Chernex, which besides the number on it, it had no other vinyl's fitted as yet, but the build date was 01-12-2016!! 