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Funicular Railways in Biel/Bienne

Richard Green



Leubringenbahn. A descending car approaches Beaumont station, Jun-11.

Photos: Richard Green

Biel/Bienne, as its name implies, is officially bilingual, German/French. Both languages are used in the city and throughout much of the surrounding area, so public transport is provided by the Verkehrsbetriebe Biel (VB)/ Les Transports publics bernois (Tpb). Its website www.vb-tpb.ch opens in German but a single click changes it to the French version but unfortunately there is no direct English version. The city has two funiculars, each of which has dual names, Magglingenbahn/Funi Macolin and Leubringenbahn/Funi Evillard, as do their associated bus stops at the base stations.

Magglingenbahn/Funi Macolin

This lengthy funicular opened in 1887 linking the city with the village of Magglingen/Macolin (now the home of the National Sports Centre), situated more than 400m above on a ledge of the Jura Massive. The funicular was initially operated by water ballast, the tanks for which were enlarged in 1923. The system was electrified and provided with new cars in 1954, finally further renewed in 2001. The line rises at a maximum gradient of 32% from an altitude of 437m up to 875m in its length of 1,683m. There is an intermediate station, Hohfluh, just below the crossing point. The lower section of each car is a panoramic compartment with 12 seats all facing downhill, giving passengers a commanding view over the city and beyond. Total capacity is 120. The top compartment is reserved for the conductor. Car No.1 is white at its lower end and red above whilst on Car No.2 the colours are reversed. Maximum speed is 6 m/s, giving a transit time of about 10-minutes.

There is a daily 15-minute interval service, relaxing to

every 30 minutes in the evenings after 20.00. Alternate services, plus those in the evening, do not serve Hohfluh. The funicular is within Zones 300, 301 and 315 of the Libero ticketing area, centred on Bern. The 3-zone fare is CHF7.00, with tickets valid for 90 minutes. The Swiss Travel Pass is fully honoured. The base station is a 10-15-minute walk from the SBB/CFF station and served at 15-minute intervals by bus No.11 from the station forecourt. This runs alternately in the direction of Rebenweg/Chemin des Vignes, or only as far as the valley station, four stops and about 3 minutes distant.

Leubringenbahn/Funi Evillard

This opened in 1898 to link the city with the settlement of Leubringen/Evilard (now with a population of some 2,300) up in the Jura foothills. The roofed station of Beaumont was added at the crossover in 1905. The cars were replaced in 1909, increasing capacity from 28 to 50, and again in 1960, when automation took place with a speed increase to 5m/s. The most recent modernisation was carried out by Garaventa during a four month closure in 2009. The original rails were replaced, the stations were made suitable for mobility-impaired passengers and the almost 50-yearold cars replaced by a panoramic design with accommodation for 80. The line climbs with an average gradient of 27% from 455m to 697m, a rise of 242 m over a distance of 933m, with a transit time of about 7 minutes. The first third of the line is in a tunnel and there is another tunnel just before the top station. A 10-minute interval service is provided on Mon. to Fri. with a 15-min service after 20:00 and at weekends. The funicular is within Zones 300 and 301 of the Libero ticketing area. The 2 zone fare is CHF4.60, tickets being valid for 60 minutes.

The Swiss Travel Pass is fully honoured. Access is by bus No 5 or 6, direction Spitalzentrum/Centre hospitalier, or bus No 8, direction Fuchsenried, which all run from the same stop just across the road from the station. The journey of five stops to Leubringenbahn/Funi Evilard takes 6 minutes. Buses on each line run every 15 minutes Mon. – Sat. and every 30 minutes on Sundays so waiting times are minimal.

A round trip

The adventurous may be interested in the possibility of a round trip. On Mondays-Fridays, except national holidays, an irregular bus service links the upper stations of the two funiculars, running as Line 79. This is provided primarily for the schools and sports centre. An up, across and down journey in the company of a multitude of bilingual students could be a memorable experience. Alternatively it is a pleasant walk along the ridge of the Jura.

Vinifuni Ligerz–Prêles

This is the revised name of the former Tessenberg Bahn following its 2003 merger with Aare Seeland mobil (ASm). The funicular, dating from 1912, is situated on the northern shore of the Bielersee, connecting the German-speaking village of Ligerz (Gléresse in French) with French-speaking Prêles, situated nearly 400m above. The entire infrastructure was renewed by Garaventa in 2004, when it was converted, like the La Coudre - Chaumont funicular in Neuchâtel, to a winched rather than counterbalanced system. The additional width of the trackbed at the site of the former passing loop and the off-centre haulage cable serve as reminders of earlier times.

The Vinifuni follows an S-shaped course through attractive vineyards, woods and meadows. The single car accommodates 50 passengers. The strong orange tint applied to all the glazing does little to enhance the otherwise splendid views across the Bielersee. The eye adjusts fairly quickly but photographs taken from within the car require considerable digital post-processing. There are intermediate request stops at Pilgerweg (serving a church, popular for weddings) and at Festi/Château the starting point of several walks. The metre-gauge line is 1,198m long, climbing from 437m to 820m at gradients between 23% and 40%. The ascent is scheduled to take 6 minutes, while 5 minutes is allowed for the descent. A particular feature of the Vinifuni is the use of regenerative braking during the descent. Until recently there was a meter in the ticket office at Prêles displaying the total amount of energy used during ascents and regenerated during descents since the 2004 reconfiguration. The figures combined to show a highly commendable recovery rate of just over 59%.

A basic hourly service is provided, with ascending and descending journeys making good connections at Ligerz with Regio trains running both ways between Biel/Bienne and Neuchâtel on the scenic lakeside line. This line is single track for a distance of just over 2km through Ligerz, which is something of a challenge to timekeeping, particularly for the TOP: Vinifuni. The attractive upper station at Prêles, Feb-2011. MIDDLE: Vinifuni. The energy meter at Prêles, no longer in situ, Feb-2011. BOTTOM: Vinifuni. The orange glazing of the single car is clearly visible, June-2011.

regular ICNs that are scheduled to run through non-stop. In the summer months the frequency of the Vinifuni increases to half-hourly for much of the day, but the additional transits do not benefit from direct Regio connections. A particularly attractive alternative is a 40 minute cruise on the Bielersee to/from Biel/Bienne, available several times daily in summer but only on Sundays in winter. The landing stage at Ligerz is close to both stations. Sailing times vary considerably with day and season so check at www.bielersee.ch. The ASm web site at www.asmobil.ch has several pages on the Vinifuni but provides little technical information. Vinifuni is within Zones 314 and 315 of the Libero ticketing network, centred on Bern. The 2 zone fare is CHF4.60, with tickets valid for 60 min. The Swiss Travel Pass is fully honoured, as it is on all connecting rail and shipping services. 

