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THE FASTEST WAY TO WILLIAM TELL

by Sholto Thomas



VBL tri-axle Volvo 9700 No. 801 (LU 15730) at Luzern on 30 June 2018.

All photos: Sholto Thomas

“The Fastest Way to William Tell”: this was the front-page headline, in German of course, on a marketing newspaper of the Verkehrsbetriebe Luzern (VBL), that appeared in November 2015. Inside was an article about the ‘*Tellbus*’, an operation I’d found to be a bit of an enigma.

VBL is the public transport operator in Luzern and I’d first spotted, several years before 2015, a well-appointed double-deck Setra coach at the bus station in front of the Bahnhof. I assumed it was on a rail-replacement job. But the next time it was sitting there, I noticed a ticket machine by the driver, and a bus stop pole with a timetable board marked ‘*Tellbus*’. The coach had a small board behind the windscreen with the SBB logo, no sign of the PostAuto yellow or post-horn marking, and it was going to Altdorf. Strange.

Investigation of the SBB journey search engine revealed nothing so the following holiday I approached the driver and asked if my Swiss Pass was valid. It was, so I boarded to see where it went. More or less non-stop to Altdorf town centre

via the Gotthard-bound A2 motorway was the answer. And in due course back home I came across a page buried deep in the SBB website under sbb-as-business-partner/federal-government-canton, giving a short history of the service and, at last, its full timetable.

The service has only two intermediate stops, Luzern Eichhof (just before the motorway junction is reached), and Flüelen Eggberge Talstation, which is a Park and Ride stop on the Flüelen–Altdorf main road, by the car park at the bottom of the Eggberge cablecar. The terminus is in the middle of Altdorf, noted for its statue of William Tell, hence the route branding. Local passengers are not carried at either end of the route. The single fare for 2019 is CHF22.00, compared with CHF21.80 by train and rail season tickets are valid for travel on the service.

Initially operating at weekday peak-hours only, the route commenced in 2006 and has been steadily improved since, initial passenger numbers doubling by 2010. Some journeys soon had to have double-deck coaches put on, and extra journeys have been added virtually every year, so that now there are thirteen journeys each way Mondays to Fridays, three on Saturdays and two on Sundays. This year’s enhancement has been a Sunday morning round trip.

At around 42 minutes running time, this coach service is a good bit quicker than the train and the latter’s local bus connection to the centre of Altdorf, which take at least 68 minutes. The 9km Seelisberg Tunnel on the



Auto AG Uri Setra S 431 DT registration UR 9142 at the original stop outside Bahnhof Luzern on 17 June 2015.

motorway, which runs on the south side of the Vierwaldstättersee, was completed in 1980 and I can just imagine the increasing discontent in Canton Uri at the length of time the train took to get to Luzern, compared to using a car via the motorway, especially given the lower train frequency in those days and some journeys needing a change at Arth-Goldau. In addition, Altdorf Bahnhof is around a kilometre from the village centre, requiring a local bus connection.

I haven't seen a timetable leaflet for this route for a few years now, and the on-line offerings are variable. The best is that of Auto AG Uri's website, where the timetable is clearly split into Monday to Friday, Saturday and Sunday journeys. In what looks like a pdf of a leaflet (somewhat of a secret under-the-counter job), VBL shows the journey columns coloured according to which days they operate and it is rather confusing. The SBB Fahrplanfelder (Service 60.093) has an almost-incomprehensible timetable in classic operations-led layout with codes above every journey, including the rare B-in-a-circle (daily except Saturdays).

While the passenger flows are almost entirely from the Altdorf end, operation is shared by the local Auto AG Uri company and VBL. Four vehicles are needed, two from each operator, and both provide a double-decker for the busiest runs. According to Wikipedia, two extra vehicles are needed on the 0705 departure from Altdorf. The concession for the route has now passed from SBB to Auto AG Uri.

Despite the public announcements and occasional leaflet in the past, I still get the impression that this is a "sulky service". Had a branch railway been reopened, would there have been this rather strange drip-feeding of resource? I don't think so. A reintroduced train service is usually hourly or two-hourly from the outset. The 'Tellbus' journeys are actually all numbered with gaps to allow for an all-day half-hourly frequency. The route also bypasses the community of Beekenried, which has no public transport facility towards Flüelen and the Gotthard rail line. Even if every other journey took five minutes to divert off the motorway, Beekenried would be better served from the Luzern direction, the journey from which requires a change from Zentralbahn train to the Postbus at Stans.

The news in Swiss Express 139 that Altdorf station will be closed in 2020 for rebuilding, and that the "Tellbus" will then be calling at the rebuilt station, may hint that there will be a more frequent service. It may also then be difficult to revert to the current offering when the trains resume. I'll be watching with interest. 



TOP: Auto AG Uri Setra S 315 GT No. 49 registration UR 9000 at the current departure point for the Tellbus at Bahnhof Luzern, stand W, located near to the Museum of Art, on 21 June 2019.
 MIDDLE: VBL Setra S 431 DT No. 803 (LU 15091) on the 'Tellbus' service on 21 June 2019.
 BOTTOM: VBL twin-axle Volvo 9700 No. 802 (LU 15029) at Bahnhof Luzern on 1 July 2013.