

And finally ... the Voralpen Express

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AND FINALLY... THE VORALPEN EXPRESS

Keith Scotland



ALL PHOTOS: Keith Scotland

The Voralpen Express links Luzern and the Vierwaldstättersee with the Zürichsee and Bodensee. The hourly train departs from Luzern at 07.40 through to 19.40, and from Romanshorn at 06.34 through to 18.34. From Luzern the services pass the Verkehrshaus transport museum then Küsnacht am Rigi (for connections by bus to Weggis and Vitznau), Arth-Goldau (connections in all directions), Biberbrugg (change for Einsiedeln and its spectacular monastery), Wollerau, Pfaffikon (SZ), and Rapperswil on the Zürichsee for more connections. It continues via Schmerikon, Uznach (connections for Glarus), Wattwil, Degersheim, Herisau and St. Gallen (for the Appenzellerbahn) then finally Romanshorn on the Bodensee with boat connections across to Friedrichshafen, Germany.

The service was started in 1991 with equal funding from the Südostbahn (SOB) the Bodensee Toggenbergbahn (BT) and the SBB. In 2002 the SOB and BT merged to become just the SOB, and today they own two-thirds of the service. The coaches and driving trailer of each train are heavily rebuilt and superbly modernised with air conditioning units on the roof. In addition to the two standard Re 4/4 IIs provided by the SBB for the service the locomotives used are the four experimental Re4/4 IVs that the SOB took over from the SBB. These locos were not followed up with

series orders, suffer rather high maintenance costs because of their uniqueness and appear in a great variety of advertising liveries that seem to change frequently. If you wish to ride behind these unique locomotives and the eight rakes of special rolling stock do so soon as they are all currently up for sale. The SOB wishes to standardise its fleet and this includes a new generation of EMUs for this service.

The "Express" is not fast as it operates on a mostly single track sinuous route with some severe gradients, which limit the train to five coaches. Its usefulness is clear from the number of passengers who join and alight at the many stops - not many go the whole way - which is one reason why there is no dining car, catering being by mini bar or self-service machine in the bar car. The scenery en-route is mostly rural although pleasant and interesting.

There is a very steep gradient on the line that heads north out of Arth-Goldau to Biberbrugg. As most trains do not exceed the standard 5-car sets and freight is almost non-existent the need to provide banking assistance is quite rare. However, in July 2008 the Swiss Military were running exercises in the area and over one weekend almost all the Voralpen Expresses had three old green coaches added to their consist and a banking engine was stationed at Arth-Goldau to assist on the grade.