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Autor: Smith, Ron

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RIGIBAHNEN 2012



No. 2 waits whilst No18 arrives with freight train at Vitznau.

All photos: Ron Smith

Ron Smith continues his look at developments on the Rigi

The Rigibahnen (RB) has to be all things to all people. Apart from operating intensive tourist services, including specialised winter sports shuttles that vary in intensity depending on the weather, it also provides lifeline services for all the people who live and work on the car-free mountain. It carries: schoolchildren (including home trips for the lunch break); milk churns; the post; food; furniture; fuel; construction materials; refuse; just about everything. A lot of improvement work has to be carried out in 2012, and more in the near future if finance can be found, so following on from the article in SE 109 here is a summary of schemes underway and planned.

As previously highlighted the present infrastructure at Kaltbad is inadequate and needs reconstruction. Re-programmed from 2011 to May 2013 this project has now been brought forward (preliminary work started this February), with the railway being closed here from the 20th August for 6 weeks, the first time in its history that this has occurred in the peak summer season. Total closure will allow demolition and construction to be carried out quickly during the short summer weather window. The closure has many implications. Local lifeline services including goods and schoolchildren, will shuttle between Vitznau and Romiti

Felsentor. At Kaltbad a temporary booking office will be established in the closed shop on the ground floor of the Hotel Alpina and a temporary ground frame installed. On completion of the works this will be removed as all signalling here will be automatic. During the works customers will be encouraged to use the RB's cable car from Weggis to Kaltbad with a shuttle bus to its base station from Weggis landing stage, plus a half-hourly service from Vitznau. Enhanced train services between Arth-Goldau and Rigi Kulm are expected to carry 70% of the passenger traffic. A freight service will still run from Vitznau to Kaltbad, whilst hotel supplies for Staffel and Kulm will run from Goldau. The scale of the 2012 freight operations cannot be underestimated. From the Autumn 2010 start of construction of the big new spa resort at Kaltbad to the end of 2011, some 15,700t of cement, gravel, bricks, machines, fuel for the machines, crane parts, and so on, were transported from Vitznau to Kaltbad. A normal trainload is 20t resulting in some 780 extra trains, including one carrying a 29t construction machine. Between 2012 and 2013 up to 200,000 tonnes - or 10,000 extra trains - could be operated, hence there is no capacity or personnel to operate steam specials this summer.

Arth-Goldau is in a hiatus. The plan was that due to restricted clearances on the main line, the life-expired bridge station over the SBB tracks would be removed, with RB trains curving down to a new facility where SBB tracks run parallel to the main line. The existing passenger underpass continues



across to the road where the new RB station would be, so this would seem an ideal option. However in recent months the SBB have indicated that traffic levels are so high and growing that they cannot spare these tracks. The SBB are also now claiming that clearances under the RB station are not a problem, so they will not contribute to the cost of its removal and replacement (no longer an option due to its recent classification as a historic monument) or refurbishing it. RB had already started on construction of the planned new platforms and this situation will remain until someone finances the bridge renewal. In the interim just across the road from the RB depot, a temporary station has been established that requires passengers to walk along the road when interchanging. Whatever the future holds, the track layout here had to be revised and this involved the installation in March of two more of the unique rack points, developed by the company that have proven highly efficient, cost effective and reliable.

The RB had a successful 2011 with passenger numbers 3% up at 645,000, although only time will tell if the 2012 closure will have an impact on performance. Interestingly, 85% of the passengers are Swiss. This is where the locals go so the Rigi must be special. To maintain this growth RB needs to invest in a vital programme of works and to help fund these the company is investigating raising money from developing, with project partners, their real estate. At Vitznau preliminary works have commenced on a two year project to build apartments over the depot and car park. Some 50 units will be constructed retailing at CHF 2m each including three-luxury villas (costing up to CHF7m) commanding lake views. There are similar development plans for Goldau; the car park by the A5 motorway could see


TOP: No 18 with a Guterzug, sets off back down to Vitznau from Kaltbad.

MIDDLE: A Rigi transporter wagon at Arth Goldau.

BOTTOM: TA 22 shunts a low loader wagon carrying an excavator onto the turntable at Vitznau.



apartments above it; the depot and workshop could be completely rebuilt incorporating more residential units. The car park at the Weggis cable car station is also earmarked for development. This income is badly needed to pay for very expensive, but necessary, works. Along with upgrading the pylons of the cable car the entire catenary (masts, contact wire, etc.) from Kaltbad to Rigi Kulm, which dates from 1937, must be renewed.

Soaring energy costs in recent years have hit the railway. RB believes that they could manage these better if they had their own rectifier to produce 15KV ac, and this is being investigated. With 50% of the running being downhill, regenerative braking would obviously be a great help, but the majority of the existing stock could not be economically converted to deliver this. New trains are desirable especially as units 1 – 4 will probably need to be replaced through not conforming to impending enhanced safety standards. It is considered that new equipment would need to be in the form of a locomotive capable of one man operation, radio controlled for shunting, and able to propel vintage 'old-timer' coaches, modern coaches, plus heavier freight trains. Combining the "flights" of trains that run up and down in busy periods by using a powerful locomotive with only one crew (together with regenerative braking), would reduce costs – but this would require considerable investment. The RB is a very busy, dynamic railway doing its best to serve the area, and also develop tourism that has spin-offs and a multiplier effect in the local economy. It employs 60 full-time and 60 part-time staff, reflecting the seasonal peaks, so it is also a significant employer in the communities it serves. It has much to do and is using its initiative to raise funds to invest for the future. 

TOP: A temporary booking office will be established in the closed shop on the ground floor of the Hotel Alpina at Kaltbad.

MIDDLE & BOTTOM: Unloading the essentials at Kaltbad.

