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Funicular Railways in Neuchâtel

Richard Green



La Coudre Lower station, a substantial building.

Photos: Richard Green

The French-speaking city of Neuchâtel has three diverse funiculars that are well integrated into the extensive public transport system of buses, trolleybuses, and the one surviving tram line. The Swiss Travel Pass is fully honoured and is particularly convenient and economical when making a series of short moves, as is likely when sampling the funiculars. Alternatively, the Onde Verte (Green Wave) 24 hour, 2-zone ticket, covering Zones 10 and 11, is available for CHF12.60. This offers exceptional value and is equally convenient. Armed with this ticket, all three funiculars can be visited, along with the tram out to Boudry. All interconnecting bus and trolleybus services are covered, as are trips to places that other tourists seldom reach. If individual tickets are to be purchased it is often cheaper to buy for the whole journey – bus plus funicular – rather than pay two separate fares. However, such tickets are time limited – 30 or 60 min – so some careful planning is called for.

Ecluse - Plan

This facility, the first funicular in the canton of Neuchâtel, opened in 1890 as a water ballast system, giving access to the elevated Plan district from the city centre at Ecluse. It was electrified in 1907 and became largely automatic as early as 1922. There have been several further upgrades, the most recent in 2009. Although of modest length at 391m, the line features intermediate request stops at Boine and Côte, as well as three tunnels. It has the familiar configuration of metre-gauge track with passing loop. The line rises from 441m at Ecluse to 551m at Plan, a climb of 110m, with a maximum gradient of 38%. Each car can carry 9 seated and 30 standing passengers.

A maximum speed of 4 m/s gives a transit time of about 4 minutes, permitting an intensive 5-minute interval peak-hour service – 10-minute intervals at other times. As is customary with automated systems, all four stations are equipped with platform doors that can prove restrictive, if photography is the purpose of the visit. The line is operated by Transports Publics Neuchâtelois now known as transN who timetable it as Line112. The base station at Ecluse is two stops north of the Place Pury interchange on trolleybus Line101, direction Cormondrèche. It has to be acknowledged that Ecluse - Plan is not the most awe-inspiring of funiculars, but it is an interesting example of a nineteenth century installation that has been continually updated. A one-way journey is covered by an Onde Verte 'Court Parcours' (short journey) ticket costing CHF2.30. A 1-2 zone ticket costing CHF4.20 permits a return trip to be made, providing it is completed within the 60-minuteS of validity. If time is spent at the top a further ticket will be required for the descent.

La Coudre - Chaumont

This impressive funicular was built by Von Roll in 1910 to link Chaumont, a mountain village at an altitude of 1,087m, with La Coudre, 517m, now a north-easterly suburb of Neuchâtel. The metre gauge line, electrified from the outset, is an impressive 2,091 m long, with a maximum gradient of 46%. The facility has traditionally used multi-coloured cars. The originals were replaced during a general renovation in 1995, but the characteristic graffiti-style livery was retained. In 2007 one car was withdrawn and scrapped, and the installation converted to operate as a non-counterbalanced winched single-car system,

in effect an inclined lift. This is a surprising decision for an installation of this length. As can be imagined, a drum of considerable proportions is required to accommodate more than 2km of 32 mm diameter steel cable. There is no evidence that the descending car generates electricity, as is the case with some other single-car systems such as the nearby Vinifuni at Ligerz. The car has capacity for 65 passengers and travels at 4 m/s, giving a transit time of 9 minutes for the 570m altitude change. The funicular is timetabled by transN as Line111. Departures are hourly at xx.45 up and xx.00 down, with some additional Mon-Fri peak hour services at xx.15 up and xx.30 down. The line runs in Onde Verte Zones 10 and 11. If no other ticket is held, a 1-2 zone ticket costs CHF4.20 but is valid for only 60 minutes. If time is spent at the top a further ticket will be required for the descent and return to the city centre, making the 24-hour ticket look particularly attractive.

From Chaumont there is an impressive view of Neuchâtel and the lake, which is enhanced by climbing the 56 steps of the observation tower, for which there is a nominal charge of CHF1. The location is the starting point of many mountain walks including Le Sentier du Temp, or 'Time Trail', a path that leads back down to Neuchâtel. This exhibits a series of carvings illustrating the evolution of life on Earth since the birth of the solar system. Each metre of the 4.5 km route represents a million years. Palaeontologists will not be surprised to find that the first carving, that of a stromatolite, does not appear until the 1.5 km mark. Then there is an even longer gap before they start to arrive more frequently. La Coudre can be reached from Neuchâtel by trolleybus on Line107, direction Hauterive. This is a 7-stop, 6-minute journey from the unimposing northern exit of the main station – through the subway towards Platform 7 and then up the ramp to the left. This stop is sometimes known as Bl. Cendrars, but it does little to honour the influential Swiss-born poet and novelist. Buses run every 10 minutes Mon-Sat, and at 20-minute intervals on Sundays.

Fun'ambule

Fun'ambule is Neuchâtel's newest funicular, built by Garaventa and only opening in 2001. It is owned by the city but operated by transN as Line110. There is something of a play on words in the name, with funambule being French for 'tightrope walker'. The funicular runs entirely in a tunnel, linking the main station to the Université situated in the lower part of the city. The difference in altitude is a modest 46m, the line 330m long, and built to the unusually broad gauge of 1.6m. The most unusual feature of the railway is the design of the cars, although this is not immediately apparent to the casual traveller. Each has a framework running on two bogies, with four suspended compartments which pivot to remain horizontal irrespective of the gradient, which varies from a maximum of 34% down to zero at the lower station. During construction two members of the team became fathers, the children being named Maxime and



TOP: La Coudre. The graffiti-liveried car nears the end of its descent.

BOTTOM: Chaumont. The turnstile and walkway leading to the observation tower.

Léa, resulting in the two cars being named after them. Maxime, Car No.1 is red and runs to the west at the crossover, while Léa Car No. 2, has a yellow livery and both can accommodate up to 126 passengers. The maximum speed of 8m/s gives a transit of 3 minutes, permitting a 5-minute interval service. The fare is CHF2.30, again an Onde Verte 'Court Parcours' ticket. Operation is fully automatic so the stations have platform doors. Another peculiarity, resulting from space restrictions, is that the drive is in the lower station, much of it being on public view.

A round trip

Visitors with limited time can combine a one-way transit on Neuchâtel's two shorter funiculars into an interesting round trip. For example, starting at the Gare, descend the Fun'ambule to Université and take trolleybus Line101 in the direction Cormondrèche, five-stops and 8 minutes to Ecluse. Ascend the funicular to Plan, and take bus Line109, direction Place Pury, four-stops and 3 minutes back to Gare. The buses run every 10 minutes Mon-Sat, and every 20 minutes on Sunday. The duration of such a trip depends more on connections than transit times, but on weekdays such a circuit should take well under an hour. 