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RAlpin INTERMODAL GROWTH

Ron Smith



A Brig station worker watches an evening train of piggy-back lorries drift through Brig on its way to Italy. May 13th 2008.

PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

RAlpin was originally set up as a joint venture between the SBB, the BLS, and the intermodal operator Hupac, to run rolling highway trains from Germany to Italy using the Lötschberg route. In May 1999 RAlpin was awarded the contract by the Swiss Federal Ministry of Transport to operate the rolling highway trains from Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Germany, right through to Novara, Italy. The 414-kilometre route was cleared to allow 4 metre high (at the corners) road vehicles to pass on the special low-floor 4-axle bogie wagons. In 2001 RAlpin was floated as an independent company and ran its first train in June 2001. In 2002 Trenitalia SpA joined as a shareholder.

Since June 2007 the trains have used the new base tunnel to reduce the journey time. The transit time varies between eight and ten hours. This is competitive with the road time plus, under the driver's-hours rules, the drivers can count the period on the train as rest period. The service is remarkably successful with a 91.5% load factor; hauled 80,342 trucks in 2007; and plans to increase this substantially between now and 2011. In 2008 it is confidently expected that 100,000 trucks will be carried. There are twenty coaches in the fleet for use by drivers, and

these have been upgraded to conform to tunnel security requirements. They have a lounge, kitchen, toilets, and couchette compartments. Although built in 1969/1970 these coaches are maintained to a high standard to keep them attractive to the truck drivers and the terminals also have showers, a café and a waiting room.

Currently 20 low-floor wagons are in each shuttle train and this formation will grow to 25 by 2015, meaning more trucks and drivers can be accommodated per train. 25 wagon trains will give a capacity of 250,000 trucks of which 200,000 will use the Lotschberg route, the rest the Gotthard. The 300-strong wagon fleet, with an average age of 17 years, is now running 160,000 kilometres per annum and is showing its age. These wagons are expensive to operate anyway, and this intensive usage has its effects. Maintenance is carried out at the SBB Bellinzona workshops, whilst since May 2007 maintenance and repair has also been carried out at the DB facility at Offenburg. This workshop is tucked away beside the hump marshalling yard, and is very busy. The terminals are also suffering from their success needing upgrading, as does their road access and this planned.

There are also plans to add to the number of destinations served.

The Swiss Government subsidise this service as part of the programme to reduce the number of heavy vehicles transiting Switzerland. When the service started in 2001 the subsidy was SFr700/truck; in 2006 this had reduced to SFr370/truck. The subsidy is a fixed amount, so that as more trucks are carried, the amount per vehicle is less.

With the train capacity improvements planned, the subsidy per lorry will reduce even further. The Government's original contract with RALpin was for 9 years but with such a positive result it is confidently hoped that it will be renewed and this will then provide the stability for an investment in new wagons.

There are around 500 companies who are customers of RALpin, and their average vehicle travels 400 kilometres to and from the Freiburg-im-Breisgau terminal, and 150 kilometres to and from the Novara terminal. Using the train saves the road hauliers both time and money. There are no customs delays; no night time truck ban - as on the roads; no problems with bad weather conditions; and it is easy to use as there is a 24-hour-a-day check in and scheduling. There are twenty trains per day, mostly running at night.

The intermodal sector with the most growth is



Loco Re482037-9 is seen in Freiburg-im-Brigau, Germany on 30th August 2007.

PHOTO: Ron Smith

unaccompanied, specifically containers and swap bodies. Rolling highway is a niche market for specific routes and specific traffic; such as air freight distributors; perishable and temperature-controlled goods; high value; and just-in-time components. The increasing fuel price is also having an effect in that the rail service is becoming more financially attractive. There is no doubt that RALpin have very successfully cornered the market with their offering, and have still more traffic to win in their sector, which they are well on the way to achieving.

This HUPAC coach for the truck drivers was also photographed at the same time.

PHOTO: Ron Smith

