

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2010)
Heft: 104

Artikel: Rigibahnen 2011
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854451>

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RIGIBAHNEN 2011

Ron Smith



No.31 descends to Kaltbad 21/6/2009.

ALL PHOTOS: Ron Smith.

The Rigibahnen (RB) operates Switzerland's first rack railway; the former VRB from Vitznau on the Vierwaldstättersee to Rigi Kulm, and the former ARB from Arth Goldau to Rigi Kulm. Both lines are standard gauge and use the Riggengbach rack system. The RB also runs the cable car from Weggis to Rigi Kaltbad. This enterprising railway has run steam locomotives since the start, even after electrification, although regular steam operation has only been at weekends or for special charters for many years now.

However, for the first time since they were reintroduced in 1971 for the 100th anniversary of the VRB, there will not be any timetabled steam operations in 2011 – although some charters will operate. This is due to the line capacity being fully taken, both with the very busy

passenger service and with freight trains operating in conjunction with the many building works that are taking place on the mountain. There are no roads on the Rigi so everything goes by train.

Rigi Kaltbad, where the Weggis cable car terminates, is half way up the mountain between Vitznau and the summit. Always a popular holiday location, its big hotels on the south-facing hillside give wide views over the Vierwaldstättersee. A large new spa hotel is going to be built next to the railway and it is predicted that this may generate some 50,000 extra passenger journeys per year. Its construction will involve the RB transporting 15,000 tonnes of building materials; the construction machinery scaffolding etc from the good road/rail transfer facilities at

Vitznau. There will also be daily flows of commuting construction workers. The existing station building at Kaltbad is to be demolished and a new one constructed on the same site. The current layout with its single platform face and a dead end siding for freight traffic, will be completely rebuilt. Currently for trains to pass, the uphill one, having stopped at the station, has to reverse onto the double track section that approaches – but does not reach – Kaltbad and wait while the other one stops and moves off downhill, before it can resume its journey to the summit. The new layout will see the double track extended into the station on the line of the freight siding, giving two platforms, with a new siding constructed for the regular freight of milk churns and supplies to the houses and hotels, plus the building

works traffic, parallel to the existing siding – there is no other space available.

The RB tracks at Arth Goldau end at a station on a single-track bridge that spans the SBB lines below. This is a hindrance to the main line trains as clearance is restricted, causing problems for pantographs and leading to speed restrictions underneath it. For many years there had been plans and discussions to relocate the RB station alongside the SBB station, and accessed via the existing underground passageway, but this idea has now finally been abandoned. The new proposal is that a temporary two-track terminus will be built on the depot side of the bridge, allowing the bridge itself to be removed prior to being cleaned, repaired, rebuilt and replaced at a higher level to give adequate

Ta 2/2 No1 shunts on the turntable at Vitznau on 24/6/2009.



clearance beneath. This will be a very interesting operation, as there is such a high volume of traffic running under it at all times that it is unlikely that complete possession of the main lines will be allowed. New shops will be incorporated into the new Arth Goldau and



Kaltbad stations, whilst at Vitznau the Rigibahnen have taken over the “Kiosk” shop and incorporated it into the booking office, resulting in increased retail sales.

The Rigibahnen has always been forward looking and innovative, and it continues this tradition having designed a new type of point. Points incorporating the Riggerbach rack have always been complicated, which leads to high maintenance costs. The new points are simpler, as the whole rack and rail section pivots, swinging from one track to the other, resulting in fewer moving parts, lower cost and maintenance and easier to keep clear of snow. Four of these points have been ordered, two each for the new Kaltbad and Arth Goldau station layouts.

This typifies the engineering excellence shown by the railway. They maintain, rebuild and repair all their own rolling stock, including the steam engines and historic vehicles, but at some time old vehicles have to be honourably retired. Power cars Bhe2/4 Nos.1, 2

No 32 under revision at Vitznau 17/6/2010.

and 3 from 1937, plus No 4, from 1953, are showing their age. Replacements will have to be innovative, and capable of working new vehicles, as well as old historic ones, in any combination. These new trains will incorporate regenerative braking to save energy, and the railway is looking at ways of incorporating this technology into its existing units.

The Rigi, “The Queen of Mountains” has always been popular with tourists. The RB, whilst transporting tourists and residents; providing life-line services such as the school runs; shipping all manner of freight traffic (once I even saw a bird cage complete with bird being transported), has always had to work hard to earn its revenue. With all these developments planned for the next year, it will be very busy and dynamic. Regular steam operations are expected to resume in 2012, but in the interim one thing is sure – it is always interesting to ride the Rigibahnen!