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2011 TIMETABLE AND RULE CHANGES

Der Beobachter looks at some developments from December

The new Dec 11 2011 - 2012 timetable does not contain many radical changes, but inevitably it does not please everyone. The still ailing Zürich/Basel - Italy service is rationalized again - for the worse. The EC trains (in principle - but not always - Class 470 Pendolini) are stretched from 3 hrs 41 minutes to 4 hrs 19 minutes for the Zürich - Milano journey, thus legitimizing what often happens. This means that they are not in the regular interval timetable over the Gotthard line and that connections fail, especially at Arth-Goldau. In contrast the Class 610s on the Basel - Milano route through the Lötschberg and Simplon tunnels are doing a little better, relatively speaking, though the scheduled daily Class 610 service Basel - Gotthard - Milano - Venezia is often deranged. Canton Ticino, which relies on the Gotthard route for its principal public transport link with the rest of the Confederation, has had enough of this, and is again protesting loudly at what it sees as a second-class service. However the reality is that until 2013, when the Class 470s are completely withdrawn, the timetable and service will not get better. Worryingly, as yet there is nothing planned to replace the 470s when they go. The good news is, of course, the opening of the new Rhein-Rhône LGV line between Dijon, Belfort and Mulhouse which reduces current Zürich/Basel - Paris TGV journeys by some 30 minutes. Unfortunately this change catches out the travellers on Eurostar from London (only a minority on the already busy Paris route) by now using Paris Gare de Lyon instead of Gare de l'Est. In Zürich there will be a delay before fleet service of the new double-deck RABE 511 units start on lines S12 and S14. A choice was made that as deliveries were cutting things too fine to be able to assure reliability, a precautionary delay to the 12th February has reluctantly been put in place. The snag is of course that overcrowding is always at its worst in the bad weather and dark nights season. Elsewhere in the city the Zürich tramways VBZ opened their new line to Altstätten Nord. In Canton Fribourg there is a new upgraded service between Bulle and Romont. This line was closed for 12 months with bus replacement, whilst being rebuilt into a new, high-capacity rapid transit line, something which it had never

been for over 100 'rural' years. A trip to Bulle is now a new experience.

With the timetable change SBB brought in some new, or reinforced, measures which were not universally greeted. It is now always necessary to have a ticket before boarding a train. On-train sales by the conductor of tickets (and of a re-grading) are no longer permitted. Failure to have a valid ticket brings a fine of CHF90. While this seems severe it has always technically been in force, but abuse has been increasing, costing SBB up to CHF20m per month in lost revenue. This is aggravated on lines with high load factors where due to overcrowding the conductor was unable to get through, whilst having to also manage the train and its operation. Fierce complaints have broken out, as so many stations are unstaffed, ticket machines are slow and do not give all options, and people claim to feel intimidated. Places like Zürich and Geneva airports also bring their own problems and conductors are asked to exercise discretion, although how they will do so has not been explained. A related measure on busy trains is that a passenger occupying a second seat, with luggage, lap-top or rucksack will now be held liable for a penalty charge too. Again, long on the statute books, and really only a matter of common courtesy, it's now serious on densely loaded trains. Dogs, which must have a child ticket, also get no seat. At the same time there may not even be a conductor as these are absent from many secondary and suburban routes where flying-squad ticket inspectors may do spot-checks as they quite often do. SBB are now proposing to degrade several low-revenue 'Inter-Regional' trains to 'Regio-Express' status which allows them to run without conductors. This is a very real change for SBB as apart from reducing staff costs it means other costs can be shared with local authorities. A typical route where trains will be re-graded is Bern - Olten by the old route. In charge will be the locomotive driver, as even quite big stations like Langenthal have no station staff. There was also the announcement of some good news. The policy of only having supervised, franchised fee-paying toilets at major stations, and none elsewhere, which has never been completely implemented, is to change. SBB has admitted that people being people, an urgent need at big stations is frequently addressed by boarding a waiting train and using its toilets, which with modern toilets does not even attract attention from outside. They have tried various solutions, including only unlocking toilets when trains have departed, but that enrages passengers who, once on board, expect the green light at once. The result is that free toilets will again be made available. SBB is to make deals with local authorities about facilities on the many unmanned stations. 

Double-deck TGV on trial in Switzerland.

