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By 'V-Bahn' to the Top of Europe

Glyn Jones

Diagram from the Jungfrauabahn showing the 8 elements of the proposal.

1. The Berner Oberland Bahn with new rolling stock and the new Rothenegg Station. 2. The new valley terminal adjacent to the new BOB Station with shops and food corner. 3. A new 1000 space multi-story car park. 4. The new Grindelwald – Männlichen Gondelbahn. 5. The new 'Eiger Express' tri-cable aerial cableway 6. The Wengernalpbahn is getting new rolling stock. 7. New rolling stock will arrive for the Jungfrauabahn. 8. There will be a direct bus service between the new bus terminal at Grindelwald Grund and the First Gondelbahn.

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About 10-years ago after the appointment of a new CEO, the Jungfrauabahn announced that they were investigating the concept of making the trip to the Jungfrauoch a half-day excursion. This would enable more visitors to make the "trip of a lifetime" each day and also allow the same visitors to make another mountain trip on the same day, so increasing the revenue generated per visitor and hence increase the railway

group's profits. Advertising was to be targeted country by country, principally in the Far East and visitors were encouraged to spend only one night in the area. In practice this meant Interlaken. The first attempt to achieve this concept was announced in February 2008 when Jungfrauabahn said that a study was to take place into the feasibility of the construction of a high-speed lift from the Lauterbrunnen Valley floor to the Jungfrauoch.

This was to be a two-stage lift with a stop half way to allow the patrons to acclimatise to the rapid change in altitude.

In the November of the same year it was announced that although the study had proved the project was technically feasible and there would be no health problems through the rapid altitude change, they would not be proceeding with the project, which would have cost up to CHF970m. The reason stated for the abandonment of the lift was that it

Kleine Scheidegg in 2015, which without the Jungfrauoch tour groups will be much quieter in the future.

All photos: Glyn Jones



was possible to increase capacity and reduce journey times using the existing railway infrastructure at a cost of only CHF100m. This was to be achieved by some new rolling stock, timetable changes, and the building of a passing loop above Wengen. The result of these proposed changes was to increase the number of daily visitors to the Jungfrauoch from the 2008 total of 4,400 people to 6,000 people, with the ultimate aim to have 1m visitors a year. It was also hoped to reduce the Kleine Scheidegg – Jungfrauoch return journey time from 120 minutes to 90 minutes with new trains. This, with the shortest travel time from Grindelwald Grund, would enable a return journey to the Jungfrauoch to only take 2 hours 34 minutes, which would just about make the Jungfrauoch a half-day excursion for tour groups that travelled by coach as far as Grindelwald Grund. These changes have now been implemented, with the passing loop between Wengen and Allmend constructed hence enabling a half-hourly service to be implemented on this approach to Kleine Scheidegg, but the half-day Jungfrauoch excursion still had not been achieved. So in July 2011 the Jungfraubahnen proposed a more radical solution, the ‘V-Bahn’, at an estimated cost of about CHF80m, which would reduce the Interlaken to Kleine Scheidegg journey time by a further 30 minutes.

The concession for the independently operated Gondelbahn Grindelwald Männlichen (GGM) expires in 2016, with concerns that the finances will not be available to fund a replacement. The concept for the “V-Bahn”, and hence the name, is to replace the GGM with a new Gondelbahn operating from a lower terminus at Rothenegg shared with a tri-cable aerial cable-way running direct to Eigergletscher - not Kleine Scheidegg as in the original plan. In addition the Berner Oberland-Bahn (BOB) would be diverted into a new station at Rothenegg, which would be adjacent to the new lower terminal. The proposal was accepted by the Commune of Grindelwald (surprisingly as the new route would reduce the number of Jungfrauoch visitors travelling via Grindelwald, and hence potentially spending money in the village) but was rejected by the mountain Communes over which the ‘V-Bahn’ would pass. The Jungfraubahn has promised to improve the ski area at First and to have a direct bus service from the “V-Bahn” lower terminus to the First lower terminus. All this must have influenced the Grindelwald community decision. In addition to the new aerial infrastructure improvements to increase capacity on the feeder railways was also proposed. The Berner Oberland-Bahn is receiving new railcars to increase its capacity on the route to Rothenegg from 682 to 912 persons/hour. Wengernalpbahn is to receive new rolling stock allowing three trains on the



TOP: The new passing loop between Wengen and Allmend.

RIGHT: The existing Gondelbahn Grindelwald Männlichen whose concession will expire in 2016.




Grindelwald side with a capacity of 300 persons/hour and four trains on the Wengen side with a capacity of 760 persons/hour. These new trains were ordered some time ago and will be in operation for the 2015/16 winter season. There will also be new rolling stock for the Jungfrauabahn in the shape of four new three-section low-floor railcars. These will give a capacity of 1,180 persons/hour with a 2-train shuttle service between Eigerletscher and the Jungfrauoch, together with a 3-train shuttle service between Kleine Scheidegg and Jungfrauoch.

On 21st October 2015 the Communes in the Wärgistal Mountain Co-operation reversed their original decision, and by a 2/3rds majority voted in favour of the proposals after they were promised a total of about CHF370,000 compensation per year. With this



decision the last hurdle has been overcome and the detailed planning can commence. The Jungfrauabahn has noted: "The approval of the project means that Jungfrau Railway Group together with the Grindelwald-Männlichen Gondola Cableway can further intensify the planning of the V-Cableway. The next step will be the publication of the planning approval procedure." The cableway to Eigerletscher will be known as the "Eiger Express". This will have a travel time of 15-minutes, with a capacity of 2,400 persons/hour using 44 cabins each carrying 28 people. There will be seven masts enroute. The replacement cableway for the GGM will have a travel time of 19-minutes (reduced from the current 30-minutes) with a capacity of 1,800 persons/hour using 148 gondolas each carrying 8 people. There will be 33 masts on this route.



So what happens to the WAB between Grindelwald and Kleine Scheidegg? The Jungfrauabahn has undertaken, as part of the concession to build the "V-Bahn", that the Wengernalpbahn will continue to operate 365 days/year, with a half-hour service in the holiday seasons and an hourly service at other times. So the railways future seems secure. Kleine Scheidegg and the WAB trains will be much quieter and the Jungfrauoch tourists will have their half-day excursion but I am not so sure it will have the same appeal. Is this progress? More information on: <http://www.jungfrau.ch/en/tourism/news-events/v-cableway/the-v-cableway-project/> 

TOP: Mock-ups of the new Gondolers adjacent to Grindelwald Grund Station in summer 2015.

MIDDLE: The existing Gondelbahn Grindelwald Männlichen whose concession will expire in 2016.

BOTTOM: One of the new WAB Bhe48s. This photo was taken at Wengen on 28th June 2015. The train was ex-works on 22nd June.