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FORCHBAHN

Jason Sargerson takes
a look at this Train-Train operation



Train departing Forch for Esslingen.

ALL PHOTOS: Jason Sargerson


The Forchbahn is a 17km long metre gauge suburban railway opened in 1912 that runs from Zürich Stadelhofen via Forch and Zürich's semi-rural commuter hinterland to Esslingen. Stadelhofen Station is an important stop on the S-Bahn network reached through a tunnel under the old city in a few minutes from Zürich Hauptbahnhof by frequent trains. On emerging from the station, opened in 1894 and rebuilt in the 1990s to a design by the controversial Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, the tree lined Stadelhofenplatz is where the Forchbahn departs. This square is also served by VBZ tram Routes 11 and 15 whilst Routes 2 and 4 serve the Opera House stop just beyond the square. Tram Route 11 and the Forchbahn (which operates as S-Bahn route S18) share tracks in the street out to Rehalp on the edge of the built-up area. To do this the trains operate on two voltages – 600V to Rehalp, where they switch to 1200V for the remainder of the line. At Stadelhofenplatz the Forchbahn trains are always on the right hand track and the trams on the left track. The trams make a circuit in front of the station and round the square to arrive back at the right hand track.

The railway has several generations of stock in operation. There are six older 2-car Be 8/8 units built between 1976 and 1986, along with a batch of eight Be 4/4 units built in

1993/4. These older units appear to normally only work between Forch and the City. Thirteen Stadler Be 4/6 units were supplied in 2003/4 and these operate the full route. This latest equipment is based upon Stadler's 'Tango' tram design and is unusual in that they are half-units with only one conventional driving cab in the front of the motor car. The driving motor car runs conventionally on two powered bogies, whilst the trailer car only has one bogie, its front end being supported on the rear of the lead unit. They normally seem to operate as back to back pairs making-up a four-car unit. All the types of rolling stock are very quiet in operation and very comfortably upholstered. The external livery is an attractive orange and cream, contrasting well with the blue and white trams.

Trains depart from Stadelhofen making a sharp right into Kreuzbühlstrasse and immediately tackling the gradient up to Kreuzplatz, where trams on Route 15 branch off, then Forchstrasse is joined and followed most of the way to its namesake community. The line is double track as far as Neue Forch, with street running out to the city boundary at Rehalp where tram Route 11 terminates using a turning loop on the south side of the road. At Rehalp the Forchbahn trains have a slightly longer stop than normal to change voltage before gaining their own lines on a reserved roadside right-of-way.

The line runs in tunnels over two stretches of its route, the first (opened in 1976 to relieve traffic congestion) is between Zumikon and Maiacher where both stations are in the tunnel, and there is another short tunnel after Forch. It is at Forch that the summit of the line is reached (676m) and where the main depot is located. The station and depot complex were built in 1970, and in typically Swiss manner environmental considerations led to part of the depot having a green 'living' roof. Alternate trains normally terminate here. On leaving Forch the line, now single track with passing loops at stations, gradually descends to Esslingen (which has a modern station opened in 1995), running beside the road and through more open countryside. Buzzards and Red Kites are frequently seen and the Greifensee is in sight on the left. At the other end of the line one thing to look out for are the emergency services using the tramlines to negotiate the heavy city traffic.

The 15 minute interval service from Stadelhofen to Forch takes 25 minutes for the journey, with every second train extended to Esslingen, taking another 15 minutes for the last section. A good reason to sample this railway apart from seeing the unique mix of trams and trains is to visit the Tram Museum based in an old VBZ depot adjacent to the Burgwies stop on tram Route 11. Unfortunately the Forchbahn trains do not stop there (they also skip a number of other tram-served stops), so visitors using the railway need to change at Rehalp or Balgrist if approaching from outside of the city. The original tramway building was taken over by Migros who converted part of it into a supermarket, whilst allowing the tracks to remain in the other part and become a very comprehensive museum. 

More pictures on page 4.

TOP: Forch station and lifts.

MIDDLE: Tram and train at Stadelhofenplatz.

BOTTOM: Tram and train pass at Kreuzplatz.





TOP LEFT: Tram and train on same line at Kreuzplatz.

TOP RIGHT: Futuristic concrete and glass at Forch with 1986 Be8/8 unit No.31 and 32. All the other Forchbahn units shown are Be4/6 units from 2003/2004.

RIGHT: Tram and train at Stadelhofenplatz.

BOTTOM LEFT: On the gradient at Balgrist.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Train passing the Gemeinde Kirch at Balgrist.

