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PASSES AND PROBLEMS ON THE RhB



ABOVE: Ge 4/4 III No 647 kicks up the snow at Filisur.
PHOTOS: Bryan Stone

TOP RIGHT: Clearing the points by hand
BOTTOM RIGHT: Thank goodness for Honda snow blowers!

In January we received a letter from a member who was critically concerned that when in the Davos area over Christmas he, and apparently other tourists, had been fined when using their Regional Ski Passes on RhB trains, something that he believed was allowed. He was informed that the passes were specifically only valid on the RhB for skiers moving between ski runs, but not for other local travel. This was a policy that he claimed many users were unaware of and considered that some RhB staff were being too punctilious in surcharging travellers like himself. He was also critical of the number of delayed trains he encountered and considered that the reason given that these delays were “due to unexpected weather” was not really acceptable from a Swiss railway, that should have been prepared for snowfall in the mountains. He had previously held the RhB in high esteem but was concerned that its operational and customer service standards appeared to be slipping.

As the editorial team also considered that the RhB was an efficient, customer-oriented operation I thought that we should use our resources to try and understand some of the issues of concern. Bryan Stone, our Swiss-based News Editor, contacted the RhB Customer Service Manager regarding the above comments, which the member had also made direct to RhB HQ. This person was distressed at the criticism of the railway over both the ticketing issue and its apparent poor operational record over the holiday period. They explained that in the Davos region the resorts have formed a single body, Davos-Klosters-Mountains (DKM), to market their facilities. It issues an electronic ski pass which is time-validated for the region's lifts with the receipts shared between participating lifts and cable cars. Since the various valley stations are linked by rail, the DKM invited the RhB, although not a member of DKM, and under no obligation to do so, to accept the ski pass to transport active winter sports participants between

these points. The RhB saw the customer service aspect as valid and agreed. However, as it has the legal concession to operate public transport in Canton Graubünden with its income from fares and public subsidy tied to its normal fare structure and transport operations, it only made a limited concession with DKM; to be remunerated by a minimal compensation out of ski pass receipts; valid between defined stations; and only for ski-pass holders when actively and directly engaged in winter sports. The object of this was to avoid loss of fares from normal rail passengers whose fares are fixed legally. The RhB required the limited concession to be made clear by DKM to ski pass holders, in Article 1.6.2 of General Conditions under which the ski pass is sold. This is in both English and German. Additionally a leaflet, only in German, making the restriction clear is issued by DKM with the pass, a weakness in present arrangements that is down to the DKM sales organization, and not to the RhB. The RhB became aware that substantial abuse of the limited concession was in fact taking place, with a measurable loss of normal fare revenue, hence the background to the increased enforcement procedures by railway employees that was encountered.

Bryan was also out-and-about in Graubünden over the holiday period and he believes that the RhB actually did quite well in exceptional circumstances. They generally kept going in an unusual mixture of intermittent very heavy snowfall and freezing rain where several other railways did not – as described in the adjacent article. Part of an alpine railway's preparation for winter weather is to know when not to do foolhardy things and if that means that nothing moves it is probably wise. To run a railway in the winter environment that the RhB operates-in is a challenge that can only be met through the dedication of its employees. The RhB people shown in our selection of photographs were out “In the Bleak Midwinter” ensuring that, where possible, trains ran. 