

By train down the Orbe : Martin Fisher explores some standard gauge byways in the southwest Jura

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BY TRAIN DOWN THE ORBE.

Martin Fisher explores some standard gauge byways in the southwest Jura.



ALL PHOTOS: *Malcolm Bulpitt*

ALL PHOTOS: *End of the line at the hill top town of Orbe on the Orbe-Chavornay Bahn (OC).*

The River Orbe flows north-eastwards through the Vallée de Joux to Vallorbe and Orbe before reaching Yverdon-les-Bains and flowing into Lake Neuchâtel. In common with much of the Jura, the lower lying land is farmed while higher and steeper slopes are generally covered in woodland. Whilst nowhere near as dramatic as the Alps, there are a number of limestone crags – the region giving its name to the Jurassic era.

The main railway line in this locality is the one that runs from Lausanne to Vallorbe. Part of this route opened as early as 1855, the section from Daillens (on the Yverdon line) up to Vallorbe opening in 1870. The line became part of the Jura Simplon in 1890 and part of the SBB/CFF in 1903. It was electrified in 1925. Beyond Vallorbe the Mont d'Or tunnel, over 6000m long, built by the French PLM and opened in 1915, upgraded the branch into a part of the international Simplon route. The SBB/CFF built a new Vallorbe station to handle the expected international traffic. Unfortunately, despite TGVs passing this way between Paris & Lausanne, the line has the air of a rural branch and Vallorbe station has now

seen better days. Despite the imposing exterior, it looks very world-weary amongst the unnecessarily large number of platforms. Few long-suffering partners of SRS members will appreciate time spent on this station!

A 10 minute walk down the hill brings the traveller into the town itself. Now a quiet and pleasant place it was once the centre of a thriving iron industry, commemorated by the Musée du Fer et Chemin de Fer situated in an old mill in the town centre. A French 241P steam locomotive can also be seen in the town.

Vallorbe is the terminus of the branch line up the Vallée de Joux to Le Pont and Le Brassus. After crossing the Orbe, branch trains leave the Lausanne line at Le Day and climb the wooded southern slopes of the Orbe valley opposite Vallorbe before reaching Lac Brenet (on the right) and Le Pont. The section from Le Day to Le Pont is owned by the SBB; it was opened in 1886 but not electrified until 1938. At Le Pont the branch runs seamlessly into the independent Pont Brassus Railway (PbR). This runs for 13km through remote farmland and alongside the Lac de Joux (on the left) before reaching

Sentier-Orient and finally Le Brassus. These two towns are known for their specialist watch-making. In winter they cater for skiers while in summer there are pleasant walks and boating is possible on the lake.

Despite the change in ownership half-way along the 40 minute journey, the whole service is provided by Travys (ie the PbR), in my experience using two Neupendelzug EMUs which were originally numbered in the same series as the SBB's version (now class 560). There is also an ex Mittel-Thurgau-Bahn unit on the line. On a few days in the summer a steam-hauled service is operated between Le Pont and Le Brassus, the carriages for which are evidently kept in the open at Le Pont.

The attractive hill-top town of Orbe is lower down the valley of the same name. Orbe has Roman origins (when it was known as Urba) and has a ruined 13th century castle and many buildings from the 18th century. Since 1894 it has been connected to the main line at Chavornay by the private Orbe-Chavornay Railway (OC), although in July 2008 this company was totally merged into the Travys organisation. The line is just 4km long and was electrified from the outset at 750v dc. On the edge of Chavornay, and again on the approach to Orbe at Les Granges, there are extensive sidings into lineside factories which must provide the railway with a very useful income (and perhaps provide an interesting prototype for a model?). Like the other lines in this article, the passenger service is broadly hourly.

The OC curves away sharply from the main line at Chavornay and follows the road for much of its journey. To begin with, the line runs down hill with sidings to the left at the beginning and end of the descent. At the time of my visit in September 2008, SBB 843 066 was shunting in the lower sidings.

The railway then crosses the valley flood plain to Les Granges where there are several rail-connected factories on both sides of the line. Two OC shunters were at work here. The line then climbs around the town to its terminus and depot. Anyone wishing to see the historic buildings in the town centre faces a walk up a flight of steps, or a longer road route from the station.

Editor's Note: Martin went to Orbe on a really wet day so has agreed that my photos taken on a sunny day in September 2008 should be used.

