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The Grimselbahn?

Bryan Stone



A coach crosses one of the dams in the area. The lone lifebelt looks a bit minimalist.

Imagine a continuous 850km long network of metre-gauge railways; from Montreux and Zermatt; Palézieux and Scuol; Tirano and Luzern. Most is already in place. There is metre-gauge track missing between Zweisimmen (MOB) and Interlaken (ZB), but plans are in-hand to operate variable-gauge coaches on the BLS standard gauge lines linking these points. The other rail-less missing link is a 22km section of line between Innertkirchen, above Meiringen on the MIB, and Oberwald on the MGB. In between is the 2164m high Grimsel Pass, whose alpine road is snowbound and closed for much of the year. Tackling this would be far harder, and more expensive, than introducing the MOB's gauge-change bogies!

This is the heart of the 'new' Grimselbahn idea, for which planning and thinking has been growing since 2008. There have been many Grimsel projects starting the 1850s when Canton Bern politics included an alpine crossing over this pass. They all fell through, especially when in 1870 Canton Bern gave its support to the Gotthard project. The standard gauge Bödelibahn, in Interlaken, was to be the start of a Grimsel railway including the Brünig approach to Meiringen. What resulted was a metre-gauge Brünig, summer only at first, which struggled for 30-years until the last section between Brienz and Interlaken was built by the SBB in 1915. Today this route is the Zentralbahn (ZB). There is one railway pointing straight into the Haslital and Grimsel region: the Meiringen-Innertkirchen Bahn (MIB), which was built in the 1920s to serve the electric power stations built to use the Grimsel water. The idea of using this route to access the Haslital apparently had surprisingly strong local support even as far back as 1908.

Retired mining engineer Ulrich Blatter, who knew the Grimsel from involvement with tunnelling works linked to supplying power stations with water, has made it a lifetime vocation, and there is an organisation, the 'Community of Interest Grimselbahn', with an impressive list of sponsors. At the end of 2013 funding of some CHF500,000 was agreed by the Cantons involved; by the Haslital Communes (mostly themselves somewhat impoverished); by MGB and ZB; and by a number of private sponsors, to start a feasibility study. The project foresees a railway running in the open from Innertkirchen to Handeck, on the Grimsel north side, and a

8.3km tunnel from there, under the pass, to Oberwald. It is easy to think of this as straightforward when looking at the map, but it is much more difficult to imagine the reality. The various railways to be linked up are all very different; some with rack working, using various power supplies, and having a multitude of potentially incompatible technical features. And who would be the users? Probably mostly tourists, although there is perhaps the possibility of some inter-regional local trade. The implementation costs are not yet known. The operating costs through this remote and avalanche-prone valley would be considerable. There was supposed to be a report from those undertaking the feasibility study by the end of 2014 but over 12-months-on nothing had emerged into the public domain.

However in late 2015 there came another twist to the story. National electricity grid planning suggests that a 400 KV transmission cable is required between the Berner Oberland and Valais. As it is anticipated that opposition to a new power line over the Grimsel Pass is inevitable, an underground connection between the Haslital and the Upper Rhône Valley may need to be considered. This would need a tunnel of at least single-track metre-gauge railway dimensions, so the earlier proposals and the possible grid project are now being evaluated together. This new development has resulted in the ZB, MGB and MIB forming a joint company Grimselbahn AG to manage the project. The MIB is owned by Kraftwerk Oberhasli (KWO) the power company who would be involved in the development of the power grid proposal. Professional opinion in Switzerland is pessimistic about the project, as it is unclear where the capital investment of some CHF500m needed to fund a railway would come from. The route is hardly high on the priority list for major national transport investment so it seems to be an unlikely starter. But we should not underestimate the pressure driving the grid improvement issue, as there is a known need to strengthen the distribution network, as future power supplies to parts of the country may not be keeping up with ever-increasing demand. Your *Swiss News* Editor spends time every year in Brienz. He will follow this with interest to keep *Swiss Express* readers up to date – but holding your breath on this one could be dangerous! 