Belfort - Delle-reopening

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A regular CFF RE service from Biel/Bienne has just arrived at Delle, where an SNCF 'Open-day' special is ready to leave for Belfort Ville. *All photos:* Ilkka Huotelin 8.12.2018

On the 6th of December 2018 the railway line between Belfort and Delle in the French region of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté was officially re-opened. The general public were invited to celebrate the re-opening with an open day on the 8th, and the next day with the new timetable period, regular passenger services re-started. Whilst the 22 km line is situated entirely within France, the line is important also for Switzerland and its reconstruction was partly financed by the Canton of Jura and the Confederation, as it re-connects the Swiss rail network at Delle to the French one and improves access to the Swiss Jura region.

The History

It was the French Compagnie du Chemin de fer Grand-Central who secured a concession for the Montbéliard–Audincourt–Morvillars–Delle railway to the Swiss border, but before the works could commence the company was split and the Chemins de fer de Paris à Lyon et à la Méditerranée (PLM) completed the line in 1868. Once Alsace, and with it the connection to Basel, was lost in a war to Prussia in 1871 Compagnie des Chemins de fer de l'Est needed a new route to the South, and it built a connection from Belfort to the PLM line at Morvillars in 1877. The same year in Switzerland Chemins de fer du Jura Bernois completed the line from the border town of Delle to the rest of the Swiss rail network.

These were the boom years for the line, as international passenger and especially goods trains used the line not just between France and Switzerland but also to Italy. For instance, the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits often ran many of its expresses this way. Just north of Norvillars, where the line crosses the Rhone–Rhine Canal, there used to be a short branch line to the transhipment port of Frodefontaine, where goods could be transferred between trains and barges. As the traffic grew, L'Est built the second track from Morvillars to Delle along the PLM's, and its route via Belfort took over the majority of the traffic.

However, after the First World War, when the French direct line to Basel was restored, the importance of this line gradually diminished. The plans to electrify the line never materialized and SNCF withdrew the passenger services in 1992, and CFF to Delle in 1995. The Belfort – Bourgogne section was utilised for freight for a while, but in 2006 that finished and the line was closed on the French side. But as with other similar cases of Franco-Swiss international links, the Swiss kept trains running on their remaining sections. CFF ran trains to the Swiss border town of Boncourt, and in 2007 the line was extended 1.6 km again across the border to Delle. Meanwhile appreciation of rail transport grew again and in 2014 an agreement was signed to rebuild the line. Construction started the following year with a budget of €110m, €28m of which came from Switzerland. Each of the sponsors had their own reasons for wanting the connection to re-open. The Canton of Jura wanted a better connection to the French high-speed network via Belfort Montbéliard TGV. The Territory of Belfort wanted to link the TGV station to the rest of the department for better local connectivity. Another important consideration was cross-border commuter traffic.

The Line

The rebuilt single-track line follows the old L'Est route and is electrified with 25 kV 50 Hz, but at Delle the voltage

Delle station, with CFF Flirt France units meeting, viewed from the pedestrian bridge crossing the tracks. The station is just a few hundred metres from the Swiss border and the buildings seen in the background are already in Switzerland.

Belfort - Montbéliard TGV high-speed station seen from the new TER platform, which is called Meroux.

ing the LGV lines at a right angle are called Meroux according to the local commune. In different on-line timetables, one can spot different. combinations of the two names. The other stops on the line are Movillars, Grandvillars and Joncherey before Delle. This station was damaged during WWII and rebuilt in 1967. As with other border stations, it used to have several tracks for freight trains, but they have now been all been cleared, with three platform faces remaining for the passenger services

The Opening

One day before the start of the regular service, an open day was organised, and it was so popular that on occasions passengers were left on the platforms, as the trains were completely full. Train services with a special timetable were running throughout the day, and although travel was free all the way to Delémont, the French organisers were rather over-enthusiastically insisting that everyone took a complimentary ticket. Maybe it was to ensure everyone remembers that one cannot ever travel without a valid ticket! There were exhibitions about the project and cultural performances at the stations and on some trains. At Belfort Ville Autorails de Bourgogne Franche Comté, a rail society was displaying its Picasso railcar X 4039 from 1960. Delle station was very popular on the day, with local agricultural produce plus a special craft beer brewed for the occasion, on sale. Most of the visitors were locals from both sides of the border, but one could hear a lot of Swiss German and see many train enthusiasts taking pictures and trying the re-opened line.

The Service

As mentioned above, the various financiers of the project each have their own interests, and this has caused challenges in setting up the timetable for the services and the result is clearly a compromise. First of all, the Swiss like to run their trains at regular hourly intervals, whereas the French adjust the number of services according to the time of the day, the day of the week and the school holidays. Secondly the Swiss trains are not able to run all the way to Belfort, but have to terminate at the TGV station. There are different explanations for this oddity. One is a rumour that the local politicians in Belfort, which is home to a big Alstom rolling-stock

is switchable also to 15 kV. Heading towards Switzerland from Belfort Ville, the line diverges from the Belfort-Mulhouse main line a couple kilometres southeast of the city followed by the first stop at Danjoutin. The landscape along the line is mostly agricultural with small villages here and there, but it is generally rather flat – at least by Swiss standards. The next station is known by many names, as it is here that there is a connection with the high-speed services of the LGV Rhine-Rhône. The high-speed line platforms on ground level are known as Belfort - Montbéliard TGV recognising the two larger cities the station serves. This is a typical modern out-of-town TGV station with a large car park and cafes. However, the new platforms for the local TER services to Belfort Ville and Delle, situated on a bridge cross-

manufacturing site, did not want a sample of a foreign competitor's products at their station! Another version is that CFF wanted to run the service with the same number of train sets as the previous service from Biel/Bienne to Delle needed. The turn-around time there was 39 minutes, which allowed extending the service to Meroux only, and not to Belfort. In any case a traveller from Switzerland has to change either in Delle or Meroux to reach Belfort, which is not ideal. Mostly , the connecting times between the services are short, but sometimes one has to wait almost half an hour. The agreed timetable has 10 of the 19 CFF RE hourly services from Biel/Bienne to Delle extended to Meroux. SNCF similarly provides 10 connections from Meroux to Belfort and a further 6 from Delle to Belfort. This is on a typical day, but there are variations at weekends and during vacations. There was also a dispute about the Morvillars stop. CFF wanted to skip the stop to ensure its trains had enough time to do the round trip to Meroux and back. After local opposition another compromise was agreed; for a six-month trial period all the trains will stop there and after then the situation will be re-evaluated.

CFF uses Stadler RABe 522s, which are also called Flirt France for its services. They are similar to normal CFF Flirts except they are also equipped to run in France. SNCF on the other hand uses Bombardier Z 27500s, which are also dual-voltage, but only for running in France (25 kV AC, 1.5 kV DC). Whilst the Swiss trains will provide both 1st and 2nd class, the French will provide only 2nd. At the moment there is no freight service on the line, but the politicians are hoping to see them running again. It is unlikely, however, that transit freight traffic will return except possibly for diversions, as the single-track line south is rather slow with steep gradients.

After a long campaign, the train services have finally been restored on this inter-national line. If it proves popular over time, it may inspire other re-openings. 🇨🇭

TOP: Besides normal signs, the paths between the high-speed and local service platforms have been also indicated on the floor.
MIDDLE: All bigger stations had exhibitions and info desks about the new train services and about the project. This one is at the Belfort - Montbéliard TGV high-speed station.
BOTTOM: Autorails de Bourgogne Franche Comté had its Picasso railcar on display at Belfort Ville.