

The Gailtalbahn

by Charlie Hulme

To the south of the Tauern mountains lies Villach, second city of the province of Carinthia and junction for lines to Italy and Slovenia. From Villach, 18 km up the main line to Italy lies Arnoldstein, junction for the non-electrified branch which runs eastwards into the upper part of the wide glacial valley of the River Gail, terminating between the adjacent - towns of Kötschach and Mauthen, 62 km from Arnoldstein. A long way from the usual haunts of British visitors, I was attracted to the area because of my enthusiasm for branch lines worked by diesel locomotives, the mountain scenery, and the Hotel Kürschner, a hotel whose owners are dedicated to preserving the environment.

History

The first 30.7 km, from Arnoldstein to Hermagor, the main town of the district, opened in 1884. Originally the junction was planned to be at Thöerl, but local objections caused the builders to divert to Arnoldstein, over very rocky territory. From the start, the line was worked by the national railway, although it was not officially nationalised until 1930. Various plans were laid for extension beyond Hermagor, including a 7 km tunnel which would connect the line with the line to Lienz which runs almost parallel on the other side of the mountains, but no money was available.

On 23 May 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary and the high mountains became a battlefield. The story of this battle is well told in the 'Museum 1915-18' in Kötschach-Mauthen; thousands of troops of both sides were encamped in tunnels driven into the rock, and supplied by cable cars. The Plöcken Pass, which leads into Italy a few kilometres from Kötschach-Mauthen, lay on the front line and an extension of the Gailtalbahn was put in hand immediately to supply the Austrian troops. By 13 December 1915 the first military trains reached Dellach, 56 km from Arnoldstein; the completion of the last 6 km to Kötschach-Mauthen took some time longer to complete, as the builders came under attack from heavy artillery stationed in the mountains by the Italian side. By January 1918 the Italians had been driven back from the mountains, and a public service began.

Today, the line has a frequent (by Austrian standards) locomotive-hauled passenger service, and all along the line there is evidence of improvement and upgrading of stations, such as brand-new cycle racks, higher platforms and what looks to me like a new signalling system (I know little about signalling - anyone help me?) Currently passenger trains start from platform 1 at Villach, and take around 1 hour 40 minutes for the journey. However, there are signs of economy measures too, with staff being withdrawn from some stations from May 1993. If you want to watch the loco running round its train at Kötschach-Mauthen before repairing to the garden of the nearby Gasthof Kastanienbaum for a cold Gösser Bier, get there soon, as one suspects the 5147 or 5247 railcars may be on the way. Hire a bike from the station, and you can follow the line for several miles on a newly-metalled riverside cycle track.

Route and Traffic

The Gailtal is a beautiful district, the wide valley floor being flanked by high mountains. There were no great engineering difficulties in the line's construction: the maximum gradient is only 1.3 per cent, and the only large structure is the 60-metre long bridge over the Gail at km 3.083. The main problem for the operators is snow in the Winter, when the area becomes popular with winter sports enthusiasts. Agriculture, Forestry and Tourism are the area's principal industries, and produce the majority of the line's traffic, although the principal source of freight at the moment is a large quarry near Hermagor which supplies ballast to the ÖBB.

In the beginning, trains were hauled by small steam tank engines, but the Gailtal was the scene of a very early experiment in modernisation in 1927 when a petrol-mechanical railcar, VT 23.01, and a diesel-electric locomotive, 2020.01, entered service. Standard power on the line, however, came to be the ubiquitous class 93 2-8-2T (BBÖ class 378) and it was one of these which worked the last scheduled steam train on 24 September 1963. The type made a brief return in 1974, when 93.1379 was used on a special celebrating the line's 80th anniversary. Modellers can buy a class 93 from Kleinbahn, although it is not the world's best runner and is hard to find in Britain. The 'Spantenwagen' four-wheelers from Klein Modellbahn would make a good 1950s passenger train. After 1963, 2045 diesel locos, 5045 and 5145 railcars, and 5081 railbuses were used on the branch, later supplanted by 2043 diesels allocated to Lienz depot, with class 2067 shunters sometimes used on freight. Photos taken in 1984 show trains of high-roofed coaches hauled by 2043.46 and .48.

The Line Today

A batch of late-production 2043s (069-071, 073-076) are now allocated to Villach, and these locos, all in the latest livery, work all freight and passenger services. Almost all the coaching stock is now the Schilieren type displaced from longer-distance services, and trains (all second-class only like all Austrian branches) are three or four coaches including one BD-type with baggage accommodation.

Goods wagons are the usual mixture, with the accent on open wagons and bogie flats for the timber traffic, and hoppers for the ballast quarry. When I was there in June 1993, most stations were open for freight although not much traffic was on offer. An Hbis-type van which appeared at Kötschach-Mauthen's 'Lagerhaus' one day went back down on the back of a passenger; it seems that the daily freight as such only goes as far as Hermagor, wagons for the rest of the line being taken up by the goods engine or any other suitable train. A bogie Postal van works up and down each day to add variety. Nearly all this stock is freely available to the H0 modeller, especially the Lima 2043 (which has recently been upgraded) and the Roco Schlieren coaches.

Maybe you think this standardisation is rather boring, but I feel that each loco has its own personality, and most layouts lose realism by having one of every type of locomotive. Certainly a line and area well worth a visit, even though it is a long way from here. Stay in Villach if you want to rush around visiting lots of lines, or in Koetschach-Mauthen if you want to stay in a really civilised little town and learn how one line operates.

Bibliography: 90 Jahre Arnoldstein - Hermagor, Schienenverkehr Aktuell 8/1984,p. 10-11.