



Train of WESTbahn

WESTbahn

Successful start - Despite headwind

On 11th December the privately owned Westbahn (Western Railway) started operations. In total, 130 million euros were invested, including 110 million in the trains. It is of strategic advantage that the SNCF, despite an initial delay, took a 25.93 per cent share in the parent company of the Westbahn, Rail Holding AG. This could lead to advantages at the European level even in the medium term.

170 employees, of which only 30 are in administration, operate the railway. 140 employees are engaged in the trains themselves, mostly in direct contact with customers. The 35 drivers are from ÖBB, DB and GYSEV; however, they were (and are) also trained together with Logistik Service GmbH (Logserv). The company attaches great importance to customer service. Six stewards per train sell and check the tickets, offer catering services and are responsible for the cleanliness of their wagon during the journey. It is noteworthy that the members of the five-person steward training team have a background predominantly in gastronomy and in air travel. The team is also constantly deployed in the trains themselves in order to gain practical experience. The relatively extensive IT system is supervised by five employees, as IT with the internet solutions is central throughout the field of production.

Operation

For proper running, all seven trains are needed. Over a short period of time, the timetable can also be adhered to with six trains if the turnaround times are short. The entire maintenance work of the trains has been handed over to Stadler Rail, which uses staff from Logserv for this purpose. The maintenance centre Westbahnbox was newly constructed by Westbahn on Logserv's site in Linz. In the two-track, 170-metre long hall, all maintenance works can be carried out, even a bogie change. The

maintenance works are mostly carried out at night.

The operation plan stipulates that three trains spend the night in Linz, two at Westbahnhof in Vienna and two in the Salzburg area. Consequently, each train reaches the maintenance centre on the third night at the latest.

During the turnaround periods, service firms clean the vehicles. The wholesale bakery Ströck directly restocks the bistro section of the trains in Vienna; for the early trains from Salzburg and Linz, partner firms are commissioned. In Vienna, the disposition is constantly occupied by an employee. The trains and their employees are connected via the infrastructure operator by means of GSM-R mobile communications. If a large number of seat reservations are made in a short period of time, the stewards can also be informed by means of mobile communication. The disposition is continuously informed of the location of the trains.

Comfort

The double-decker trains contain over 501 comfortable, adjustable seats. Apart from in the bistro area, all of these are covered with leather. The norm is two seats either side of the aisle in rows or compartments. At one end of the train is a small smoking section. Each of the four central wagons is equipped with a waiter-service bistro area. The menu includes warm and cold drinks as well as cold snacks. Payment can be made with the so-called

Kilometerbank, with credit card or with cash. The drinks machines accept cash.

New standards have been set with the toilets. In three central wagons there is not only one women's and one men's toilet, but also a urinal in the men's toilet. A central wagon is disabled-friendly, particularly with an appropriate toilet.

At each seat there is a 230-volt plug socket. Mobile repeaters are installed throughout the whole train for better reception. Unlimited Wi-Fi is available for free internet access. SSL (secure data transfer) is possible.

Tickets

Tickets can only be purchased via the internet or directly in the train. International UIC tickets are not available, at least for the time being. All tickets and subscriptions have no name attributed to them and can be transferred to another passenger. The tickets are valid for twelve months, the Kilometerbanks for 24 months.

It is possible to pay online with MasterCard and Visa or with EPS from an Austrian bank account. The range of tickets is to be expanded further. The ticket itself will then be sent as PDF to the e-mail address entered online. In the train, cash payments are of course also possible. Miles can be collected for "Miles & More".

There is actually only one class. But with the ticket "WESTbahn Club", you also have a claim to the empty seat next to you! And in fact there is a rule tariff and the half-price special offer. However, in reality the rule tariff is never relevant, because by purchasing a ticket you automatically own a "WESTcard", which entitles you to the special offer. For the moment at least, the rule tariff

PHOTO: WESTBAHN



View from inside

cannot be selected online.

The idea of the club is innovative. Despite its uniform features, the Westbahn has a varied range of offers. Particularly in the case of reservations, a first class atmosphere can, with a bit of imagination, be evoked – there is even more space available than in the usual first class. The more or less theoretical rule tariff is required for cooperation with the transport associations.

In principle, there are only four types of ticket. The single ticket without return journey for the route Vienna–Salzburg costs EUR 23.80, independent of the time of day. For the return journey, a new ticket must be purchased. With the Kilometerbank, the customer acquires a certain number of kilometres: 1000 kilometres for EUR 73, 5000 kilometres for EUR 355 or 10,000 kilometres for EUR 690. With the latter offer, the price for Vienna–Salzburg drops to EUR 21.87. The Kilometerbank is also suitable for group journeys. The yearly ticket, valid throughout the network, costs EUR 999, and includes Westbus. In addition, weekly and monthly tickets are available for certain routes. Children up to the age of six travel for free when accompanied by an adult, those up to the age of 15 for one euro, regardless of the length of the route. Children travelling alone pay the usual tariff. Club tickets are 75 per cent more expensive; in reality these are only sold during peak times, as the seats will otherwise remain empty anyway. Westbahn intends to retain this tariff structure for a certain period of time.

In the case of the Kilometerbank, the barcode of the ticket is read and credit automatically deducted by a steward using a portable terminal. If the remaining kilometre credit is not sufficient for the desired route, the customer pays the additional amount. The owner of a Kilometerbank can check his credit over the Internet.

Single tickets and the Kilometerbank have been available since mid-September 2011. As early as the start of October, the first Kilometerbanks were sold online.

Vouchers for 50 and 100 euros are also available. The stewards can give vouchers directly to passengers in the case of delays or when no seats are available. The vouchers can be used in the train for tickets and the bistro, or online.

Reservation

Seat reservations are never a requirement. For reservations, a system common in Japan is practised: the passenger does not reserve an individual seat; instead an area of the train at least as large as the number of reservations is marked as a reservation zone. In this area, the passengers can be sure of a seat and may select one freely.

The negotiations with the four transport networks that the Westbahn crosses (SVV, ÖÖVV, VOR, VVNB) were somewhat more difficult. For customers in possession of network tickets, it is possible to travel with the Westbahn along routes in the corresponding network areas.

As the stewards charge for everything with their hand-held terminals, billing is therefore made easy. They simply have to transfer the sums of cash that they collect to the Westbahn at a post office or bank branch.

The Westbahn was able to present a surprise in September 2011: together with the bus operator Blaguss, it unveiled the Westbus (PriMa 06/2011, page 96).

If it is possible to convert individual bus routes to rail operation, then there is no need to be concerned about the use of the buses, as there are sufficient potential routes in Austria where these can be deployed.

Future

In September 2012, the new 44-kilo-

metre long stretch of track through the Tullnerfeld from Vienna to St. Pölten will be inaugurated. By the time that the timetable is changed in December 2012 at the latest, the journey time for this route will be shortened from between 42 and 44 to 25 minutes. Hence, with the existing rolling stock, a consistent hourly service with 18 connections per day from Vienna to Salzburg will be possible. The journey time for the entire stretch will fall from between 2:57 and 2:59 to around 2:30 hours.

The Westbahn wants to continue travelling through Vienna's Westbahnhof in the long term. Customer orientation makes it highly advisable to follow the large number of passengers heading in that direction, since it is only there that very good connections to the local public transport system are available.

Expansion plans will only be realised after the successful launch of the Westbahn. The next five years are decisive for this. The break-even is to be attained in the third year of operation. If the Westbahn project should fail, the founder, associate and managing director, Stefan Wehringer, would experience "personal financial ruin".

The Westbahn and its parent company see many development opportunities internationally, particularly in the more open east. In Austria itself they want to take part in all tenders for rail transport in the future, and especially in the area of local passenger rail transport. The company acknowledges considerable potential there, and also in long-distance traffic. The question remains open as to which types of vehicles would most likely be deployed there. Opposition is to be expected less from politics than from the most important competitors.

Even though various other Internet domain names have already been registered for Westbahn, such as westflug.at, the company wants to remain in the rail industry at least for the medium term. ■