

DB Autozug night trains

Whoever commences a journey with a night train in Switzerland is most likely to do so with the City Night Line (CNL) trains of DB Autozug GmbH. They serve destinations in Germany, Holland, the Czech Republic and Denmark from Zürich and Basel. There are only a few other night trains still in operation, these being the Euro-Night "Wiener Walzer" and "Zürichsee" mostly operated by ÖBB and connecting Zürich with Wien (Vienna), Budapest, Graz and Zagreb. Also worthy of mention are the sleeping cars to Minsk and Moscow, which are incorporated in the DB train Basel – København (Copenhagen) as far as Hannover. However, since the timetable change on 9 December 2012 there are no more night trains to France and Spain, and the connections to Italy were given up quite some years ago. On the other hand, the DB services seem to be guaranteed for the next few years at least. At a media event in Zürich in October 2012, DB Autozug provided an insight into this economically-difficult business.

From DACH Hotelzug to DB Autozug

The international sleeping car (sleeper) pool "Trans Euro Night" (TEN) existed in Central Europe from 1971 to 1995. In 1992 the

national railways of Germany, Austria and Switzerland founded DACH Hotelzug AG – the name standing for the initials of the three countries D, A and CH. The aim was to create a high-value service exclusively with sleepers and reclining-seat coaches. However, it soon proved a mistake to do without couchette coaches, so these were quickly re-introduced. In 1997 ÖBB left the joint venture, which then became City Night Line (CNL) AG. In 2000 SBB also left.

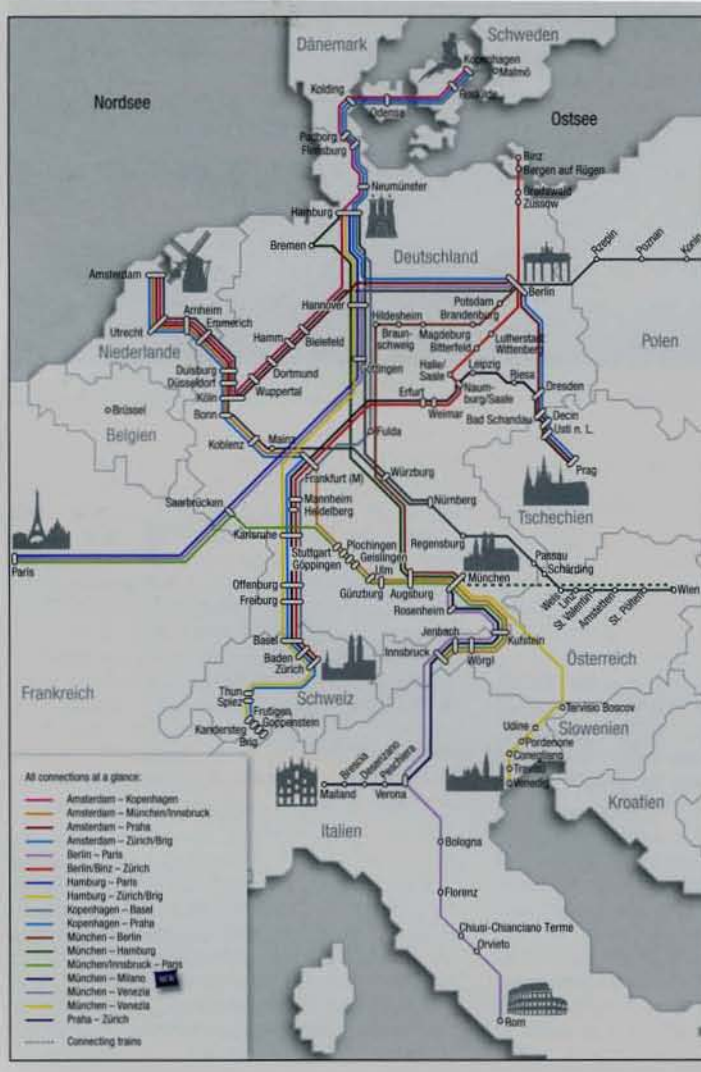
In early 2010 CNL AG was fully integrated into DB Autozug GmbH based in Dortmund, with a regional office in Zürich for the connections with Switzerland. CNL AG was liquidated. However, many coaches are still registered in Switzerland, and some of the sleeper and couchette-coach attendants based in Zürich have job contracts according to Swiss law. As quite a number of trains start and end in Zürich, this enables increased productivity, thereby compensating for the higher salaries. With the exception of the motorail trains, DB Autozug had already been using the term "City Night Line" for its entire night-time traffic since December 2007; the previous terms "DB Nachtzug" (Night Train) and "Urlaubs-Express" (Holiday Express) were discarded with that timetable change.

Difficult balancing act between costs and revenue

Whereas multiple units are becoming increasingly standard in daytime traffic, DB Autozug continues to operate with classic coach trains, which usually start off in coupled part trains that are separated along the route, according to the various destinations. By re-arranging (shunting) coaches – mainly in Mannheim and Hannover – it is possible to serve relatively many direct connections with only a few trains, which are moreover much in demand. Disadvantages of this operating concept are the relatively high production costs and certain comfort deficits for the passengers. Basically all CNL trains should include a restaurant car which, however, cannot always be provided. In 2012 there were unexpected technical problems with some of these cars. Furthermore, as some DB Autozug restaurant cars were hired out to DB Fernverkehr, there were fewer on the CNL network. A thorny topic is the breakfast – a popular object for cost-reduction exercises – which for several years has been served in a cardboard box. Even the passengers in the luxury class are served soggy slices of toast, for which the single slice of sausage and cheese is grossly inadequate. The times when crisp warm rolls were served are long gone. DB Autozug is aware of this problem and is working on a better solution.

Increasing internet bookings

Already 40 % of CNL tickets in Germany are purchased via the internet, whereas in Switzerland the figure is merely 25 %. Via the SBB website as well as at SBB ticket offices, only all-inclusive tickets can be bought, whereas for DB passengers who already have a ticket, the reservation with the surcharge can be booked separately.



The 2013 DB night-train network offers 17 connections; the München (Munich) – Milano connection was new for the December 2012 timetable change. The motorail trains are not shown (drawing: DB).

Temporarily shortened DB night trains to Italy

Since 1 January 2013, only trains with side-selective door release may run in Italy. DB Autozug is greatly affected by this, as to a large extent its deployed rolling stock does not fulfil this requirement. Side-selective door release via the 18-pole UIC cable is not internationally standardised; the method adopted by FS differs from that of DB, ÖBB and SBB. The DB night trains to Italy were thus under threat of being withdrawn as of 31 December 2012.

Until a few days before the turn of the year it was unclear whether the trains would be allowed to run, so bookings were not possible. Several DB representatives were in long negotiations with "Rome" to find a compromise solution. In Italy there was only limited sympathy towards DB's opinion that in view of the few stops, side-selective door release isn't as relevant for night trains as for other traffic. Finally it was agreed that until further notice every coach must have an extra attendant!

As a direct consequence of this requirement, DB Autozug has shortened the München – Roma train drastically. Since early January 2013 it consists of only three instead of eight coaches. The new wagon group to Milano was shortened from three to two coaches. Despite this, everyone involved was greatly relieved that the traffic didn't have to be withdrawn entirely. DB Autozug hopes that in the foreseeable future a less personnel-intensive solution can be found so that the trains can run again at their intended length.

(mr)



Motorail night train ARZ 13371 Hamburg – Narbonne, hauled by locomotive 115 336, at Kreiensen on the Hannover – Göttingen line (photo: J. Hörstel, 3 April 2009).

Prices are often not uniform either, making a comparison worthwhile. It is still possible – although not recommended – to board the couchette and sleeping cars without ticket and reservation. If places are still available, the sleeper attendant can sell tickets on board. As bookings at the ticket office or online are possible up to one hour before departure, the conductor must check occupancy at the terminal in every train, even if there are still free places according to the reservation list.

The best-value tickets, i.e. for the seating coaches, are mainly bought by backpackers; tourists are also the majority in the couchette coaches. Thanks to the regular business and leisure passengers, the high-value sleeping cars are well frequented the whole year round; the beds are usually booked out first. A particularly high rate of sleeping-car passengers is registered from Switzerland.

Fewer motorail trains

Besides the CNL trains DB Autozug also operates five night motorail connections within Germany exclusively for passengers with cars or motorbikes. With seasonal restrictions such trains also operate between Germany and Alessandria, Bozen, Innsbruck, Narbonne, Schwarzach-St. Veit and Villach. With the timetable change on 9 December 2012 the international services were markedly reduced as trains from Berlin were withdrawn. Roughly half the passengers in the motorail trains come from Germany, 13 to 15 percent from Switzerland. On the connection Lörrach – Hamburg 40 percent of passengers are Swiss; there is also a high percentage of Scandinavians and Netherlanders on their way to the south.

For motorail services, already 60 percent of bookings are via the internet, and 15 to 20 percent via the DB Call Centre. The previous pricing system with a four-level tariff has been replaced in winter 2012/2013 by a flexible pricing system with current day-to-day prices. The cheapest domestic (Germany-only) rate is EUR 99 for one couchette ticket including car or motorbike transport.

Uncertain future

DB Autozug has to provide its services entirely on its own account, i.e. without subsidies. Whereas earnings cover operational costs, vehicle replacements are difficult to finance. In particular the couchette and

seating coaches in the fleet are outdated; replacement of the less popular reclining-seat coaches is currently under discussion. The situation with the sleeping cars is better: the oldest in use are around 25 years, the double-deckers 15 years and the “Comfort-line” single-deckers less than ten years old. For the classic CNL night trains the network served is not likely to change significantly in the coming years. Although it would be desirable to offer a service to London, the enormous operational requirements and the high right-of-way prices make this an unrealistic proposition. Competition from private operators hardly threatens DB Autozug in view of the modest profit prospects. In 2009 the attempts by a private operator to start up a night-train service from Stuttgart to Berlin failed.

In 2012 DB Autozug purchased 18 used motorail wagons from Austria. The budget hardly permits further investments at present. Whilst all motorail wagons are currently approved for 160 km/h, it is conceivable that for any future purchases a speed reduction to 120 km/h would be accepted to enable the use of standard freight-wagon bogies. On the other hand, closed motorail wagons would be advantageous in order to prevent theft. Desirable extensions of motorail services to southern Europe fail, amongst other reasons, due to the significantly higher track access charges in Italy and France.

DB Autozug in figures

In 2011 DB Autozug – with 1100 employees a 100 % subsidiary of DB Fernverkehr – transported 4.6 million passengers over a distance of 1.5 billion passenger-kilometres, and 1.2 million road vehicles (including the Sylt Shuttle service).

In the 2012 timetable, the City Night Line trains served 17 routes in eight countries (Germany, Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Czech Republic). An overview of the rolling stock:

- 56 sleeping cars (incl. 25 double-deckers)
- 97 couchette coaches (incl. 15 with bicycle compartment)
- 25 seating coaches (incl. 20 with bicycle compartment)
- 21 reclining-seat coaches (sleeperettes)
- 9 restaurant cars

The motorail vehicles are not included in this list. (db/mr)

Traffic to islands

For completeness' sake it should be mentioned that DB Autozug also operates the Sylt Shuttle service across the causeway (dam) between the mainland and the island of Sylt. With more than 13 000 train journeys, about 440 000 road vehicles per year are transported over the Hindenburg Dam. DB Autozug also operates the ferry traffic to the North Sea island of Wangerooge as well as the three-kilometre-long metre-gauge island railway. However, DB Autozug does not own the ferries. (lüt/mr)