

The Usedom Bäderbahn – A Template for Europe’s Rural Railways?

ACoRP
New life for local lines



An ACoRP Briefing Sheet



A People’s Railway

Passengers alighting at Zinnowitz, the branch line train to Peenemunde is in the bay on the right

Introduction

“Do you have a train timetable?” I asked the receptionist at the plush Baltic Coast hotel in Ahlbeck. “Yes of course,” she replied, reaching for a stack of pocket timetables under the desk. “It’s our own UBB railway”, she said proudly. Question: How many seaside resorts in the UK would have up to date timetables at the ready, and how many would refer to the railway as ‘ours’? The UBB is one very special railway, showing the benefits of local management and strong local identity, but as part of a much bigger entity.

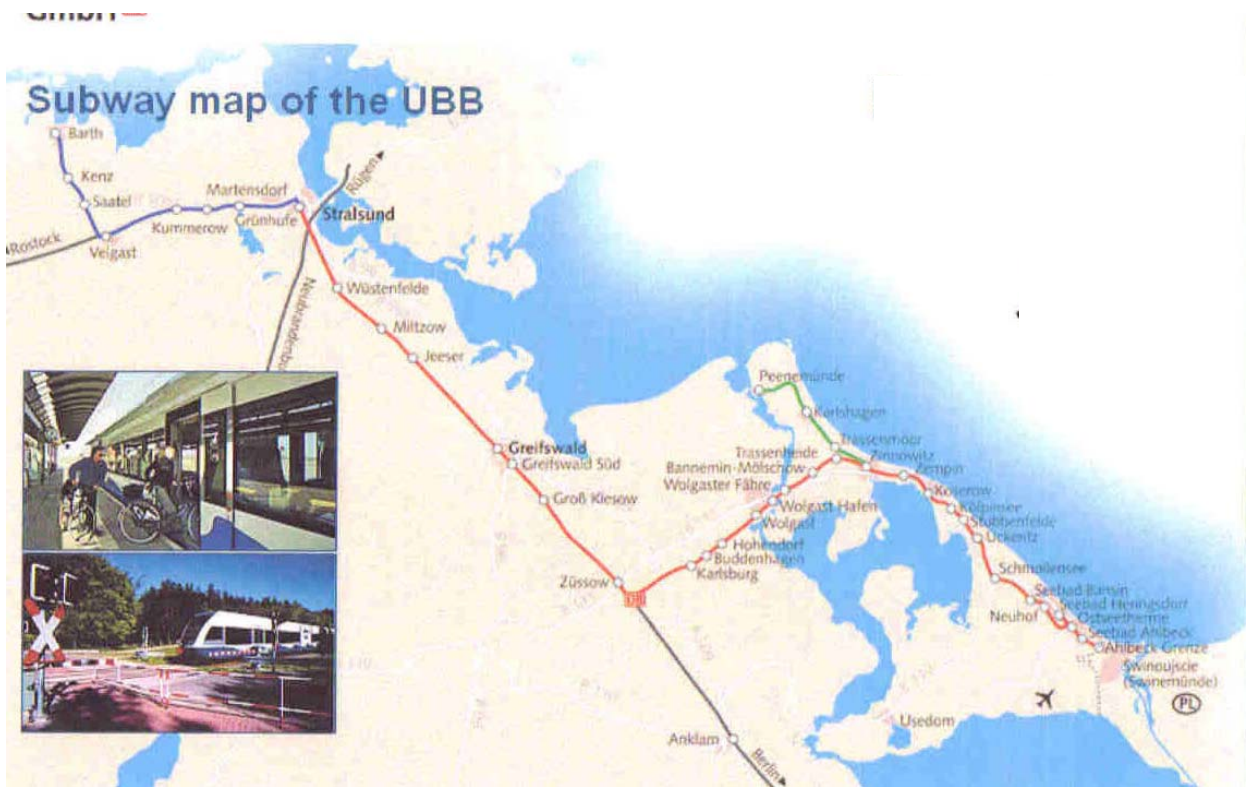
The ‘UBB’ stands for Userdomer Baderbahn, one of Europe’s most interesting and dynamic local railways. Earlier this year the stations won a special prize in the German national rail awards. But what is so special about the railway is that it is all top quality – the trains, stations, and staff. And above all, that people – like the receptionist – really see it as their railway.

Usedom: Pearl of the Baltic

Usedom is an island on the northern tip of Germany. It has some of the finest bathing beaches in northern Europe. They stretch along 42 km of coastline of sandy dunes and low cliffs, countryside of superb woodland and flower-rich meadows which form a Nature Park easily accessed by a network of walking and cycling trails. There are seawater lagoons full of birdlife, superb *fin de siecle* seaside resorts (even with piers!) and villages of thatched fishermen’s houses.

Linking them is the Usedom Bäderbahn, a local railway at the cutting edge of technological development.

Yet this is not a ‘private’ railway. It is actually owned by one of Europe’s biggest operators – Deutsche Bahn (DB).



Historical development

It was the coming of the railway from Berlin to the growing Baltic port of Swinemünde, on the eastern edge of the island, that brought visitors in their thousands. In 1876 the railway bridge over the Peene Straits at Karnin was built, linking Swinemünde and Usedom to the mainland. In 1894 the railway was extended from Swinemünde westwards along the coast to the little resorts of Ahlbeck and Heringsdorf. The villages, with nearby Bansin, soon grew into major holiday resorts for the rapidly expanding metropolis of Berlin, boosted by royal patronage and known as the *Kaiserbäder* or Emperor's Resorts as the Kaiser himself became a frequent visitor. Hotels and Guest houses expanded along the shores developing a distinctive architectural style of richly decorated wooden facades and balconies – *Baderarchitecture* – together with the handsome piers from where steam ships took excursionists along the coast to the nearby islands of Wollin or Rügen, or even across to Bornholme or Sweden

In 1911 the railway was extended as a single track line with passing loops along the length of the island serving Bansin, Ückritz, Zempin and other resorts and fishing villages westwards to the Wolgast ferry terminal, where a steam ferry crossed the straits to Wolgast Harbour and a branch line to Züssow to rejoin the main Berlin-Stalsund railway.

War and Occupation

The branch to Peenemünde was only opened in 1937 primarily to serve the huge military/scientific complex being developed at the end of the island, a use which continued through the period of Soviet occupation and

during the years of the German Democratic Republic. The branch did not become demilitarised and part of the DR passenger network until 1955.

World War II was a catastrophe for Usedom and its railways in more ways than one. Not only was Peenemünde, for obvious reasons, a prime target for Allied bombing raids resulting in massive destruction of military targets and civilian population alike, but the resultant redefinition of East Germany's borders along the Oder-Neisse line saw Swinemünde, renamed Zwinouj[cie, incorporated into Poland. The rail bridge to the mainland at Karnin was destroyed in 1945 not by the RAF but by the retreating SS, leaving the Usedom railway completely isolated both from its principal city and the rest of the rail network.

Further Decline

The 40 years of the German Democratic Republic saw the Usedom railway suffer slow decline. The now venerable steam ferry Stralsund (since preserved) carried visitors to catch island branch trains to reach popular camp sites and now collectivised hotels in the resorts along the coast. Diesellisation did occur in the 1960s with the ubiquitous DR 101 and 201 centre cab diesels replacing steam-hauled services, but otherwise there was little or no capital investment in decaying infrastructure.

At unification of Germany in 1989/90 and the two rail systems in 1991, the Usedom railway network was in a sad state of neglect, with weed infested track, crumbling stations and infrequent, slow services. East Germans could also now buy cars much more easily and rapid motorisation occurred. Passenger numbers on the branch declined dramatically. Closure seemed a likely option.

The Renaissance of a Railway

Strong local community support for the line, linked to a need to help rebuild the area's devastated tourist industry, encouraged a radically different solution. After much debate the line was privatised into a remarkable local railway-managed railway, a free standing company known as the Usedomer Bäderbahn GmbH (UBB). The UBB is 100% owned by Deutsche Bahn (DB) but with its own local management structure, staff, headquarters and workshops (in Heringsdorf). The company is able to draw down money from both its parent company and from Federal and Land (Regional government) sources. More than 100 million marks (around £33 million) have been spent by UBB on the line, rebuilding and reopening stations, installing new signalling, and introducing automatic level crossing at several locations. New stations have been opened, for example at Ahlbeck Therme to serve the island's new spa baths, and at Ahlbeck Grenze (Border) from where there is a foot and cycle crossing into Poland with bus links into Zwinoujście.

A new platform bay allows easy connections from Zinnowitz along the branch to Peenemünde where remains of the Rocket installations now form a major museum. A former Soviet submarine is anchored on the quayside as a museum attraction.

Track and bridge reconstruction allowed line speeds to be increased to 80km/h over the 76km network and more recently to 100km/h. A fleet of refurbished 1960s built VAB ex DR lightweight railcars – known colloquially as *Ferkeltaxis* or “Piglet taxis” - were introduced in 1993 to operate a 30 minute takt (clockface) service. One of the machines was even converted to operate, experimentally, on environmentally clean natural gas, the first such example in Europe. The old railcars are still used for heritage days and special charters.



DB operated 218 385 3 prepares to leave Seebad Herringsdorf with the summer Saturdays express to Koln. It will join a portion from Binz at Stralsund and finish its journey with electric traction

The New Bridge

But this was just a beginning. In 2000 a new lifting road bridge was built to connect Usedom with the mainland at Wolgast, incorporating track to allow the UBB through running to Züssow. This has resulted in the de-electrification of the Wolgast-Züssow section as the all-diesel UBB has taken over the 19km branch. The new bridge also allows DB to operate, for the first time since World War II, through express services at summer weekends to and from Berlin over the UBB. A loco-hauled summer-only service operates from Koln.



The Usedom Island lift bridge really does lift!



Above: Two GTW2/6 depart Wolgast Fahre for the main line connection at Zussow. Every other hour the train runs through to Stralsund

New Trains Introduced

Later in 2000 UBB introduced its fleet of new light weight articulated railcars, the Bombardier/Adtranz/Stadler Class 646 (GTW2/6). This is a totally new concept of diesel railcar, two car units that can be operated in multiple, with the power unit not underfloor but in a central, easily accessible (and therefore easily maintainable) corridor unit. In this area is packed a MTU 12 cylinder diesel engine powering two traction motors. The saloon areas are articulated off this central drive package. The units for Usedom differ from other versions of this train in that they have a lower floor height and are heavier than other versions. They also have 2 + 3 seating to accommodate the holiday crowds. The low floor flexi-space areas offer easy carriage of cycles, wheelchairs and luggage. Fast and comfortable, these units have transformed rural branch line travel from the poor relation in transport terms to the core of an integrated green network. At the three “Kaiser” resorts of Bansin, Heringsdorf and Ahlbeck UBB now operates a 30-minute bus service linking stations with resort centres, promenades and hotels. UBB weekly and season tickets are valid on the bus.

Right: The commodious interior of a GTW2/3 showing the bike storage and toilet area.

UBB services now operate beyond the branch on a two-hourly timetable along the main DB network to Stralsund. From December 2002 UBB extended operations along the branch to Barth further along the coast. Following prolonged negotiations, EU funding has led to the extension of the railway into Poland to rejoin the island system with Zwinouj[cie, giving real economic benefits to communities on both sides of the border. The extension opened in 2008.

Conductor guards have been retained on trains because the company realises their value not just for security and passenger

confidence but for product awareness, selling a range of weekly season and rover tickets, including cycle tickets. Cycles are hugely important on the branch, with an excellent network of station-accessible traffic free trails – several stations offer cycle hire outlets. Cycling is now as important as the beaches for Usedom as health conscious Germans re-discover the benefits and pleasures of gentle cycling. Marketing through imaginative leaflets, liveries and signage is also excellent. Each station staffed sells an excellent range of UBB branded merchandise including watches, postcards, posters and children’s toys.

The stations

The condition of the stations is excellent. All have been refurbished, with many of the original buildings lovingly restored. It is no surprise that the railway won a special prize for the entire network of stations in the 2009 German rail awards. Many of the larger buildings have other uses as well as ticket offices – good quality restaurants, a physiotherapist and a railway-themed pub (at Herringsdorf) are some examples.





Could it work here?

One of the many interesting aspects of the UBB is that it is owned by DB but operated as an independent local railway with its own branding. Apart from the conductors' DB-branded equipment, everything looks and feels locally owned. Could the combination of a railway owned by a larger undertaking, but with independent local management – and funding – work in the UK? The answer could be a qualified 'yes', giving all the advantages of 'microfranchising' with few of the disadvantages. It has the right economies of scale with some 24 DMUs, allowing for a substantial depot facility at Herringsdorf and a substantial complement of staff. Major maintenance seems to be carried out at DB's Rostock works. Other major overheads – and possibly procurement – are done through the DB parent company. The sort of network where this could work includes Tees and Esk Valley, Cumbrian Coast and probably the West of England branches. The idea deserves further discussion. And Usedom is a great place to visit, to see an example of what really is best practice!

Colin Speakman and Paul Salvesson

Rapid Growth

Success has been spectacular. In 1992 the Usedom branch was carrying a mere 260,000 passengers per year. In 2001 the UBB passenger totals exceeded 2 million, and this at a time of rapidly rising car ownership. Significantly, though most visitors, despite excellent rail connections, still come to Usedom by car, evidence is that when they arrive they use UBB as part of their holiday experience.

Much of the success of UBB lies in the fact that its activities are so clearly linked to local initiative and enterprise. It is incontestable proof that the concept of a locally-managed railway can offer a future for rural branch lines once candidates for closure. But it also underlines the need for the right kind of investment – in infrastructure, rolling stock, and in imaginative marketing. But the economic as well as the environmental benefits, for the rural communities such railways serve, are enormous.

Above: GWT2/6 crosses to the 2002 built lift bridge at Wolgast Haven

Below: A quick trip to Poland. The UBB has now been extended to Swinoujscie at the Polish end of the island.





Above: The industrial museum site at Peenemünde,

Right: DDA compliance DB style, Paul Salveson clammers into the weekly express to Koln at Seebad Herringsdorf



Looking through the power pod on a GWT2/3



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