

Steaming to the top

Vintage and not-so-vintage steam and diesel on Austria's Schafbergbahn – *Hugh Dougherty* enjoys a day out.

I spotted the track of the Schafbergbahn as soon as we had unpacked in the summer of 2010 in our hotel at St Gilgen on Austrian's Wolfgangsee, for it clung to the face of the Schafberg mountain itself, just across the lake from where we looked out. And I knew we had to take a trip on such a metre-gauge railway, as Austria's steepest, steaming to the top, no less than 1,190 metres high, in just 5.85 kilometres of steeply graded, Abt-rack narrow gauge track.

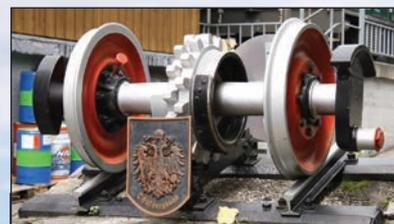
So it was that, wife convinced that the views would be good, we crossed the Wolfgangsee on the 1873-built steamer 'Kaiser Franz Josef I', with our through tickets. Never was there a more appropriate way to approach a steam-worked, narrow gauge line, even though the ship, once the pride and joy of the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser himself,

conceals a diesel engine these days under her vintage exterior.

Going up

Being a busy August Sunday, the station at St Wolfgang was crowded. Efficient crowd management and train working quickly had us crammed into one of the line's coaches. It was soon hefted up the mountain, as part of a two-car set, by one of the railway's more recent oil-fired steam locomotives built by SLM of Switzerland in 1995.

Just in front of us, at a decently safe distance, another train blasted its way skywards. It was thus possible to look out and watch it edge its way, a whirl of connecting rods and heaven knows what else under the boiler, all accompanied by the hiss and purposeful beat of our own loco, like that in front, propelling the train.



Main picture: Schafbergspitze upper terminus, the Wolfgangsee visible below.

Above: Abt exhibit, reassuring passengers at St Wolfgang that there's plenty keeping their train on the track!

Below left: New and old alongside at the summit.

Bottom left: Cleaning the Giesl ejector on the 1893 coal-fired loco. All photos by the author.

The vistas below started to unfurl as we clattered over the rack points into the passing loop at Schfbergalpe station, where we sat behind the preceding train to allow it to cross a descending steam-controlled, two-coach set.

And then it was off up the curving line, blasting through rock cuttings, out over the edge of the mountain, through a tunnel and into the sunlight just short of the Schafbergspitze station, summit of the line. It is home to a hotel, walking paths and views of mountains in every direction, the train seeming a tiny thing against the panorama of the mountains and Wolfgangsee below.

While the train took a breather,



we went off to book our return journey – a must to help the staff load trains safely. With that done, I managed to persuade my wife to postpone our healthy walk around the summit until the appearance of what the railway’s brochure described as ‘the nostalgic steam train’. It was a sight to behold when the headlight of its green carriage emerged from the tunnel mouth swathed in steam and smoke. Like its coal-fired loco of 1893, it was in the green livery of the Salzkammergut Lokalbahn, which opened the railway. With driver and young fireman both mopping their brows, the train triumphantly came to a halt at the platform.

That’s where the fireman scrubbed cinders out of the Giesl ejector gauze



with a brush, topped up the boiler and fired a couple of shovelfuls as the driver oiled round. He did so by the very non-vintage expedient of squirting oil at the motion from a squeeze bottle, ignoring the fine array

Above: Looking back down the gradient to Schafbergalpe station.

of OBB, Austrian state railway-branded oil cans displayed in a compartment below the bunker. It was hot work, and the crew swigged a well-earned drink of water, while posing for tourist cameras and »



answering questions about their steed. There's no doubt that narrow gauge steam, a rack and a mountain have a universal appeal.

Coming down

After our walk and picnic, there was just enough time to examine a cable-worked, narrow-gauge short line hoisting goods up to the hotel from the station. It was then time to descend. Call me obtuse if you want, but we chose the narrow gauge railcar that had been parked in the siding when we arrived.

Maybe it was early exposure to County Donegal diesel railcars as a wee boy, but whatever the reason I had to sample a diesel descent. And a good choice it proved, for the steam train in front was packed full, making photography impossible, whereas we had uninterrupted views. The sounds made by

the railcar as it braked its careful way down the mountain took some beating for variety, while reassuring us that its brakes and rack system were in tip-top condition.

And so back to terra firma at St Wolfgang, where the fireman of the vintage train was paddling hot ash and clinker out of a pit, his engine having been put away for the night. It was a reminder that narrow gauge, coal-fired steam is no easy option. We headed for the pier, leaving our diesel railcar 'boat train' behind, boarded our ship and sailed back to St Gilgen. The ship booking office, where we had bought our through tickets, was selling a working HO gauge model of a rack train. However, the EU 250 price tag, plus the fact that She made me admit I'd need to build a model of the entire Schafberg to run the train, put an end to any plans I might have been harbouring for a working souvenir. Shame!

But this is a line worth visiting, and if you're in the area don't miss it

"When the headlight of its green carriage emerged from the tunnel mouth swathed in steam and smoke..."

This page: The vintage train makes a fiery exit from the tunnel.

for steam in superb scenery, outstanding engineering and that essential narrow gauge charm. It runs daily from 1st May to the end of October. You can also see the remains of the 76cm gauge Salzkammergut Lokalbahn, the concern's other line, which until 1957 linked Salzburg to Bad Ischl and Mondsee over 66 kilometres of track.

Although we hadn't time to visit the line's museum at Mondsee – another time, I hope – we did manage a cycle on hired bikes over a long section of the trackbed between St Gilgen and Strobl. It was pleasing to note a plaque recalling the former use of the cycleway, so the line – not forgetting its locomotive association with the Welshpool & Llanfair – is fondly recalled locally. Replacement services are provided by the OBB, Austrian Railways' post buses, at least offering some continuity with the line's past.

Make tracks, then, for the Salzkammergut and the narrow gauge on offer. There's plenty to enjoy, and I can still hear the beat of the vintage steam train, triumphantly cresting the top of the gradient to reach the summit of the Schafberg. **NGW**

