

A Swiss view of Britain



This is Swiss cartoonist Andreas Gefe's view of Tube travellers in London.

Andreas, a keen cyclist and rail traveller, was invited to London to give his artistic impression of Britain while British cartoonist Martin Rowson went to Switzerland to look at the Alpine country's admirable railways.

It was the Swiss Ambassador Bruno Spinner's idea to highlight Swiss methods which he believes Britain would do well to adopt.

And when Swiss rail experts outlined their ideas at a special event in London in June, the audience of British rail experts agreed that Britain could and should copy the Taktfahren plan which provides for a "clever pattern of timetabling" designed to maximise connections.

It allows the Swiss railways to offer fast journey times but without ultra-high-speed services. One expert described the Taktfahren as a heartbeat which all rail operators had to get in rhythm with.

Peter Vollmer, director of the Swiss Association of Public Transport, said its success was dependent on a multi-modal ticket which allowed easy transfer between rail operators and other modes too.

He also said 2 million people had national railcards – which Railfuture wants to see introduced into Britain. Rail investment was supported by a large percentage of the population. The people decide about the kind of transport at referendums and then the companies must make sure that their clients (the public) are happy.

Public transport use dropped in the 1960s when there was no investment in rail and only investment in roads but now public transport use is growing after investment, since the 1980s.

Villages of more than 100 have a right to be served by public transport and all villages of more than 500 population usually have an hourly service.

The full Taktfahren system will be introduced on 12 December 2004, with 95% of the trains changing timetabling and there will be 40% more trains.

Alps freight must go by train. The maximum amount of lorry trips allowed is 650,000, according to the Federal Constitution Article 84.

This was introduced against the wishes of the Government and now the Swiss are in conflict with the European Union which believes there should be "free" choice of transport.

Switzerland is building massive tunnels under the Alps to increase rail capacity.

Mr Vollmer said building the Alp tunnels was a political decision. He was baffled by questions about feasibility studies and cost-benefit analysis.

He said there was a simple assessment. Don't build the tunnels and there will be more traffic on the roads. A good transport system is good for quality of life and good for the economy. Economists now understand this.

One British expert said it would be too ambitious to try to introduce a Taktfahren for the whole of Britain but it could perhaps be tested out in one area, perhaps Lincolnshire.

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