

Rail transport and cycle tourism in South Tyrol and in other European regions: challenges and solutions

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During the EURAC conference “Sustainable Mobility from Bike to Train: An Opportunity for Regions and Destinations” representatives of railway undertakings and passenger rail authorities, experts on tourism and bicycles discussed the opportunities and difficulties of a better integration of bicycle tourism and regional rail transport.

Roberto Rubbo, Head of the Mobility Agency of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano gave the participants an overview of the concept of the integration of rail transport and bicycle tourism in the region. The goal of the concept is to promote soft tourism through the integration of public transport and cycling.

The province is supporting bike usage in combination with public transport in different ways. The “BikeMobil”-Card allows usage of public transport for between one and seven days and includes renting a bike for one day. To avoid congestion especially on destinations with a lot of tourists bicycle rental points offer one-way tours. Tourists don’t have to return their bikes at the same spot they rented them from.

The core of the concept today is the Venosta / Vinschgau railway between Merano and Resia. Eight rental points are spread along the railway line. Tourists use the train to drive up the valley, rent bikes at the upper end and cycle back down towards Merano. The bikes are returned at another rental spot along the valley and tourists return to Merano or Bolzano by train.

The major challenge today is congestion by bike users. Despite the offer of one-way service at rental points many tourists still want to transport their bikes on the train. There is until today no definite solution for this issue.

Hugo Goetsch of the Southern Tyrol Cycling Agency (Südtirol Rad, Bici Alto Adige) gave a more detailed insight into the bicycle concept of the province. In entire South Tyrol 23 rental and service points are part of the concept. Two destinations are the key areas for bicycle tourists. The Vinschgau / Venosta valley has around 2.000 bike rentals per day in the peak season. In the Hochpustertal tourists rent around 4.000 bikes daily during peak season. Most bikes are returned at rental stations at the lower end of the valleys. Many more cyclists transport their own bike up the valley with trains, cars or busses and cycle back down the valley.



Bicycle rental point

The most important solution to solve these problems is the close cooperation with tourism agencies, bike rental owners and public transport authorities. The BikeMobil Card already explained by Roberto Rubbo can be seen as a prime example of the success of this concept. The number of sold tickets (“BikeMobil Cards”) rose from 6.000 in 2002 to 28.000 in 2008.

Maurizio Chiusa of SAD Rail Services described the situation from the perspective of a railway undertaking. SAD is a subsidiary company of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano and provides public transport in South Tyrol. Since 2005 SAD is also responsible for the Val Venosta / Vinschgau Railway. 11 diesel-electric STADLER ATR 100 and 8 STADLER Flirt (ETR 155 and ETR 170) service the connection between Merano / Meran and Resia with around 2 mio rail kilometres per year.



Bicycle trolley

The Venosta / Vinschgau valley railway was closed by the national railway undertaking in 1991. In 1999 South Tyrol decided to reopen the line and took over the infrastructure from the national railway undertaking. In 2005 the connection reopened. The railway line is part of the concept to improve the situation for bicycle tourism in the area. To improve the capacity for bikes in the trains some seats were removed. Trains can carry between 15 (ATR 100) and 36 bikes (ETR 170) depending on the model.

Still the capacity of the trains was not sufficient. The reaction of SAD was to improve information for customers. During peak hours assistants supported cyclists with getting on and off the trains. As a last measure a trolley was instigated that transports bikes parallel to the trains. On the most overrun connections the transportation of bikes on the train was forbidden during peak hours. Instead, bikes were loaded on the trolley and transported on the road in parallel to the train. Cyclists would receive their bikes at their destinations. As a result the number of bikes transported on trains dropped considerably from 16.125 in 2010 to just 2.318 in 2011.

Similar problems – although not of the same magnitude – were also reported from other participants of the workshop.

Kai Dahme of the VBB (transport association for Berlin and Brandenburg) reported they had problems with congestion from cyclists on trains going from Berlin to the Baltic Sea on around 20-30 days per year. Trains to the coast have 70 places for bikes – making more room would be a waste of space in trains usually used by commuters who prefer seating over large areas reserved for cyclists. The congestion is caused by day tourists who spontaneously take their bike up for a weekend. The VBB reacts by marketing other destinations for tourists that are reached with other trains. Also additional trains are used on weekends with expected large tourist numbers. Due to the unstable weather in

Germany this is difficult to plan and no real solution exists for the problem. Trains are sometimes largely empty and at other times completely overrun depending on the weather and the weather forecast. Supporting rental services would be not as feasible as in South Tyrol. Most cyclists come from the region and own their bikes – they would not use rented bikes.

Participants concluded that responsibilities of passenger rail have to be clearly defined and the government has to provide adequate financial means to fulfil these obligations. Railways can easily integrate limited numbers of cyclists in their daily routine. Cycling tourism can even improve railway services as trains on off-peak times when it can improve capacity utilisation. If railways are integrated in local cycling concepts and numbers of cyclists grow a price tag has to be attached to these additional services. In many cases it will turn out that other solutions such as bus services or the support of local rental points are cheaper and more flexible than railways and therefore should be promoted and used instead.