

Austria



„175 Years Railway  
in Austria“

Hardly had the rail been discovered transport, when a real boom started in the second half of the 19th century: railway company shares were an immediate hit, but not all of the many companies managed to survive. The railway system was nationalised.

Very soon a dense rail network spanned the Danube Monarchy. Its uniformity can still be seen today: railway buildings that look just the same in Southern Tyrol as in Galicia, narrow gauge railways that have the same narrow gauge width of 760 millimetres throughout all the states of the former Habsburg Empire. In fact, it is actually called a „Bosnian“ gauge.

The new mode of transport soon had to meet military requirements in addition to civilian transport tasks. For this reason, a city railway was built to traverse Vienna, so that troops could be transported through the city as quickly as possible.

In 1912 began the electrification of the railway. Starting in the west with the Karwendelbahn in Tyrol, the electrical lines only reached the federal capital after the Second World War.

The network of Austrian Federal Railways (ÖBB) now mainly consists of the Westbahn (Western Railway) between Vienna and Vorarlberg, and the Südbahn (Southern Railway) between Vienna and Carinthia as the main lines. Connecting routes such as the Brenner, the Tauern and the Pyhrnbahn cross the Alps.

### Branch line found few attraction

The ÖBB paid little attention to the regional network after the Second World War, causing a vicious circle of fewer passengers and fewer offers: speed restrictions made travelling there increasingly less attractive, so the ÖBB continued to reduce traffic. Again and again there were waves of decreasing usage, and most recently a number of branch lines in Lower Austria were sold to the state for the symbolic price of one euro. Although the state had previously announced that none of the acquired rail lines would be shut down, in actual fact only one route, the Mariazellerbahn, is still in daily operation. A complete regionalisation of funding for regional traffic like in Germany does not exist in Austria. Of the 6,710 km of tracks belonging to the Austrian na-

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*Trackage infrastructure made in Austria*

tional railway company after World War I, today only 5,100 km remain, and it is expected that these will be further reduced by several hundred kilometres by 2025.

Of Vienna's six former terminal railway stations, only the Westbahnhof (West Station) will remain in existence. The Südbahnhof (South Station) and Ostbahnhof (East Station) will be turned into the new Vienna Central Station, which is currently being built as a through station. Since 1997, work has been underway to modernise the most important stops of the ÖBB within the framework of the so-called „Railway Station Campaign“.

#### **Founding a holding company**

As always, the traditionally loss-making Austrian Federal Railways are at the mercy of politics: in 1992, they received a separate legal personality and were separated from the budget. Under the right-wing conser-

vative government after the turn of the century, the „red train“ was split up into separate companies under the umbrella of a holding company. Since then, managers from outside of the railway industry have been at the head of the company in quick succession, and they in turn have brought colleagues from their former companies to the ÖBB.

Enrichment allegations were made while cutbacks were carried out in operations and personnel. Some of the managers had to leave the ÖBB due to speculative trading. In 2008, the Group acquired the cargo division of the Hungarian State Railways, with the effect that the long profitable ÖBB freight division dramatically slipped into the red.

#### **„Target network 2025“ presented**

Projects such as the politically enforced Koralmbahn, currently under

construction between Graz and Klagenfurt, place a burden on the infrastructure budget of the ÖBB. The Lower Austrian Governor in turn delayed for years a railway tunnel under the Semmering – a competitive rail link between Vienna and the South – by his rejection, while at the same time supporting an already completed parallel motorway, including tunnel.

Recently, the ÖBB presented the „target network 2025 +“: 400 kilometres of new track to be built, 700 kilometres to be handed over to the federal provinces.

According to the proposal, in 13 years 300 million passengers instead of the current 240 million would use the ÖBB yearly. The company currently has 45,000 employees, with a declining trend. ■