

GALLIC THUNDER



A TRIP TO PHOTOGRAPH BIG DIESELS EAST OF PARIS

FRANCE

10 - 12 & 27 - 29 SEPTEMBER 2013

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A
RAILOGRAPHY
PRODUCTION

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cover photos

upper : 26140 passed Arzviller with TER35020, the 14:20 from Strasbourg to Nancy on 27 September 2013.

lower : 72190 led IC1745, the 15:12 Paris Est - Belfort Ville, through Bayel, east of Bar-sur-Aube, on 10 September 2013.

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*It was dull and wet
for most of the five days
I spent on the Paris - Belfort
line.*

*Sunset was still over half an hour away
when 72130 approached Bar-sur-Aube in the
gloom with IC1848, the 16:50 Belfort Ville - Paris
Est on Sunday 29 September. At least the wet rails
reflected the loco's headlights.*

INTRODUCTION

The iconic SNCF Class CC72100s are probably the last six-axle, express passenger diesel locos left in Europe and are largely restricted to the Paris – Belfort route these days. I detoured from my usual route to and from Germany in September to spend five days attempting to photograph them. A quick visit was also paid to the Saverne Gap, on the electrified main line west of Strasbourg.

THE PARIS - BELFORT LINE

The Belfort line is double track throughout, 443km long and was the main route between Paris and Basel until a few years ago. Electrification currently extends for 40km or so at the Paris end, although this is being extended to reach Troyes by 2016. The line is also wired for around 4km east of Culmont-Chalindrey, where it crosses the Dijon – Nancy line.

Naturally the character of such a long line changes considerably over its length but most of the 130km stretch I visited, between Troyes and Langres, could be described as running through open countryside, either flat or gently rolling. Villages tend to be fairly small and quite widely

separated and most of the land is devoted to agriculture or forestry. From Chaumont to Langres the line follows the beautiful Marne Valley between wooded hills for 30km, paralleled in places by the Marne et Saone Canal. There are a few significant towns en-route, notably Troyes (pop. 61000), Chaumont (pop. 24000) and, further east, Vesoul (pop. 19500) but the area is generally sparsely populated and most of the intermediate stations have closed, leaving gaps as long as 70km between the few that remain.

72121 passed Thivet, in the Marne Valley west of Langres, with IC1848, the 16:50 from Belfort Ville to Paris Est, on 10 September.





I found this spot at Bayel, a few km east of Bar-sur-Aube, on the first day but had to return at the weekend when there were some trains to photograph.

72130 wheeled IC1840, the 13:20 from Belfort, towards Paris on Saturday 28 September, luckily coinciding with the weekend's best light.

PASSENGER TRAINS

The principal passenger services east of Troyes are the Paris – Belfort Intercities trains worked by class CC72100 diesels based at Chalindrey depot, typically on 6 to 8 corail coaches. Unfortunately there weren't many of them. There should have been six daytime trains east of Troyes on weekdays, three each way, but the 09:12 from Paris and the 13:20 from Belfort didn't run on Tue 10, Wed 11 or Thu 12 September. Weekend services were much better with seven trains seen on Sat 28 Sep and nine on Sun 29 Sep, including a westbound empty stock on the

Sunday. There are a handful of other services booked for CC72100 haulage, including the odd train to Reims or Dijon, but I didn't see any of them.

As well as the loco hauled trains there are also regional services from Paris to Culmont-Chalindrey and on the Dijon – Culmont-Chalindrey – Chaumont – Reims route. These were all worked by AGC DMUs in Champagne-Ardenne's awful livery. B82500 Bi-mode units (diesel + 25kV AC + 1.5kV DC) worked many of these but some were operated by straight DMUs of class X76500.

FREIGHT TRAFFIC

I expected to see very little freight traffic but there was more than anticipated. On Tue 10 Sep three freights were seen in the afternoon, a westbound block train of cereal hoppers worked by one of the relatively new BB75400s and a mixed freight in each direction hauled by a pair of BB67400s. One of the mixed freights had another pair of BB67400s coupled DIT inside, making it look like a quadruple header.

Wed 11 Sep produced an ECR class 66 on steel coil in the morning, a westbound mixed freight with a pair of BB67400 in mid-afternoon and a Europorte Euro4000 on oil tanks in the late afternoon. The mixed freight was at a similar time to that the previous day so it could be regular.

Nothing was seen on the Thursday, when I was only by the line for a couple of hours in the morning, or at the weekend.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Having never visited or knowingly travelled over the line before, it was a bit difficult to know where to begin but a quick trip to Drehscheibe produced a few ideas and a trawl around Google Maps generated some more. Troyes seemed a good place to start, as it was where the autoroute from Calais met the line, and Culmont-Chalindrey seemed a good place to finish as the line to the east appeared to be closely paralleled by telegraph poles on the south side. The 140km

67528 and 67617 dragged an eastbound freight up the Marne Valley towards Langres at Thivet on Tuesday 10 September.



in between turned out to be quite photogenic with some really excellent photo positions and plenty more that were perfectly acceptable, if fairly unexciting.

In terms of photo positions, Luzy-sur-Marne, a few km south of Chaumont (or east in railway terms) is worth a special mention. The line runs alongside the Marne et Saone Canal here and there are some excellent morning shots looking across the canal to the railway with wooded hills rising up behind. Other locations were found in the Marne Valley near Thivet and at Humes, just north of Langres. Away from the Marne Valley, Bayel, a few km east of Bar-sur-Aube was also good.

Unfortunately the weather wasn't very co-operative. On the first day there was sunshine between the showers and a couple of 72100s and a freight were photographed in good light.

The remainder of the first three day visit was dull and wet and most of the weekend visit, a couple of weeks later, was the same, with a brace of shots in half sun on the Saturday being the only respite.

The line would be well suited to a mid-summer trip to take advantage of the trains that run in the early morning and in the evening. Little runs in the middle of the day so there would be plenty of time to make up for lost sleep or enjoy a long lunch while the sun was too high for photography.

A car is almost essential to get around due to the distances between stations and the sparse train service. I didn't see many buses either. There are a few locations that could be reached on foot or bicycle from Chaumont but it would be very hard work to do the line justice without a vehicle.

AGC units operate around half the passenger trains on the line. B82501 and B82513 approached Bayel on train 11649, the 12:12 from Paris Est to Culmont-Chalindrey, on 10 September. Both units are of the BiBi variety, capable of working off 25kV AC and 1.5kV DC overhead as well as in diesel mode.





26231 passed Arzviller with EN452, the 07:44 from Moskva Belorusskaja to Paris Est on 27 September 2013.

THE SAVERNE GAP

I spent almost three hours at Arzviller, at the top of the climb through the Saverne Gap, on the afternoon of 27 September 2013, en route from the Gäubahn to Chaumont.

The Saverne Gap provides a relatively easy route through the Vosges for the Paris - Nancy - Strasbourg - Offenburg and Luxembourg - Metz - Strasbourg - Basel main lines, which join at Reding, near Sarrebourg. The combined double-track line, electrified at 25kV, soon meets and

then runs alongside the Rhine - Marne canal in a deep cutting that ends at the west end of the Arzviller tunnel. The canal runs through a parallel tunnel and, 1.5km later, both railway and canal emerge into the valley of the river Zorn, just below the village of Arzviller. For the next 15km, the railway and canal follow the twisting Zorn valley down to Saverne where they emerge from the forested hills into the rolling farmland of Alsace.

PASSENGER TRAINS

Almost half the trains seen during my session at Arzviller were TGVs linking Strasbourg and points east with Paris and other major cities such as Nantes and Bordeaux. The term TGV covers a multitude of different types these days but most trains were either TGV Réseau sets in the 500 series or Euro Duplex sets in the 4700 series. One of the new 800 series RGV2N2 sets was also seen.

There were a number of loco worked TER trains, all formed of BB26000 Sybics at the west end of quite long push-pull rakes. A couple of TERs were worked by Z27500 AGC EMUs. Looking back at my notes from a 2010 visit, one of the trains that was loco worked then was an AGC this time (14:15 ex Nancy) but generally little had changed and most of the loco numbers were familiar from the previous trip. No Z11500 EMUs were seen this time but that might have been due to the time of day as they usually ran in the morning and midday period in 2010.

A couple of longer distance loco hauled services were seen as well, both worked by Sybics. IC90 from Zürich to Bruxelles was formed of SBB stock apart from an SNCB coach coupled directly behind the loco. This train had been



TGV set 807 is one of the latest RGV2N2 variant and was photographed at Arzviller on 27 September, working TGV2358 from Colmar to Paris.

hauled by a BB15000 last time I saw it at Arzviller in 2010. EN452 from Moskva to Paris was largely formed of modern RZD coaches in a snazzy red and grey livery with at least one PKP vehicle in the formation. Quite a change from the austere dark green Russian sleepers I remember from the '70s and '80s.

A BB25500 propelling an empty set of squat stainless steel coaches worked east during my visit, the first of the type I've seen here, although they do work some trains from Strasbourg to Saverne. Seeing the driving trailer, I assumed it was an EMU and was taken by surprise by the loco on the back.

FREIGHT TRAFFIC

My 2010 visit coincided with a strike and I'd assumed that the relatively low levels of freight activity were due to that. However, it wasn't any busier this time. Four freights were seen, only one of them hauled by Fret SNCF power, almost inevitably a BB37000. Another train was worked by an ECR class 66 and the remaining two by SNCB class 1300s, one of them double headed.

PHOTOGRAPHY

As this was only a stopover on a longer journey, I didn't go out of my way to find new locations, returning to Arzviller, where I knew there were good afternoon shots. It was a surprise to see how overgrown it had become in the last three years but the stepladder saved the day (as it often does).

Unlike my visit to the Paris – Belfort line, there was unbroken sunshine for the three hours I was at Arzviller.

The only westbound freight to pass Arzviller during my visit was this Ambrogio intermodal train hauled by SNCB's cleanest loco, 1341.



COMMENTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the Paris – Belfort line is a little way off the direct route from the UK to Germany by road, it's a very easy and stress free drive from Calais. Compared to the overcrowded and badly maintained motorways through Lille and across southern Belgium, the autoroute from Calais to Reims and on to Troyes is a delight to drive with relatively light traffic and good quality infrastructure. Troyes is around the same distance from Calais as Luxembourg or Köln but it didn't feel like it. There was a price, of course, as it's a toll road and the journey costs around €30 each way, well worth it to avoid the hassle and frustration of the more northerly routes in my opinion.

The CC72100s are impressive locos and make a suitably impressive noise, filling the Marne Valley with sound, even when going downhill. It's just a shame there aren't more trains for them to work. There seemed to be plenty of locos around with 14 different machines seen in use, far more than could possibly be justified in most countries (72121/130/138/140/145/147/148/151/160/166/172/176/179/190).

Looking at the potential for passenger traffic, it's surprising there are any trains at all east of Troyes. Through traffic has understandably gone over to the newly built LGVs in recent years and the service appears to be structured to discourage all but the most determined traveller to or from the towns the line does still serve. Journeys that would be relatively simple in most

countries, such as Vesoul to Nancy or Dijon are rendered almost impossible by the sparse service and the lack of connections. The fact that SNCF doesn't even run the advertised service can't help attract custom either. A service where the first eastbound train of the day arrives at Vesoul at 16:31 isn't a service at all.

The Paris – Belfort line could be summed up as having classy locos, excellent photographic potential and a train service seemingly in terminal decline. The area around Chaumont is extremely pleasant to visit and I'd like to go back and do the best locations in sun. However, I do have some concerns that there won't be any loco hauled trains to photograph. A check on the SNCF journey planner reveals that the 09:12 ex Paris and the 13:20 ex Belfort still aren't running on weekdays. We'll have to see what next year brings but I'm not hopeful.

Arzviller was refreshingly busy compared to the Paris – Belfort line. There will be big changes there before too long with the LGV from Paris being extended to Vendenheim, only 10km short of Strasbourg, bypassing the twisting line through the Saverne Gap and removing most of the TGV traffic. Whether the capacity liberated will be used to enhance the local service or increase the number of daytime freights remains to be seen. As in so many places, it's unchecked vegetation growth that's likely to be the biggest problem for photographers.