

Spiral Steam

Germany's Brocken

The world's most popular steam destination.

Words and photography by TONY STREETER





Freezing, foggy, windy, cloudy. Northern Germany's highest mountain can be all of these - yet around 700,000 people each year ride the railway that curls its way to the top. Why? Because on a good day the views are magnificent, and even on a poor one the 1-in-30 climb can be spectacular. Neither does the Brocken mountain's history rely on the weather.

It would be too much to suggest that most of those travelling are enthusiasts - they're not. Yet riding on the open balcony of one of the red and cream coaches is one of the world's great railway experiences, whether or not you can tell your air brake pump from a water pre-heater. In fact, the Brockenbahn has much to offer the fan: this is 'extreme railroading' with steam - and in a world of forgettable railcars that makes it pretty well a 'must see'.

For many people, the ride to the Brocken is 'the Harz'. In reality, this most famous railway is just a part of a metre-gauge system that stretches for 140km (87 miles) and includes sleepy branches, railcars and even goods traffic alongside its more touristy offerings. However, while the Brockenbahn is but a small section of the whole, it carries more people than anywhere else on the system. Elsewhere railcars and even trams mix it with steam, but here there's a busy timetable - 100% steam. In fact, this survivor is not only the most popular part of the Harz, but probably carries more people than any other steam line in the world. Not bad for one with a destination that was off limits for three decades.

Modern Success

The Brockenbahn is a modern success story. Lying up against the eastern side of the East/West German border, its upper section became off limits the same time the Berlin Wall was built, in 1961. That's because of the border, and that the Brocken was the perfect place for a Soviet listening post. Public services were only revived after the end of communism, and the unification of Germany in 1990. Special trains ran in 1991 and in 1992 the normal timetable began, following a major reconstruction. The line quickly became the most popular part of the Harz network in winter as well as summer - a contrast to its previous life when services had been seasonal.

The Harzer Schmalspurbahnen (HSB) network spreads across the Harz, with primary termini at Wernigerode, Nordhausen and Quedlinburg and three 'main lines' plus a number of branches. ➤

“The Brockenbahn even crossed into the west. To get round this, the Soviets and British agreed a ‘territory swap.’”

PREVIOUS PAGE:
The Brocken can be a windy place, making drifting exhaust one of the challenges for photography. Seen from the other side of the line from (6), No. 99.7236 heads uphill on April 1, 2013.

RIGHT: Trains regularly work right up to the station as No. 99.7237 shows on April 1, 2013. This footpath is virtually at the station throat.

BELOW RIGHT: The northern side of the mountain includes vistas across the North German plain, as well as into what was West Germany. This train is crossing the Hirtenstieg footpath on April 7, 2013. Despite only being moments away from journey's end, No. 99.7235 is heading away from Brocken station at this point.

BELOW: Approximate location of the Harz within Germany.

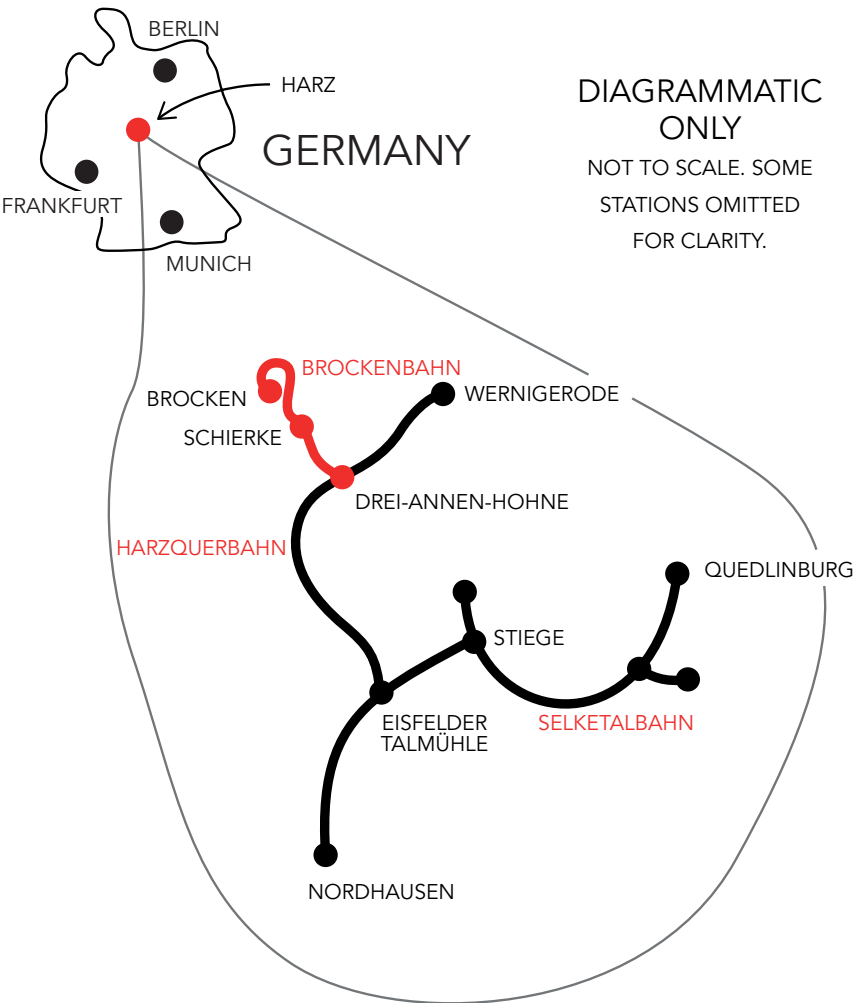


One of the ‘three’, the Brockenbahn itself runs only from Drei-Annen-Hohne, (where it splits from the Wernigerode - Nordhausen Harzquerbahn), to Brocken, a distance of 19km (12 miles). However, many Brocken trains actually run from Wernigerode another 15km (nine miles) away.

Wernigerode is home to the HSB’s main shed, which is alongside Wernigerode station and has a viewing area accessible from the main platform.

The main workshops are sited at Wernigerode-Westerntor, a short distance away.

Further Brocken trains ‘shuttle’ to and from Drei-Annen-Hohne. Also, one return train per day runs from/ to Nordhausen via Drei-Annen-Hohne (65km/40 miles each way). Today, 11 services a day can run to/from Brocke at peak times - not including ‘extras’. Regular trains are generally powered by the system’s big 2-10-2Ts, all but one of which nominally date from the 1950s. However, the frequent ‘Traditionszüge’ vintage specials that mostly start from Wernigerode normally run with Mallets Nos. 99.5901 (1897) and/or 99.5902 (1898). These are sometimes double-headed. ➤





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Goetheweg station has not been used as a public stop for decades, but the reversing siding there is invaluable in allowing trains to cross and pass each other. On January 1, 2015 No. 99.7232 creates a thunderous exhaust as it passes one of the signals protecting the siding, which is out of sight behind the train.



HARZ HISTORY

Lying in central Germany, on one side of the Harz is the North German Plain while on the other is rolling country. Whereas standard gauge railways reached the towns round about fairly early, reaching into the Harz meant dropping the gauge to create lines that could twist and turn through tight valleys, and climb gradients up to 1-in-25. The metre-gauge came to the Harz mountain area from 1885.

Striking distance

First to open was what is now known as the Selketalbahn, reaching from Gernrode in the east to serve places like Alexisbad and Harzgerode. Then from 1897 came the Harzquerbahn - or trans-Harz line - connecting Nordhausen in the south to Wernigerode in the north via a 61km/38-mile route. That route took the line within striking distance of the Brocken, even then famous from history and literature such as *Faust* by Wolfgang von Goethe, and a potentially lucrative tourist magnet. So a part of the plan included the Brockenbahn, branching off the Harzquerbahn at Drei-Annen-Hohne. It was finished in the same year as the Harzquerbahn: 1899.

Initially, the Harzquer and Brockenbahn were both run by the private Nordhausen-Wernigerode Eisenbahn, but after the Second World War when this area of Germany became part of the communist east, both these lines and those of the separate Gernrode-Harzgeroder Eisenbahn (Selketalbahn) were nationalised and joined the Deutsche Reichsbahn. They were only split off again in 1993, when all of them came under the mantle of today's Harzer Schmalspurbahnen (HSB) - or Harz narrow gauge railways.

However the system only just fell within East Germany; a separate line that ran east-west and crossed the border near Sorge was closed, and special papers were needed for anyone wanting to get off at the Harzquerbahn's Sorge or Elend stops. In some places, the border fortifications were visible from the train.

Territory swap

The most affected was however the Brockenbahn, which not only ran right alongside part of the border for much of its length, but according to the agreements between the Allies that conquered Germany even crossed into the west near Goetheweg. To get round this, the Soviets and British agreed a 'territory swap' just after the war.

As time went on though, and people increasingly sought to escape from the east into the west, the geography of the Brockenbahn was ever more a disadvantage. Rules on travel were tightened, then when the Berlin Wall was built in 1961, passenger trains stopped.

The defences became increasingly sophisticated; by the 1980s, the Brockenbahn ran alongside a high fence, the track was mined, and the summit itself was turned into a fortress. From here, the communists could listen to western radio communications - and the only trains to run were for supplies. Public services returned in 1992.



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ABOVE: Part of the Brocken experience is superb views... if the weather is clear. No. 99.7247 slogs uphill alongside the Goetheweg path across the area known as the Brockenmoor on April 1, 2013. It's possible to take such pictures from the paths around the summit, then see the train a second time as it nears Brocken station.

ABOVE RIGHT: Vintage trains generally run with Mallets Nos. 99.5901 and/or 99.5902. On January 1, 2015 the 1898-built No. 99.5902 overtakes walkers on the Goetheweg.

RIGHT: From the Goetheweg there are views towards the summit. This train is nearly at Brocken.

From Drei-Annen-Hohne the gradient is a steady and volume-inducing 1-in-30; trains can often be heard a long way away.

First and only intermediate station is Schierke (5km/ three miles from Drei-Annen-Hohne), which between 1961 and 1991 was effectively the end of the line. Now, trains cross here, and locomotives take water. From here it is still a 14km/nine-mile slog.

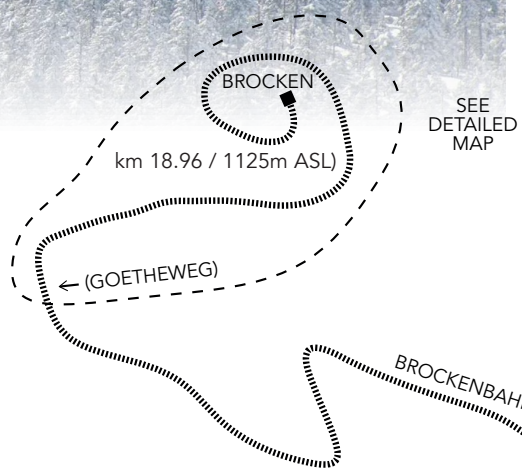
Previously, there was also a station at Goetheweg (nearly 14km/nine miles from Drei-Annen-Hohne),

but this has not reopened. Even so, trains may still stop here, as there is a reversing siding that is used to allow trains to cross.

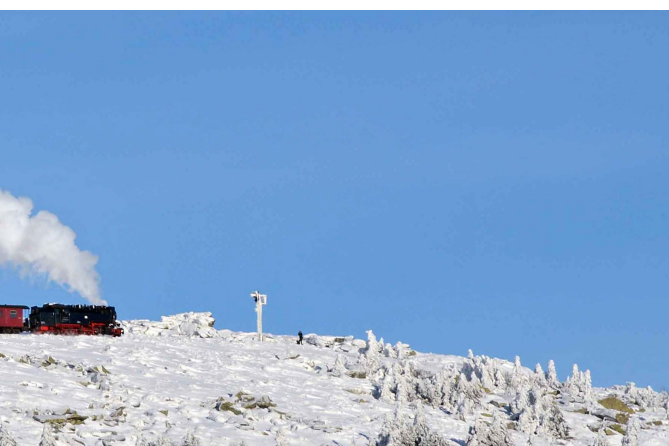
Much of the line from Drei-Annen-Hohne and to beyond Schierke is in pine forest, but from around Goetheweg it starts to clear the trees. From this point to where it meets the Brockenstrasse (see map), the railway closely parallels the old border, and also a new path that opened after Germany's reunification; like the station, this is the 'Goetheweg'. ➤



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SEE
DETAILED
MAP



ABOVE: The Brocken can be a windy place making drifting exhaust one of the challenges for photography. Seen from the other side of the line from (7), No. 99.7236 heads uphill on April 1, 2013.

THE BROCKENBAHN

SCHIERKE
(km 5.36/
687m ASL)

LEFT: Map showing the Brockenbahn in relation to the Harzer Schmalspurbahnen (HSB) network.

DREI-KANNEN
HOHNE
(km 0/
543m ASL)

TO
NORDHAUSEN

RIGHT: 1931-built 2-10-2T No. 99.7222 offers a unique (and arguably more attractive) 'face' than its 1950s-built relatives due to the absence of the normal 'boxy' pre-heater. On October 19, 2009 it is nearly at the foot crossing for the Hirtenstieg path heading from the Brocken in the direction of Ilsenburg.

BELOW: Between the site of Goetheweg station and the point where the line crosses the Brockenstrasse, the route is paralleled by a footpath (the Goetheweg). No. 99.7241 crosses the area known as the Brockenmoor on New Year's Day 2015.

BELOW RIGHT: The Brocken is surrounded by myth. This is the Teufelskanzel (devil's pulpit) where Faust is meant to have met Satan, with No. 99.7236 rolling downhill on April 1, 2013.



Climbing alongside the Goetheweg path, there are frequent views of the summit from the train, before at about the point it crosses the Brockenstrasse arguably the best bit of all begins: for the last section the train climbs the 'Brocken spiral', curling one-and-a-bit

times round the mountain before finally reaching the summit station. This three-track terminus is 1125m above sea level and just 17m lower than the very top of the peak.

Photography

The combination of steam, scenery and - in winter - snow, make this place uniquely attractive to photographers. However, there is a word of warning. The Brocken can be an inclement, nasty place, with the weather changing sometimes as often as the trains >

Eleven services a day can run to Brocken at peak times - not including 'extras'.

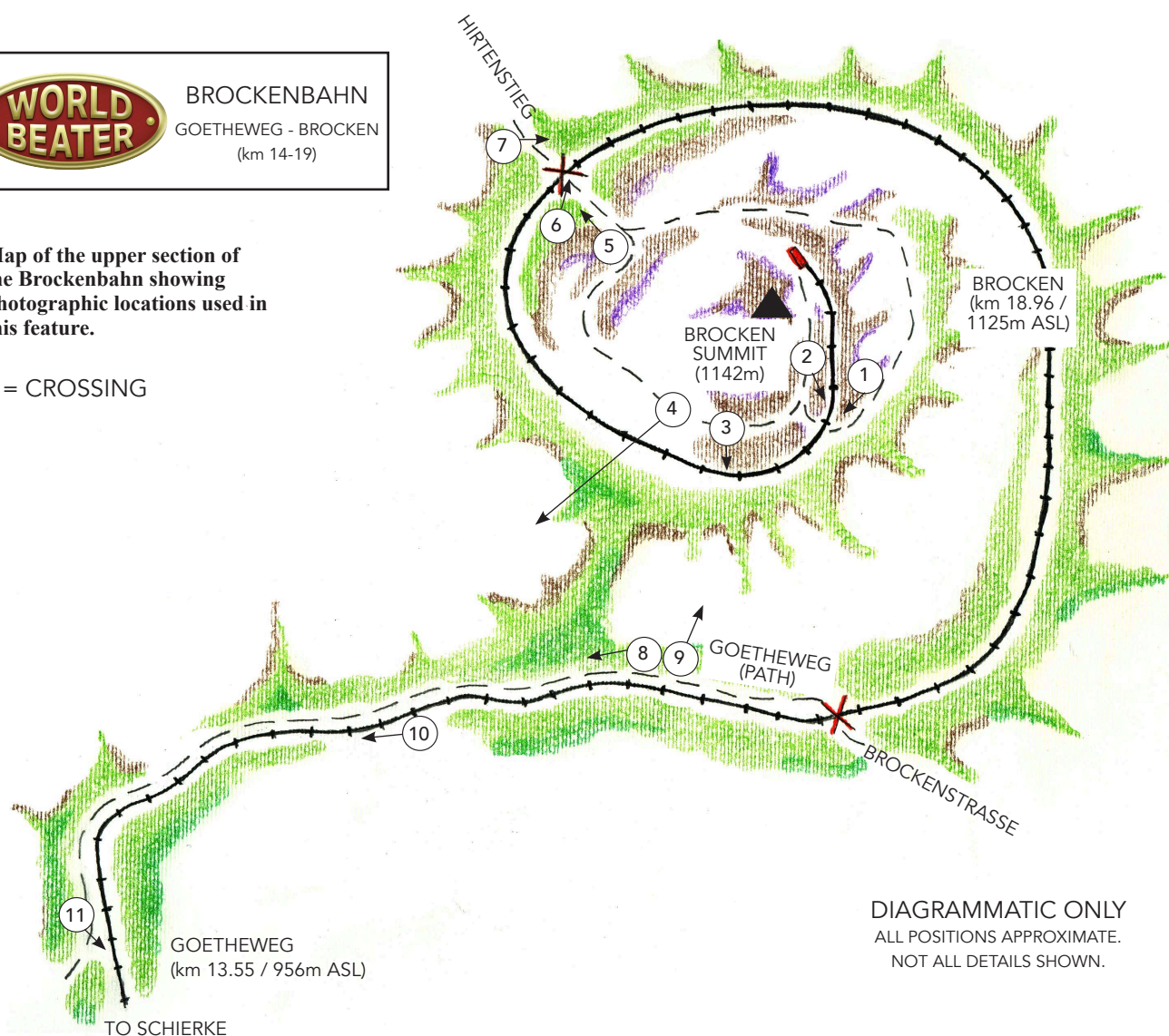




BROCKENBAHN
GOETHEWEG - BROCKEN
(km 14-19)

Map of the upper section of
the Brockenbahn showing
photographic locations used in
this feature.

X = CROSSING



DIAGRAMMATIC ONLY
ALL POSITIONS APPROXIMATE.
NOT ALL DETAILS SHOWN.

“Trains climb the
‘Brocken spiral’, curling
round the mountain.”





ABOVE: Shortly before Brocken station, the line curves round the southern side of the mountain, with clear views to the lower hills below. On New Year's Day 2015 No. 99.7236 is almost within sight of the summit terminus.

BELOW RIGHT: possible pic to come?

Temperatures drop well below freezing - and high winds can sometimes even stop trains and people need to be evacuated. Also, that snow you want to photograph has to get there somehow (and it also drifts). This is not a place to be if you're ill equipped, especially in winter, which can be drawn out. Preparation and having the right gear is essential - and missing the last train could mean trying to walk off the mountain in the dark - definitely not recommended. Taking pictures means using your legs: the Brocken lies in a national park and private motor vehicles are banned. Many photographers will therefore take the first train to the top and a much later one back.

There is a wide selection of shots from the paths at the top of the mountain, and more along the Goetheweg path between the Brockenstrasse and the former Goethestrasse stop (see map).

Although the Goetheweg has roughly the same gradient as the railway it parallels, reaching the Goetheweg from the summit means walking along the steeply-graded Brockenstrasse.

From the old Goethestrasse stop towards Schierke and Drei-Annen-Hohne the line is mainly in trees, and the Goetheweg path diverges here leaving the railway to dive into the forest alone. However, it is not the

When a clear, still day does dawn, the rewards can be rich.

only section of line that can be followed: for those wanting to see it closer to Schierke there is another path that follows a large section of the line's route. The Bahnparallelweg (railway parallel path) runs from below Schierke station through the woods for a chunk of the route uphill, before leading to the steep and rocky Eckerlochstieg that takes walkers away from the railway and connects to the Brockenstrasse. The Bahnparallelweg can easily be reached from Schierke station.

Photography on the Brocken isn't always easy. The statistics say you'll encounter fog, or wind, or some other weather designed to make taking pictures difficult... but when a clear, still day does dawn, the rewards can be rich.

Yet even if the weather is poor, or taking pictures isn't your thing, this place and its railway are unique. Unique and spectacular - as ever more people have found. **WS**

GETTING TO THE HARZ

WHERE IS IT?



The Harz mountains are in north central Germany, around 100km/60 miles from Hannover in the north west, and 60km/40 miles from Magdeburg in the north east. The Brocken itself is within the Harz national park and is a protected area; motor vehicles are banned, making the train (along with walking) the main way to get to the top.

GUIDED TOURS



A number of companies offer holidays to the Harz, including Railtrail Tours, Ffestiniog Travel, Great Rail Journeys and the Railway Touring Company.

HOW TO GET THERE



By air/rail: Wernigerode is on the railway between Hannover and Halle (Saale), meaning that both Hannover airport and Leipzig/Halle airport are within fairly easy reach by train. From the UK, Hannover has direct flights from Birmingham, Heathrow, Manchester and Stansted, while Ryanair serves Leipzig/Halle from Stansted.

Deutsche Bahn (German Railways) travel information: www.db.de
UK DB booking centre: 08718 808066



By car: Wernigerode is served by the B6n expressway, a huge improvement on the single-carriageway roads of previous years. Calais is around 800km/500 miles away, while Hoek van Holland (served by Stena Line from Harwich) is some 550km/350 miles. Note that various rules of the road are different in Germany and need checking before you go - including the need for winter tyres.

WHERE DO I STAY?



Main start point for trains to the Brocken is the line from Wernigerode, which makes this charming mediaeval town a good base. Hotels include the railway themed Altora across the road from the shed (+49 (0) 3943 40995100/www.hotel-wernigerode-altora.de) and there are plenty of bars and restaurants. There are also hotels at Drei-Annen-Hohne (Kräuterhof, +49 (0)394 55840/www.hotel-kraeuterhof.de) across the road from the station, and on the Brocken itself (Brockenhotel +49 (0)394 55120/www.brockenhotel.de). Staying on the Brocken is the only way to see a full day's trains without climbing the mountain on foot. Times vary, but trains can typically take around 50min from Drei-Annen-Hohne, and between two and three hours from Wernigerode.

Wernigerode tourist information: +49 (0)3943 5537835/
www.wernigerode-tourismus.de

TICKETS/INFORMATION



The HSB has a comprehensive website (much of it in English), with timetables and ticket information. The Brocken is subject to special ticketing arrangements, meaning a ticket costs the same whatever your starting point.

An adult return 'January 2016' (note prices shown are still the same - I've checked) is EUR37. In contrast, Wernigerode - Schierke return is EUR15. Other options include all lines passes (adult three-day EUR74/five-day EUR111).

A cheaper option if you're not intending to travel to the Brocken (it does not include Schierke - Brocken but does cover the rest of the HSB) is the local three-day HarzTourCard, which also covers travel on various other local modes of transport. This costs EUR18 for adults and is available from various outlets including tourist information centres.

HSB: Tel. +49 (0) 3943 5580 www.hsb-wr.de

FACILITIES



Facilities on the Brocken include a waiting room/ticket office/shop in the station as well as a café entered from the station's rear. There are further catering facilities in the hotel, and a museum (which also has a café) alongside includes equipment from the former Soviet listening post here. Check opening times before travel.

ANYTHING ELSE?



The Brocken can get very cold and very windy; there is often fog or cloud, and sometimes white-outs. Proper preparation, and proper clothing, is essential - and that's especially true if you intend not just to take a ride but to spend time outside to photograph.

Also, if you're visiting the Harz as an enthusiast, it's unlikely you'll only be doing the Brockenbahn (and nor should you). Indeed, there are arguments that other parts of the system have aspects even more likely to appeal to fans.

The Selketalbahn that covers the eastern part of the system from Eisfelder Talmühle regularly uses unique 1939-built 2-6-2T No. 99.6001 and when two steam diagrams are needed also 1918-built Mallet No. 99.5906, and runs over a largely unspoilt system through a rural landscape; while the Nordhausen - Wernigerode Harzquerbahn has a much-more cross-country feel, with plenty of climbs on the way. Sadly, relatively little steam now uses the section beyond Drei-Annen-Hohne.

TONY TO SEND PIC