



# Full of life

**Benny Langer runs a hotel. However, garden railroads are also another great love of his life. His impressive layout allows him to combine both passions: His job and his hobby.**

**T**hings are getting busy at Jöhstadt train station. The Saxon class IVK steam loco of the Zittau Narrow-Gauge Railway is about to depart. The voice of the busy railroad official resounds loudly and urgently throughout station: "All aboard, take your seats, doors closing – hurry up back there!" Shortly afterwards, the heavy locomotive starts to move. Slowly at first but gradually gaining speed, we can hear the "tsch" – "tsch" – "tsch" sound of a steam locomotive as it slowly pulls

away. The heavy locomotive emits clouds of steam accompanied by a loud and penetrating whistle signal. The train departs the station at a leisurely pace, leaving behind the many people waiting for the next train.

However, this is no mere museum excursion on a historic railroad so realistically staged here. It is the small but multifaceted LGB railroad owned by Benny Langer, which he built directly outside the gable end of his hotel situated in Germany's up-



*“We try to offer as much variety as possible.”*



per Ore Mountains. The pretty hotel with the fairy-tale name “Fichtenhäusel am Pöhlgrund” lies at the edge of a forest in a side valley between the Preßnitz and Sehma valleys. The little Pöhlbach river burbles past the hotel. The forest terrace at one gable end serves coffee and cakes to hungry hikers and walkers while LGB locos and platform cars circle around the tracks at the other gable end. They are almost always watched by hotel guests and sightseers, who can also sit at this end and enjoy a good view of the LGB layout. Since the hotelier Benny Langer has built a roof over the garden railroad, even the skiers or snowboarders who come to this

winter sports area and drop in for lunch or dinner can admire the LGB railroad in action.

It all began with a rather crazy idea: For many years, hotel guests and visitors to the restaurant have had their liquor orders delivered to their tables by an LGB train. But at some point, Benny Langer decided that it was a shame “that only two locos could ever travel the short distance back and forth to the tables while all the others had almost nothing to do”. That’s because the railroad fan had been filling his shelves with more and more LGB locos of all versions over the years. At the moment, the ▶

TEXT: CHRIS D'AMICO PHOTO: OSKAR E. F. H.

fleet includes almost twenty LGB locos and 85 cars. This led to the idea of building a garden railroad. After all, the young hotelier has railroad in his blood. It was his great-grandfather who originally took up the hobby. He even built his own miniature locomotives. His grandfather, whose wife was originally from Hamburg and met her husband in the Ore Mountains, also worked on the railroads. This meant that the youngest member of the family was in close contact with locos and railroads from a very early age. In the end, Benny Langer inherited the entire family collection of model railroads. “They laid the foundation for my current garden railroad layout,” explains the long-standing LGB fan.

However, his daytime job as a hotelier limits the amount of time that the 32-year-old can devote to his hobby. “Running the sort of garden railroad I want at the same time is not possible,” says Benny Langer. The idea that saved the day was to turn this impediment into an advantage: In hotel jargon, people talk about “experience gastronomy” and it just so happens that “our garden railroad has now become a genuine magnet for visitors from near and far,” says a delighted Benny Langer today. But to begin with, he had to spend a lot of time unpacking, planning, and executing. In August 2017, Langer and his friends finally reached for their shovels and spades. On an area that now extends to around 130 square meters (1,399.3 sq ft), they constructed the heart of the garden railroad layout – the first loop of track. The construction team had shifted a great deal of gravel, as Benny Langer recalls. Large amounts of wire netting were used to support mountains and hills; roads and paths were created; tracks made of brass (with screwed rail joiners) ran over bridges and disappeared into tunnels. And at the end, the various plants and

grasses, the stream and cliffs helped create the perfect impression of a typical Ore Mountain landscape. Not long after they began, Benny Langer and his team added another loop of track to the layout.

### Surprises included

Today, there are two railroad routes that operate on the hotel's LGB layout. Although the landscape and tracks on the layout are not based on a direct geographical prototype, the real inspiration is directly outside the door, so to speak. One only has to spend some time in the region and on site: Hiking, cycling, biking or skiing. Kühberg train station, which plays an important role on the layout – the Fichtenhäusel belongs to Kühberg – never actually existed in reality. And the second station, Jöhstadt, which is very imaginatively recreated on the layout with its own buildings, is much larger than the prototype. However, the railroad fan has remained faithful to the historical period in which the locos and rolling stock operate on the layout. Benny Langer: “Here, I’m using locomotives and cars whose prototypes are still in service with the Pressnitz Valley Railway and Fichtelberg Railway – both of which are extremely popular museum railroads.” The opening scene described above involves LGB locomotive road number 145, the Saxon class IV K, which whistles and puffs as it departs Jöhstadt station while the class VI K, road number 99653, waits its turn. To replicate the prototypes as closely as possible, Benny Langer has equipped all his steam locomotives with pulsed smoke generators. Despite being the product of vivid imagination, the landscape and track layout on the LGB layout at the Fichtenhäu-

**All change, please:** In Kühberg station, the class 251 and road number 99 4652 with their passenger cars wait to depart.





**The grand meeting point:** The LGB layout at the Fichtenhäusel Hotel is a magnet for day-trippers and guests – in summer and winter.

sel stick to a particularly well-thought-out plan. The most important thing for Benny Langer in designing his garden railroad was to create a unique experience. “I wanted the onlookers to constantly discover new details,” adds the LGB fan. This is why he is “quite happy to let things get a little chaotic on the layout,” as Langer puts it. This means, for example, keeping the viewers guessing as to which tunnel a loco will emerge from after it disappears into the mountain. With this in mind, Benny Langer has not only laid crossing sections inside the tunnel but also a complete loop. “It’s important to have moments of surprise,” says the layout and hotel boss, explaining his layout concept. He has certainly managed to achieve this with an ingenious track plan and its tunnels, which contain several crossing sections of track.

### Train operations between Kühberg and Jöhstadt

Benny Langer usually runs four train sets on the layout. “I definitely don’t want it to appear cluttered,” explains the railroad boss, adding that a maximum of six trains can be operated simultaneously. The trains run in opposing directions either on circular or shuttle routes between the two stations Kühberg and Jöhstadt, both of which are through stations. Since the compact nature of the layout meant that there was no alternative, the clever builder also used radius R1 tracks at certain points. The uphill gradients on the layout are just manageable without the need for cogwheel assistance. The two sidings in the tunnel accommodate two spare trains. The layout has a total of three tunnels, two of which are double tunnels, as well as four bridges across which the passenger and freight trains roll in a constant rhythm. To make this possible, Benny Langer programmed a dozen train operations, which he triggers in a varying sequence. Naturally, the railroad boss whose job as a hotelier and restaurateur keeps him busy does not have the ►



**Realistic:** The class IK crosses one of the four bridges on the layout.

**Solid:** The class IVK makes another stop at Kühberg Station.





**Village life:** People are busy working in the churchyard.



**Sound:** A Bohemian brass band plays a tune on the garden terrace.



**Top:** Even the LGB Club gift 2021 has made it onto the layout.

time to control and guide the trains himself through the interesting landscape. “My layout is fully automated and operates a continuously changing series of train sets and routes.” As one sequence of train journeys is completed after 30 to 40 minutes, a new one begins.

Another “aid” is used to add realism on the layout, in the stations, in the village and on the fields and hillsides: The sound. Many sounds and tones are programmed and integrated into the operating sequences. Not without pride, Benny Langer explains: “We carefully coordinated the sounds and functions.” Model railroad fans are constantly fascinated by the intensity of the sounds, for example, when the trains enter or depart from the stations. Every locomotive on the layout has its own prototypical sound.

### Sounds add life to the layout

Right now, we can hear the original sounds of the historic diesel locomotive of the SOEG, the Saxon-Upper Lusatian Railway Company, whose prototype is still in use with the Zittau Narrow-Gauge Railway. Before the diesel locomotive moves off with its heavy freight, we can hear the clicking, hissing and other sounds as the railroad personnel prepare the train for departure. Then the diesel engine comes to life, sluggishly at first before settling down to emit a deep roar. The loco headlights turn on and the train starts to move. The whistles on the locomotive accurately replicate the “communication” by the locomotive engineer, for instance, when the train is summoned into the station by a long blast of the whistle followed by a short and another long blast. Benny Langer: “The arrival and departure of trains – as well as the junction traffic in the countryside – are the absolute highlights of the layout.” It’s also worth pointing out that the model railroad’s inspiration, the historic Fichtelberg Museum Railroad, was forced to stop using whistles because they were disturbing some of the residents and guests. Irrespective of this, all visitors to the LGB layout at the Fichtenhäusel Hotel will definitely be able to experience the communication method used by locomotive engineers before the introduction of radio communications for railroad operations. The fact that Langer is so well informed about how the railroads originally operated is thanks to his friends who work both with the Fichtelberg Railway as well as with the Pressnitz Valley Railway. “I am in touch with one of them on an almost daily basis and can clarify all sorts of issues with him – even questions about railroad legislation.”

However, it is not only railroad sounds that enrich the soundscape. When a train passes the church, the bells ring and the sounds of a church organ can be heard through the open door through which the priest is exiting. At the farm, the rooster crows, the dog barks, the cows moo and the swallows twitter. One can even discern the sounds made by the door on the outhouse as it opens and closes, not to mention the angry voices emanating from the tractor workshop. It seems that the old John Deere is having problems with its ignition system and the labored sounds of the starter motor are unmistakable. The Lanz tractor is also getting its fair share of verbal abuse because the mechanic is apparently unable to get the “piece of crap” to run properly. Although Benny Langer found many of the sounds on the Internet, he has also used his own camera on numerous occasions to capture sounds himself.

The tractor workshop is not the only thing that captures the viewer’s attention. The LGB layout also doesn’t skimp on details elsewhere. From the saws whose sounds are synchronized ▶



**Impressive:** Nighttime lights. There is also plenty of action on and around the platforms of Jöhstadt Station.



**Active:** Even the chair-lift can still be used at night.



**Homely:** Warm light creates a very special atmosphere.



**Realistic:** Many passengers are still waiting for a connecting train late at night at Kühberg Station.



**Hard at work:** All four tracks in Jöhstadt are currently occupied. The freight train transports tree trunks, coal, and construction material.

with their movements to the mountain hut visited by hikers looking for a view of the ruined castle. Higher up, we can see the chair-lift. And down below is the village with its cheese-mongers and bakery, and the “Bären” guest house where the Bohemian brass band on the terrace is striking up a tune.

### Many details and wonderful nighttime scenes

A bustling vintage car rally has also been modeled complete with a tailback of cars and motorbikes at the closed barrier. Residential and other buildings are dotted around the various roadways. Most of the buildings are Pola models. However, Benny Langer purchased the main station in Kühberg, built using hard foam to replicate the typical Ore Mountains architecture, from a modelmaker on eBay. Jöhstadt station is also made from hard foam and originally replicated the station at Drei Annen Hohne on the Harz railroads.

And when it gets late and darkness descends on the Fichtenhäusel Hotel, the LGB layout continues to operate. That’s because Benny Langer also attaches great importance its nighttime appearance. The nighttime scenery includes illuminated platforms, street lamps, windows emitting a cozy glow of light, flashing signals, and car headlights whose beams light up the road. Here too, software is used to manage this sophisticated light show. What more could you want? Guests can look on – often for hours at a time – and every so often Benny Langer also takes a time-out to control his trains himself. That is, if he doesn’t happen to be chasing after a new sound or dreaming up new ideas. “I already have an idea for the next phase of expansion,” he says with a mischievous grin. We look forward to seeing what surprises he serves up to guests in the near future.



**Exciting:** The Mercedes 300 SL is getting a lot of attention.

**Busy:** There’s a lot to do at the coal scuttle.



## Track plan

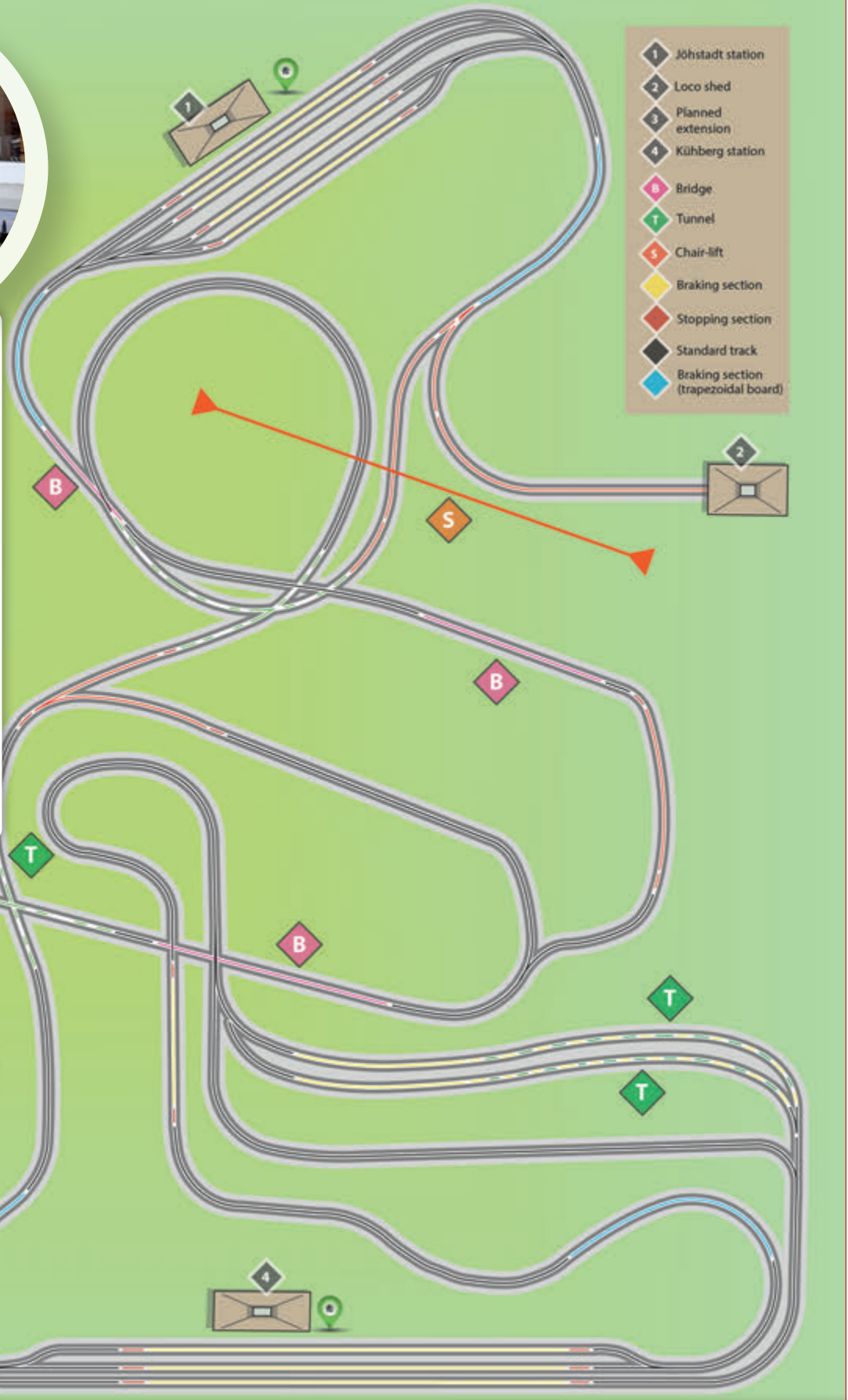
## Layout description



## Personal details:

**Benny Langer**

The hotelier and railroad fan is 32 years old and bursting with ideas and energy. He spent his early childhood in contact with LGB railroads. Together with friends, he began to design and build his LGB outdoor layout for his Hotel "Fichtenhäusel am Pöhlgrund" in Germany's Ore Mountains in 2017. The Saxon narrow-gauge railways (Pressnitz Valley, Fichtelberg) are the historical inspiration for the layout. Special highlights: Train arrivals and departures as well as prototypical crossing traffic. For the perfect sound, he also goes on the hunt for specific tones and noises.



**Layout name:** Fichtenhäusel, **Theme:** Saxon narrow-gauge railways (Pressnitz Valley Railway and Fichtelberg Railway), **Construction time:** from August 2017 onwards, **Track length:** More than 200 meters (656.2 ft), **Layout size:** Circa 130 m<sup>2</sup> (1399.3 sq ft), **Operation:** Digital, **Number of trains running:** 4 - 6 train sets, **Turnouts:** xx, **Turnout control:** Digital, **Bridges:** 4 (more planned), **Tunnels:** Currently 3, including two double tunnels, **Stations:** Kühberg with three through tracks; Jöhstadt with four through tracks, **Rolling stock:** All locos have sound, **Special features of the layout:** The trains that run on circular and shuttle routes cross over or make complete loops inside the tunnel. It's always exciting for viewers to see where the train re-emerges from the mountain. The sounds bring the scenery, buildings, and roads to life. And at night, all eyes are on the locos and passenger trains.