

# Product Review – N Scale RAm TEE I by Minitrix

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Under Märklin's tutelage, Minitrix has of late been coming up with some unique and innovative new products. Perhaps the most awaited-for is the four-unit Swiss/Dutch RAm TEE I diesel multiple unit set. The model, which has never been mass-produced in N, was announced a couple of years ago for delivery in 2001. As often happens, the projection was overly-optimistic and the set didn't actually hit hobby shop shelves until Fall 2002.

## The Prototype

Five of these DMU trainsets were built in a cooperative effort between the SBB and the NS for service between Zurich, Amsterdam, and Paris from 1957 to 1974. Two were numbered in the Swiss inventory as RAm TEE 501 & 502; the other three were the Dutch Railway's DE 1001-1003. Each push-pull train consisted of a Dutch-built power car and three Swiss-built passenger cars: a compartment coach, a restaurant car, and an open seat coach with driver's cab.

In 1976, the four remaining sets (RAm 501 was destroyed in a collision) were sold to Canada where they served as the Ontario Northland Railway's Northlander. At some point, the power cars were scrapped and the trainsets were powered by specially-painted EMD FP7s. After the sets were removed from service, several of the cars were acquired by a Swiss rail enthusiast group and returned to Europe for eventual restoration.

## The Model



Figure 1: Looks good (from a distance)!

The Minitrix model comes in a fairly robust cardboard box with appropriate (and as we will see, telltale) artwork on the cover. Inside, the four units are individually wrapped in plastic and snugly cradled behind clear vacuum-formed plastic in separate cavities in the one piece hard foam insert.

To extract the models from the case, you must first remove the foam insert from the box. Minitrix has thoughtfully provided three finger holes in the face of the foam to facilitate lifting; one of these holes also contains a small plastic envelope containing the drawbars needed to make the four units into a complete train. With the insert out of the box, you can press a finger through holes in the back to free each piece of the set.

The drawbars have the now-familiar NEM 357 coupler 'tongue' at each end. Each unit has an NEM 357 coupler box with close-coupling mechanism at every vestibule end. To assemble the set, carefully connect the cars with the drawbars. You may want to do this at the workbench with the entire consist balanced on its roof and a small screwdriver backing up the coupler boxes as the pressure needed to clip the drawbars into position might have a deleterious effect on the coupler centering mechanisms.

### **The Good News . . .**

Operationally, the set is fine. I had no problems negotiating a 2% helix grade in both pull and push mode. Given that the set IS the maximum number of cars that the power unit should ever handle, I can imagine that steeper grades could be surmounted with relative ease.

Each car is lighted and the head and tail lights are synchronized to the direction of travel under normal DC operation. Minitrix has also pre-configured the power unit to accept one of their Selectrix digital decoders and I suppose that with careful tracing of the circuits, a NMRA DCC decoder could be fitted as well. In either case, some solution would have to be engineered for the control car head and tail lights and to reduce the heat from the interior lighting.

### **. . . and the Bad News**

On appearance the model scores a big miss! The proportions are fine and the overall detail is quite good, but for whatever reason, the model lacks a convincing full-width, sealed diaphragm between the individual units; an attempt was made, but the individual end-mounted pieces do not touch and the effect is quite noticeable. Roco VT 11.5 TEE and the Kato/Hobbytrain RAe TEE II both provided acceptable solutions that are at least ten years old. Minitrix could have done better!

Worse still, Minitrix chose to deal with truck swing by modeling unsightly and unprototypical cut outs in the body skirting. They then attempted to minimize the effect by attaching matching bits to the truck side frames. The subterfuge totally collapses in the vicinity of the doors where the cut goes horizontally through the silver-painted door itself. Finally, the burgundy paint applied to the some of the truck-mounted pieces did not even match that on the adjacent body panels!



**Figure 2: Close-up showing the truck and diaphragm shortcomings**

At the very least, these compromises are unfortunate. Considering that at a list price well in excess of \$300 few of these sets will be purchased by what I call “the N-Tinplate crowd.” Most will end up on ‘serious’ broad-curved layouts or in collectors’ display cases. Therefore, one has to wonder why Minitrix took such pains to ensure that the set would negotiate any curve. Too bad they didn’t take a closer look at their own Swiss Express cars, which also have full-length skirting, and devise a better looking solution.

To sum up, if you HAVE to have one of these sets, I guess you HAVE to have it. But the rest of you, beware! Had I had the luxury of seeing it in a hobby shop rather than having to purchase it sight unseen through the mail, I probably would have passed. For their part, Minitrix kept me interested through the pre-release months by skillfully avoiding any mention or depiction of the telltale ‘wheel wells’ in any pre-release press release or photo. In a last-minute attack of conscience, the cut lines do appear on the box art line drawing, but by then it was too late!