

Dec. 2, 2007----

HAMBURG, Germany----There is no humbug in Hamburg, especially when you ride the Miniatur Wunderland, the world's largest miniature railroad.

Are you with me?

The tiny railroad is one of the biggest tourist attractions in Germany. There are 700 trains, 4,000 automobiles, 165,000 trees and 250,000 individual lights. The track length spans 5.6 miles and it winds in and out of four rooms in an old warehouse along the Elbe River.

The trains travel through the Alpine region of Germany, portions of Hamburg, and United States -- including Miami Beach, Fla., the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas.

No detail is too small for the Wunderland staff. Germany is enduring a train strike and the work stoppage is being re-created in the Wunderland. Modern-day Las Vegas neon is illuminated by thousands of LEDs and there's a miniature SWAT team flushing out a casino. O.J. must be in town! Farther down the road, the train visits Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Wunderland staff was constructing Switzerland during my visit.

"Only 150 trains drive around at one time," said model building electrician Holger Ballasch in a conversation in a cramped nook behind a Mount Rushmore backdrop. "We don't have the space for every train."

Model trains representing Amtrak and Burlington Northern are imported from the United States. In this Wunderland, Amtrak always runs on time. The most expensive train in the stable is the Marklin \$500 Big Boy. Made mostly of metal, it is the world's largest model steam locomotive.

Miniatur Wunderland is not owned by a corporate conglomerate but by twin brothers Frederick and Gerrit Braun. In July 2000, Frederick visited a model railroad shop in Zurich, Switzerland. He then called his brother to inform him they were going to build the largest model railway in the world.

Frederick already had a bit of a "track record."
He had one of the world's largest collections of Mickey Mouse comic books.

As the Brauns, now 40, made their dream public, they often were the subject of ridicule around Hamburg. "Probably we would have won more approval for a go-cart race on the Heiligengeistfeld area of Hamburg than for the model railway exhibit," Gerrit said. "The construction of model railways was considered as an antiquated hobby of loners."

The Wunderland is very hands on. Kids can punch buttons to set off space shuttles and shark attacks. The trains can be viewed from above and the sides without looking through plate glass.

The trains are computer run by five guys sitting at a control center with dozens of monitors that resemble a NASA board. Each programmer oversees a specific portion of the layout through cameras set up trackside. It takes 33 computers to operate the Wunderland.

System programmer Sven Hinzmann looked at the panel and said, "There's the switching command for every turnoff and signal. Thousands per minute." Hinzmann also keeps an event log for trains that move too fast and other small mishaps.

I asked Hinzmann if he liked trains.

"No more," he answered with a laugh. "It is my business, though."

I also wanted to push a button just to say I ran the world's largest miniature railroad. Hinzmann and Ballasch refused. "It's like a switchman on a real track," Ballasch said with a stern German accent. "Except no persons will be damaged if we have an accident."

Great! So I pleaded my case, just for a miniature moment.

He still said no. The programmers seemed prepared to call security.

I felt like Woody Guthrie getting bounced out of a boxcar.

The Miniatur Wunderland in Hamburg, Germany, is open 365 days a year. Hours are 9:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday; until 9 p.m. Tuesday; 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday and 8:30 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday. Tickets range from \$7.05 (5 euro) for children under 16 to \$14.10 (10 euro) for adults.