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SWISS HOLIDAY TRAVEL

by Trevor D. Surgenor

The Holiday Ticket holder in Switzerland is faced with an embarrassment of riches: an unbelievably dense network of railway services, almost all at regular intervals, with the maximum of convenient onward connections and punctuality maintained by a zealous staff anxious to prevent any break in this complicated spider's web. On top of that, your ticket is valid on lake steamers, postal and railway buses working almost all the scenic Alpine and Jura routes and even some funiculars and cable-cars, offering a 25% reduction on the remainder.

Enthusiasts intent only on studying the railways have demonstrated that it is possible to cover most of this network with a month-long Holiday Ticket by moving on to another centre every few days, but a family of five wanting to enjoy the scenery, shopping and leisure facilities in a relaxed way must settle for one well-chosen hotel (this can mean a lot of letters enclosing international reply coupons) near the station in a town offering a wide range of local and long-distance services.

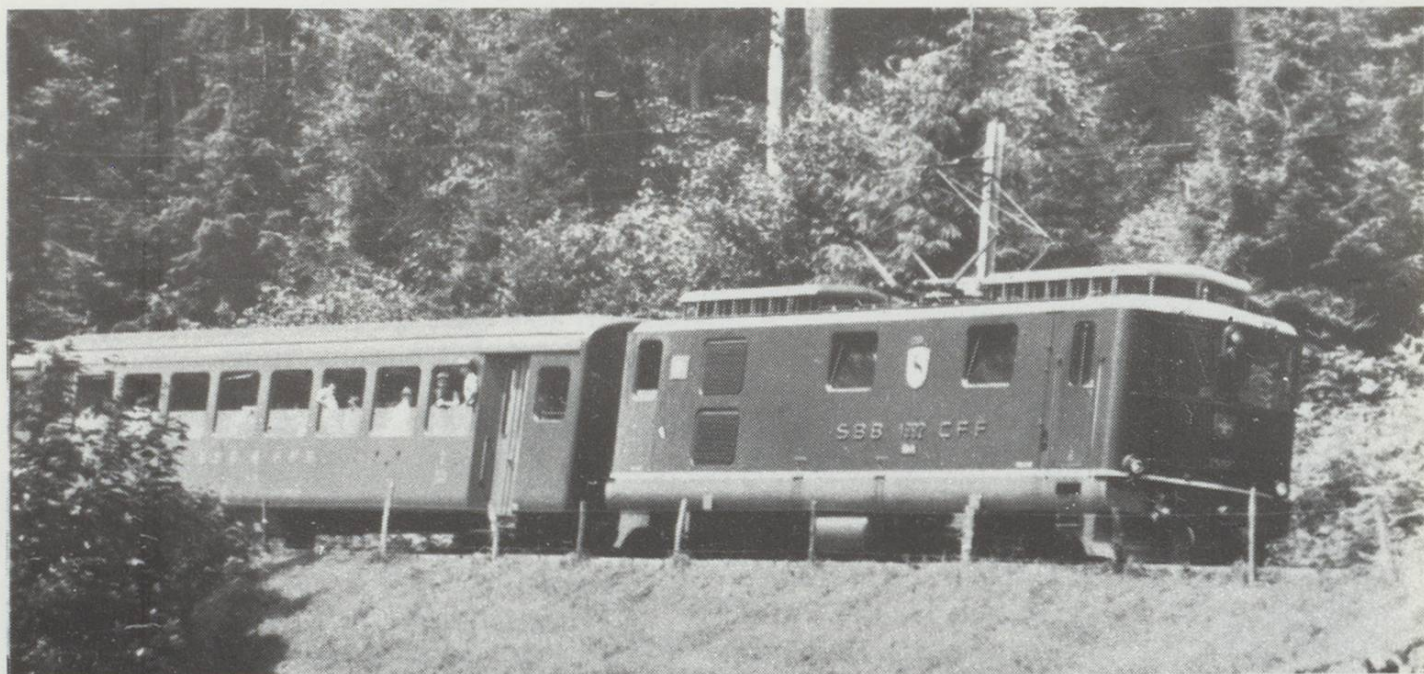
This tall order was fulfilled in our case by choosing the medieval town of Fribourg on the edge of the French-speaking area. All the hourly air-conditioned expresses on the Zurich-Berne-Geneva axis, whisking you comfortably and quietly between the North-East and South-West corners of the country, stop here. Fribourg is also the terminus of the C.F.F. line to Yverdon (children will love the beautiful park in the station square), the G.F.M. line to Murten, with onward connections to Neuchâtel and La Chaux-de-Fonds, the Jura watch-making centre, and the hourly non-stop G.F.M. bus to Bulle, the hub of that company's narrow-gauge system serving Gruyères and making a connection with the M.O.B. trains between Montreux and Gstaad and the B.L.S. network. Even a one month (31 days in July/August) ticket is not enough for all the scenic and interesting day-trips and circular tours possible from Fribourg.

Travelling via Berne, only 20 minutes away, you can visit Thun, Interlaken, the Trümmelbach Falls and world-famous resorts such as Grindelwald, Wengen and Mürren. Your ticket covers travel up to Mürren not only by funicular but also by cable-car, though not on the further two stages to the summit featured in the James Bond film. From another platform at Interlaken East you can take the narrow-gauge S.B.B. train along the northern shore of Lake Brienz to the town of Brienz, famous for its woodcarving and to some as the terminus of Switzerland's only daily steam-operated cog railway. The Holiday Ticket does not cover this, but I was consoled by the fact that on the afternoon when I crossed the road from a woodcraft shop to look at it the steam locomotive had been replaced by a diesel. (If you visit the nearby Open-Air Museum, allow plenty of time if you want to see all of it.) If you are lucky you will find that your train includes a 'familiewagen', an observation coach fitted with armchairs and books and crayons for the children. Beyond Brienz are Meiringen and the Reichenbach Falls in Sherlock Holmes country and the impressive Aare Gorges: at the exit you can pick up a postal bus back to Meiringen (Interlaken is one hour away from Berne, and Meiringen another 40 minutes). From here the railway continues, partly by rack, over the Brunig Pass and terminates in Lucerne, after a 1½ hour trip, and Lucerne, of course, has a direct standard gauge link to Berne with a journey time of 1¾ hours.

From Zurich, 1 hour 53 minutes away, Schaffhausen and the Rhine Falls are quite near. The train stops a very short walk from the bottom of the falls and then takes you across a bridge near the top. If you feel like getting up for a 7.16 departure it's not so hard when your only breakfast chore is to serve yourself from

the hotel buffet open from 6.30 - you can take the Gotthard route, glimpsing the only working SBB "Crocodile" slumbering in the sidings at Erstfeld, to the Italianate resort of Locarno. returning via the delightful Centovalli tram, Italy and the Simplon Tunnel, whence it is air-conditioned comfort all the way home via Lausanne - as it is for most of the outward journey. Despite the long journeys - 4¾ hours to Locarno - the whole family thoroughly enjoyed this trip and a similar one to Lugano and the Swiss miniature village which includes an outdoor model railway at Melide.

In contrast, Murten, the Roman amphitheatre at Avenches, Payerne's Romanesque abbey and Grandson castle can be reached by short local trips. Lausanne is only 44 minutes away on the Inter-City and, apart from Montreux, Martigny, Sion, Sierre and the Rhone valley resort, one highly recommended day-trip from there is by lake steamer to Thonon-les-Bains on the French shore of Lake Geneva, a very pleasant town which caters well for pedestrians. Beyond Lausanne lie Nyon, with its lovely views, enterprising Roman museum and narrow-gauge railway to the french border in the Jura mountains, and Geneva, where we had our first look at a Spanish "Talgo" express. Younger children returning from Geneva by the 18.56 can enjoy an on-board playroom with rocking-horses, lego, etc.



"Over the Brunig Pass", (see previous page). Hge 4/4 between Meiringen and Brung-Hasliberg. Photo Editor.

What about wet days? Take the narrow-gauge from Berne to Migros' vast new shopping complex called "Shoppyländ". If the rain goes away during the day, take the same railway to its terminus at Solothurn, a lovely medieval town incongruously overlooked by its Italian Baroque cathedral. Your ticket is valid for the S.N.B. tram which you can use between the station and the 'old town'. One hardly needs to mention the superb transport museum at Lucerne, connected to the station by a frequent boat service.

The most memorable railway treats were the new M.O.B. Super Panoramic Express (weekends and first class only) from which the lucky first eight or so in the boarding queue can view the constantly changing scenery through a full-width front window at the front of the train - the driver has a cabin above - in air-conditioned comfort, and the Vallorbe-Lausanne journey (no booking, no supplement) on the T.G.V.

For steam enthusiasts weekend excursions, all easily accessible by rail, are available at little extra cost.

Of the postal bus runs in the high Alpine passes around the Susten-Furka-Grimsel triangle the Grimsel is perhaps the most spectacular and is certainly the most convenient to Fribourg, outward via Brig (lunch in the Migros) and return via Meiringen.

If you bring children with you - 6 to 15 year olds pay half price - and really want to enjoy your travels, I feel that first class is well worth the extra. In either class the Holiday Ticket is very much cheaper than the sum total of ordinary fares, even with a family concession, and it cuts out all the ticket-office queues and delays and allows you to change your itinerary at will.

Where does a family of foreigners with widely varying tastes and appetites eat during all this? For convenience, variety, quality and reasonable prices we found the Migros, Cp-op, E.P.A., Innovazione and other department store self-service restaurants excellent. As only a few of these are open on Sundays (e.g. at Montreux and Interlaken) the children sometimes got their number one choice, the nearest McDonald's fast food restaurant.

Tickets, all information and the indispensable timetable covering all public transport are obtainable from the Swiss National Tourist Office in London, who answered all my queries promptly and politely.

