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MY FIRST VISIT TO SWITZERLAND

By Brian Macdermott

To say that I have fallen in love with Switzerland is probably an understatement. What a place?! Spectacular scenery and clean trains in a multitude of colours and variety!

The 1987 family holiday, undertaken by car, was spent in a self-catering chalet just above the village of Les Avants (on the MOB). The village is just up the mountainside from Montreux with a beautiful view across to the Rochers de Naye and the Dent de Jaman. Being a family holiday, 'train spotting' had to be fitted in wherever possible. However, the road down to Montreux from Les Avants crossed the Montreux-Oberland-Bernois five or six times - armed with a timetable, departure time from the chalet could be worked out to coincide with maximum waiting time at the many level crossings!

On Sunday 23 August we paid a late afternoon visit to the Blonay Chamby line at Chamby (also on the MOB), where steam loco 99 193 was hauling the last working of the day out to the Museum, situated on a short spur off the 'main' line. The timetable is planned very well, enabling one to travel the whole line and spend about an hour looking around the depot/museum. The depot houses (I think) six tracks full of steam locos, automotrices and coaching stock. The Blonay Chamby is a line full of eccentricities and is well worth a visit - we were even 'hand shunted' at one point! Connection can be made at Blonay with the Vevey to Les Pleiades line. Return fare on the BC, including Museum entrance fee, was S.Fr 7.

The Monday and Tuesday were spent in a general motoring tour of the Lake Geneva (Lac Leman) area. A fleeting visit was paid to the junction station of Vevey where Re4/4¹¹ No. 11337 was noted on a west-bound train. Another fleeting visit was paid to Lausanne station. The depot can be seen from one of the platforms and is complete with turntable. On shed (amongst many others) were Re4/4¹¹ No. 11137 in red/grey livery, Ae6/6 No. 11472, Be4/6 No. 1615, and Ee3/3 locos Nos. 16379 and 16373. Ae4/7 No. 10974 was resting in the station as in TGV departed northbound. Worth a visit is the Lausanne Metro, running from the town centre via the station down to the edge of the lake.

At Nyon, Re4/4¹¹ No. 11248 was held in a loop with a five wagon freight train whilst in the roadway adjacent were a couple of the Nyon-St. Cerque-La Cure units, looking spotlessly resplendent in their red and orange livery.

In the opposite direction, the small town of Aigle, 10 miles or so south of Montreux, is a rail and tramway mecca. The SBB station forecourt area doubles as a terminus for three companies: the red and white vehicles of the AOMC (Aigle-Ollon-Monthey-Champery); the blue, white and grey vehicles of the ASD (Aigle-Sepey-Diablerets); and the brown, cream and black vehicles of the A-L (Aigle-Leysin). One of the Bahn Rail Ferrovia 2000 Re4/4¹¹V locos arrived at the SBB station whilst I was there.

Wednesday and Thursday were 'rail days'. S.Fr 94 bought my wife and me a ticket from Les Avants to Interlaken Öst, with the children travelling 'free'. (Travel from Montreux was at the same price). We caught the 10.24 a.m. off Les Avants - the 10.00 a.m. "Panoramic Express" from Montreux to Zweisimmen. This was formed of five panoramic vehicles headed by one of the MOB's four 6000 series locos. Superb views of the mountains and countryside are afforded from these air-conditioned coaches on the limited-stop journey to Zweisimmen where arrival was made at 11.45 a.m.

Zweisimmen is a junction station. The MOB goes back out to Lenk, about 11 miles or so along the Simmental Valley, whilst the BLS and SEZ share the station area. We just had time to consume our packed lunch before catching the 12.21 p.m. connecting train for Interlaken Ost. This train makes only one stop, at Boltigen, before arriving at the junction station of Spiez, on Lake Thun. I don't know if it is normal practice, or whether platform space was at a premium because of the train diversions following the flooding of the Gotthard that week, but a few moments after arrival we reversed back out of the station then forward into another platform.

We then stopped all stations to Interlaken Ost. The Ost station seemed a little too 'railwayfied' for the family, so we quickly hopped onto a train which was just departing back to the West station. This seems more suitably positioned for the souvenir shops etc. BLS No. 205 had arrived there with a freight in the meantime.



Agent du Mouvement Jean-Claude Bonin in the 'box' at Montreux. The microphone enables Jean-Claude to make station announcements and contact radio-equipped members of the shunting staff.

Our return trip was somewhat eventful. I had planned to get back to Zweisimmen by the 16.39 arrival from Interlaken, and indeed did so. The plan was to catch the 16.50 semi-fast MOB train back to Les Avants where arrival was due at 18.18 - just right for our well-earned evening meal. A 2-car MOB unit was in the platform, at the stop-block end of which was a clock face with moveable hands indicating the 16.50 departure. The train duly departed and for some reason I thought . . . we're on the wrong train! My fears were proven correct when we headed off down the Lenk branch instead of turning right onto the Montreux bound line. A hasty glance at the timetable showed that, at a guess, this train would return directly to Zweisimmen with only a two or three minute turn

round at Lenk. We decided to stay on board and enjoyed the (unintentional) free ride! Upon arrival back at Zweisimmen the problem became apparent - the hands of the clock weren't very clear from the angle I had viewed them, and we had, in fact, boarded the 16.49 and not the 16.50 which had been standing on the adjacent platform!



Above: MOB GDe 4/4 No. 6001 "Vevey" comes into Montreux with the 2-coach 06.50 from Zweisimmen watched by Be 4/4 No. 1001 "Montreux". After arrival on Track 6, 6001 reversed its stock onto the shed shown between the two locos. No. 1001 shunted its three cement tankers, which later departed bound for Saanen at the rear of the 09.00 to Zweisimmen.

We now had plenty of time to catch the slower, all stations 18.00. We made doubly certain that this was the 18.00 and installed the family in MOB 2-car unit No. 4004. This had two coaches and a PTT van at the rear. As we had about 15 minutes before departure, I decided to leave the train to take a few photos. I walked to the head of the train and, to my horror, heard a whistle blow. Turning, I saw the train gradually glide away from the platform with my wife and two boys hanging out of the window shouting for help! Surely 'train mad Dad' couldn't get it wrong twice in the same afternoon? The Postman was hanging out of his van as he passed, so I called to him in French to stop the train. He casually replied that there was nothing to worry about . . . a coach needed shunting in another platform and they'd be back shortly! This allayed my fears, but not those of my family who were still heading off into the sunset! After all this, we arrived at Les Avants, mentally and physically exhausted, some 90 minutes later than planned. Still, it did give me a chance to watch the attachment of three cement tanks to our train en route - a truly 'mixed' train. Here in England I am an ardent follower of the Somerset and Dorset Line. There are some notable similarities between the operation of the respective lines which appealed to me.

The next morning, I was up bright and early to catch the 07.16 from Les Avants to Montreux where I had an appointment with the signalbox staff, arranged by letter a couple of months previously. The 2-car unit was packed to the gunnels with school-children by the time we arrived at Montreux, a few minutes later at about 07.50.

Montreux has the distinction of being served by trains of three gauges - the standard gauge SBB; the metre gauge MOB; and the 80 cm rack line to Glion, Claux and the Rochers de Naye. For bus enthusiasts, single-deck trolleybuses with trailer cars pass through the main street of Montreux not far away.



The "Panoramic Express" takes a short breather before leaving Les Avants. The train departs Montreux at 10.00 and calls at Les Avants, Chateau-d'Oex, Rougemont and Gstaad before arriving at Zweisimmen at 11.45.

I spent a very pleasant two hours in the 'box' with the Agent du Mouvement on duty, Jean-Claude Bonin, and the Supleant Chef de Gare, Albert Berdot. In common with many 'smaller' SBB stations, the box is simply an office (for want of a better word) that slightly projects onto Platform 1. The one Signalman controls all the signals in the area, the level crossing, and makes all the station announcements as well as keeping in touch with Control at Lausanne and using the telex machine! In my opinion, the pair of them seemed to handle their varied responsibilities with remarkable calm and professionalism.

Although the door is marked no entry, many people still walk straight in to ask directions. As Montreux has something of an 'international flavour' the questions can come in a variety of languages - and the trains are still coming in at 60 mph needing attention from the Signalman! I was surprised to see an Engineers' train being propelled towards Geneva on Track 2 at over 50 mph.

Track 1, a platform line, is a loop off the Geneva-bound line (Track 2). Track 3, the other platform line, serves the Brig-bound trains. Adjacent are Tracks 4, 5 and 6 which are MOB tracks. MOB trains arrive at Montreux under their own signalling controls, but departure cannot be made without the 'permission' of the SBB Signalman once connections have been made.

I said my farewells to Jean-Claude and Albert and boarded the 10.00 a.m. "Panoramic Express" back out to Les Avants feeling content that I could now term myself a 'visitor' rather than a 'tourist'. I have already booked the 1988 holiday in Kandergrund on the BLS and hope that I might get a similar appointment with one of the signalboxes at Spiez.

All Photos by B.D. Macdermott

If anyone wishes to research the area further, I can fully recommend the following (usual disclaimer):—

1. Salford Video. "The MOB and connecting railways".
2. Book. "Le Chemin de Fer MOB". (£6.95).
3. Book. "Railways in the Bernese Oberland". By Martin Bairstow. (£4.95).



Re 6/6 No. 11638 arrived in Track 3 with Train No. 3113 from Lausanne at 07.55. It then moved forward, set the empty stock back into Track 2 and ran round. Out of sight, a shunting loco is attaching an empty PTT van which had been detached from an early morning Lausanne - St. Maurice train. When attachment was complete, the train left at 08.14 bound for Vevey as E.C.S.

Photos by B.D. Macdermott