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HALF A GLACIER EXPRESS

By Tom Bigley

During a lifetime's interest in railways both life size and model, I have been guilty of the common attitude of dismissing those in foreign parts as being not quite proper. However, I have now matured as a "late developer" and over the last 4-5 years became interested in all European railways. This belated maturity has focused especially on Switzerland with the combination of it's myriad different systems aided by the delights to the eye of Alpine scenery. My awakening curiosity led to the purchase of some Swiss railway books and membership of the Swiss Railway Society. Not unusually this led to a particular fascination in the metre gauge systems of the south and the workings of the Glacier Express which is run jointly by the Brig Visp Zermatt Bahn, Furka Oberalp Bahn and the Rhätische Bahn. The loan of these books to a work colleague whose principal interests lay further north in Germany produced the response "Why don't we have a day trip on the Glacier Express?" Why not indeed? Plans were provisionally laid last February for an overnight stay in Zürich to allow an early start with an even chance of catching the last flight out of Geneva in the evening.

Thursday the 14th May saw us checking in at London Heathrow for the 0950 Swissair Airbus for Zürich. Two hours later we checked in at our airport hotel then caught the courtesy coach into the city. Making straight for the platform ends of the Hbf we were soon clicking shutters at the Re4/4, Re6/6, Ae3/6 and the Ee3/3 class locomotives. I realise that this may be heresy to some of you but my admiration of the Swiss Railways does not extend to the SBB's taste in colours. I know it's slowly changing for the better but dull green is not the most attractive colour to observe or photograph. I know the Swiss take their defence seriously but do they have to camouflage their trains in matt green? Leaving the station after an hour or so we set off to explore the city and immediately came across a prewar tram literally glittering in the sunshine in an all gold livery on a special tour working. Three hours touring the old town and it's model shops and a trip on the Polybahn saw us back at the Hbf and this time witnessed the fascinating precision of the Taktfahrplan. All but two of the platforms were devoid of trains and about 6 Re4/4's were waiting out on the approach tracks. Within 20 minutes every platform was occupied and had an Re4/4 coupling on to what had been the rear of the incoming trains. We boarded an Intercity train, which was bound for Winterthur and St Gallen, and departed in parallel with 3 other expresses on our short journey to Zürich Flughafen and our hotel.

Friday the 15th was us up at 06,00 hrs to catch the 08,07 IC to Chur on the first stage of our ten hour journey to Geneva. Hauled by the inevitable Re4/4II we were soon speeding down the west side of the Zürichsee with little to record apart from the seemingly endless number of Loks at every station and siding, and a fleeting glimpse of a Südostbahn triebwagen at Wädenswil as we sped by. The scenery was becoming grander as we passed the Walensee and skirted the Liechtenstein border. Just 75 minutes from Zürich we got our first glimpse of the Rhätische Bahn at Landquart, and we were soon in Chur where our schedule allowed an hour to explore. Those 60 minutes offered the opportunity to photograph all the principal varieties of RhB motive power including the Chur-Arosa DC powered units in the station forecourt. To have glimpsed a Crocodile would have set the seal on a great day but none were seen. Are there any in service this summer?

Our hour was soon gone and so we boarded the coach with those magical plates "Glacier Express Chur-Disentis/M-Andermatt-Brig-Zermatt". At 10,44 precisely RhB

Loco No 633 "Zuoz" started us on our way. First stop was Reichenau-Tamins and within seconds of our arrival a red liveried Ge6/6 II No 704 "Davos" arrived from the opposite direction with the St Moritz section including the FO Panoramic car B4211. Some smart marshalling soon had 633 continuing into the Rhine Gorge at the head of 11 coaches. From here the scenery was breathtaking and ever changing all the way to Brig.



RhB Pendelzug Be4/4. No 512 at Chur.

Photo: Editor

At Disentis the reformation of our train allowed time to photograph the FO Locomotive HGe4/4 I No 31, and the RhB Ge4/4 I No 601 "Albula" still in green livery as well as some of the stock of our train which was now shortened considerably including the loss of the Panoramic car. We continued with 5 vehicles behind HGe4/4II No 102 and soon heard the "clunk" as we engaged the rack rail for the first of many times and started to climb at a seemingly impossible angle. We secured a place in the Restaurant coach (WR3811) and settled down to the serious business of lunch and the contents of those famous tilted wine glasses as we climbed up and beyond the snow line. During 'pudding' Andermatt suddenly appeared hundreds of feet below us and reappeared on one side then the other as we snaked our way down the mountain side. The meal was finished just in time as the Restaurant car was detached here to join the eastbound train. Stabled at Andermatt were HGm4/4 No 62 and HGe4/4II No 101 and 103 plus a shed full of stock which time did not allow us to explore. Next loco seen was Ge4/4III No 82 "Uri" waiting with a motorail shuttle at the east portal of the Furka Base tunnel. West of the tunnel the scenery became gradually less bleak as we descended through the Goms. Here, in particular, the abrupt changes in gradient and seemingly impossible right angled curves resembled a very badly laid train set. Too quickly we reached Brig, glimpsing HGe4/4I's Nos 32, 34 and 36 on shed and BVZ's ABDeh8/8 No 2043 "Zermatt" waiting

to complete the train's journey to Zermatt - but not ours. We had enjoyed over half the delights of the Glacier express and I certainly intend to return one day to complete the whole trip.

Our journey was to continue behind red liveried SBB Re4/4 II No 11182 on the 150 minute journey to Geneva. Leaving behind the BLS shed with an array of brown liveried Re4/4's and the BVZ depot with one venerable HGe4/4 we sped through the vineyards of the Rhone Valley, being constantly "attacked" by Swiss Airforce veteran Hawker Hunters engaged on a large scale military exercise which had been in evidence throughout our journey. Our train was now into the start of the evening rush hour and we tried to observe the bewildering array of narrow gauge lines feeding from (it seemed) every station. We think we saw them all from the M.O. at Martigny to the B.A.M. at Morges. If only we had more time . . .

By now the weather, which had been very kind to us, changed and as we sped round Lake Geneva visibility dropped and it began to rain. Our arrival at Coravin was 4 minutes late and a mad run to the taxi rank and a willing effort by the driver through the now torrential rain and the Geneva rush hour just failed to catch the last flight to London. If only the new Airport station had opened a month earlier . . . So - back to the city for a hotel and home to Gatwick the following morning.

And, as we feared after a whole day travelling the length of Switzerland by train, we soon knew we were home. The network Southeast 4-VEP for the admittedly brief journey to Three Bridges was filthy!!

An exhausting but exhilarating 48 hours. Now there is the family holiday in Interlaken to look forward to with all those railways in the Bernese Oberland.

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