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## Switzerland by Rail 1992

by C.J.Freezer

### In the September 1991 Swiss Express

Richard Pinner described, in some detail his journeys by rail to Switzerland in the fifties and asked why so many SRS members preferred to fly. Doubtless many of us came up with the stock answer, air travel is not only faster, it is cheaper as well. Nevertheless, I had long toyed with the idea of making the journey overland, and so when Nick suggested we took the old fashioned way, I agreed readily, the more so as he undertook to work out the details.

Rather than travel overnight, we decided to break our journey in Paris and to return via Köln, taking an overnight ferry back. The original plan, to travel from Hoek van Holland to Harwich was ruled out by Sealink's retiming the service, but the Olau Line Vlissingen (Flushing) - Sheerness service was an acceptable substitute.

It is advisable to book one month in advance and, ideally to travel as a party of four since this will usually ensure you get the four facing seats in these days of aircraft seating. You need to show your Swiss Passes if you intend to use these for the Vallorbe-Lausanne journey on the TGV. It took over an hour at Victoria to sort out the details and get our reservations. On the 10th June we met at Victoria. Benefit one, our coach now left from the end of the road and benefit two, you've a bigger choice of breakfast at Victoria. (Thinks: why can't we have competing caterers at Heathrow and on Motorways?). However a malevolent signalman on Network Southeast thought it a good idea to let the Brighton slow out ahead of the Newhaven boat train which wasn't, as a result, non stop.

At Newhaven we boarded the *Stena Landoner* (ex *Versailles*) for an enjoyable cruise across the Channel in perfect conditions. At Dieppe we discovered that the "train" from Dieppe Maritime was a coach running over the inset tracks. Single line working with road vehicles is even more fraught than with rail, we met a van coming the other way and lost a good

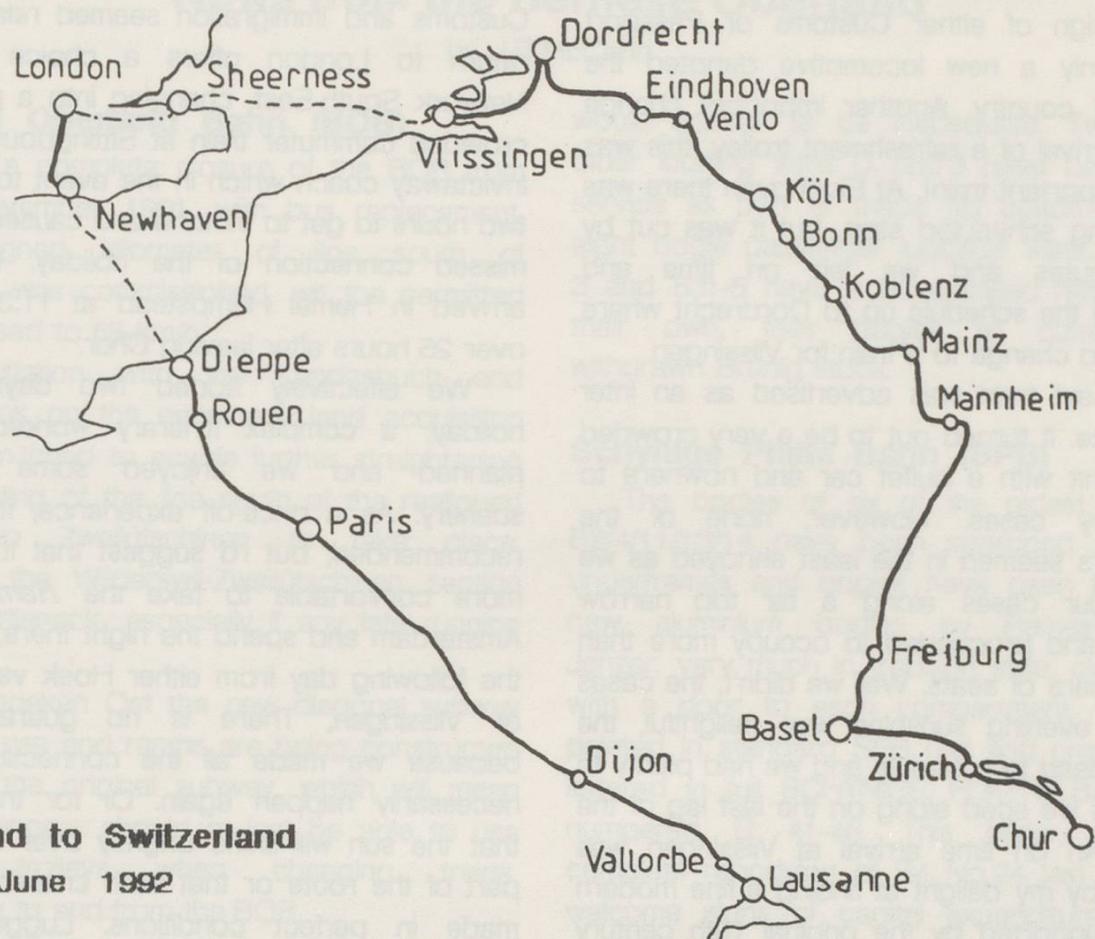
deal of time. However we made the connection with the 16:03 to Paris, turfed an optimist out of our reserved 2nd class seats and then sat back to enjoy the ride.

Snag two, we got to Paris in the rush hour, the Metro is just as crowded as LT and as we arrived at St.Lazare we couldn't use the RER to get to the Gare de Lyon. We eventually found the Hotel Nouvel, picked at random from a guide, which proved comfortable and cheap, there were ample restaurants nearby, we had an enjoyable meal and then made another mistake, we went into a Paris bar. At that point we realised just how inexpensive Switzerland can be.

The following morning was spent dashing around Paris on the Metro and RER, we managed to squeeze in the Arc de Triomphe, a few shops and the Place de la Bastille before joining the TGV, which is a very impressive train indeed. On the way south the weather deteriorated and we arrived at Lausanne in a downpour. However, that was about the worst weather we encountered in a fortnight, for although we did have some rain, it was usually while we were in a train.

I think we all had misgivings about the return journey, a 12 hour dash across Europe with three changes, the longest giving just 15 minutes, the shortest only nine, particularly as we were carrying our cases as well as the inevitable shoulder bag.

The morning was wet, though the rain held off until we reached Chur bahnhof where we boarded the 09:15 for Basle, travelling first class on our Swiss Passes. Thanks to the late arrival of the train from Basle, with its advertised connections for the *Bernina* and *Glacier Expresses*, the connection to our train from St.Moritz couldn't get into the station and we were six down on leaving. As the connection into the *Mont Blanc* at Basle was very tight and the Kursbuch suggested the connection would not be held. Our luck was in, the train was back



## Overland to Switzerland

June 1992

on schedule by Pfaffikon, we left Zurich on time and arrived at Basle to find a cross platform interchange.

Our reserved second class seats were in the last coach of the waiting train, but we made it with ample time to get our cases onto the luggage racks at the end. It was then necessary to evict another optimist from our reserved bay before settling down in relative comfort. We left on time, arrived at Basel Bad and were boarded by German Customs who, having plenty of time before they got to Freiburg, the next stop, proceeded to do a couple of spot searches. Judging from our coach it was "let's harass little old ladies day", we wondered if there was something more than mere officiousness involved.

The *Mont Blanc* kept good time all the way, we had seats on the Rhine side of the train and as, long before we reached Mainz the sun had come out, we had a most enjoyable journey to Köln where we rolled in dead on time at 16:59. En route the conductor had given not only the connections over the speaker system, but had

thrown in track numbers for good measure. Unfortunately, he wasn't interested in eccentric individuals who wanted to leave Germany as he didn't mention our next train when we were approaching Köln. It wasn't difficult to find and, with large lifts to the subway, transfer to the Den Haag train was simple.

The Dutch have gone overboard on multiple unit trains and as a result are short of loco-hauled carriages, so this fairly important train was made up of older DB corridor stock, with no additional luggage provision. Into the bargain, we found our reserved seats commandeered by a couple of cyclists who'd dismantled their machines and stowed them on the racks. Reluctantly, they vacated the compartment, we stowed most of the cases on the racks, but one had to go between the seats leaving very little room for anyone else. Into the bargain, the DB obviously considered this an unimportant service and shoved something ahead of us. We arrived at Venlo, the border crossing, three minutes down. A fairly leisurely loco exchange then followed, we left three minutes late, the

Dutch considering honour to be satisfied. There was no sign of either Customs or Passport control, only a new locomotive denoted the change of country. Another important change was the arrival of a refreshment trolley, this was now an important train! At Eindhoven there was a fairly long scheduled stop, but it was cut by three minutes and we left on time and maintained the schedule up to Dordrecht where we were to change to a train for Vlissingen.

Our next train was advertised as an Inter City service. It turned out to be a very crowded multiple unit with a buffet car and nowhere to put heavy cases. However, none of the passengers seemed in the least annoyed as we heaved our cases along a far too narrow gangway and proceeded to occupy more than our fair share of seats. Well we didn't, the cases did. The evening sunshine was delightful, the train ran dead to schedule and we had plenty to look at as we sped along on the last leg of the journey. An on time arrival at Vlissingen was matched by my delight at finding a fine modern awning supported by the original 19th century cast iron pillars, but tempered by the number of people leaving; were they all for the ferry, if so, would there be places on the coach? In point of fact, there was ample room for us and our cases on the airport-style shuttle, we arrived in good time to discover a very modern ferry terminal, laid out on airport lines with good check-in desks and an escalator leading up to a level covered entry onto the boat.

As cross-channel ferries go, the Olau line operates cruise liners. A standard cabin for overnight stay is up to luxury standard, what the luxury cabins are like I have no idea. Furthermore, with all cabins forward, there is no noise from the screws, a useful feature for an overnight trip. There were ample restaurants; we opted for the inexpensive, but good cafeteria, breakfasts was lavish, a buffet breakfast with large plates and ample supplies of hot and cold food cost a fraction over 4 per head - 14 guilders in practice. The stairwells were covered in antique charts, but fortunately the captain had a more modern set to hand, we docked a little early at Sheerness and brought a

glorious holiday to a close. Even British Customs and Immigration seemed relaxed. The return to London offers a choice between Network South-East, changing into a potentially crowded commuter train at Sittingbourne or an Invictaway coach which in the event took nearly two hours to get to Victoria and caused the only missed connection of the holiday. We finally arrived in Hemel Hempstead at 11.30, a little over 25 hours after leaving Chur.

We effectively added two days to the holiday, a complex itinerary worked out as planned and we enjoyed some delightful scenery. As a once-off experience, it is to be recommended, but I'd suggest that it might be more comfortable to take the *Rembrandt* to Amsterdam and spend the night there, travelling the following day from either Hoek van Holland or Vlissingen. There is no guarantee that because we made all the connections it will necessarily happen again. Or for that matter, that the sun will shine brightly over the scenic part of the route or that both crossings will be made in perfect conditions. Luggage is a problem, and the cost is high, with all incidentals thrown in, we probably spent as much as we would have done flying first class.

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#### European Model Railway Exhibition

The German Railway Society is holding its annual European Model Railway Exhibition on Saturday 19 September from 10:30 to 16:30 in the College of Further Education, Oxpens Road, Oxford, on the inner ring road opposite the Ice Rink and only 7-10 minutes walk from the railway station or city centre. Admission is £1.50 adults, £1 for children and senior citizens. There are 9 layouts on show this year, four German, including Reichelsheim and Spalt (both recent *Continental Modeller* features) plus a large TT layout. There are three French layouts and a new Austrian narrow gauge layout that is to be featured in *Continental Modeller* next month. Switzerland will be represented by David Broomfield's RhB Maloja. The usual specialist traders will be present, Howes, Victors, Winco and Robert Spark plus a couple of newcomers, together with the German Railway Society bring and buy stall. All the supporting Society stands will be present and the College Refectory will be available for refreshments and meals..