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Setra postbus waiting to depart from Maloja post office, June 1992

Die Bergeller Bahn

A postscript by David Broomfield
Photographs by the author

Since writing the article on die Bergeller Bahn (Swiss Express 3/9 March 1993) I have had the opportunity to explore the route at first hand by postbus, at least as far as the Swiss-Italian border at Castasegna. It would have been nice to travel all the way to Chiavenna but only a limited and separate service operates beyond the frontier and booking is essential. The timing of this requires a very early start if one is to make the round trip in the day.

I got on the bus at St.Moritz Bahnhof after waiting for it to come down the hill from the town. It was quite well filled on a pleasant sunny day, several of the passengers being soldiers returning home after their annual stint. We set off along the main road which follows the floor of the flat Upper Engadine valley, making side trips round the populous lanes of St.Moritz Bad, diverting into Champfer and

Silvaplana villages, which the broad main road now by-passes. Then up to the Corvatsch Luftseilbahn at Surlej and again temporarily leaving the main route which runs at the foot of the mountains along the northern shores of lakes Champfer, Silvaplana and Sils to traverse the various parts of Sils Maria and Basalgia.

The railway would have crossed between the lakes here, permitting a central position for the station, but one has to admit that it couldn't offer the convenience of the bus in this comparatively populous section of the route. From Sils Maria there is a horse bus connection to Fex during the summer tourist season for which booking is again essential. After Sils it is a straight, fast run along the lakeside to Maloja and it is possible to see the hamlet of Isola, through which the railway was to have run, on the other side of the water.

Maloja itself was something of a disappoint-

ment insofar that, while it straggled for some distance, there was little, except for the large and apparently closed Kurhaus, little of it! It does have a sizeable modern Post Office with parking for several buses as this is the terminus for frequent short workings from St.Moritz, Pontresina and Samedan. I was very gratified to find that there was ample space for my bahnhof just where I had put it and, though I had never seen it before, quite a striking resemblance to the site, even to the extent of a suitable cliff face from which one of my tunnels could have emerged.

After leaving Maloja things change suddenly. The road drops over the top of the Upper Engadine to fall dramatically into the Val Bregalia. The 50,000 Landeskarte shows an enormous number of hairpin bends as the road descends the Maloja pass, but I swear it doesn't include all of them - I certainly lost count. There were some shots of this in an item in a recent TV travel programme, but unfortunately the reporter, Sue Cook, didn't seem to notice them, commenting only on how tired travelling on the efficient Swiss transport system made her. Certainly the drop from the top to the bottom of the pass proper is over 250 m, the distance by crow is under a kilometre.

At the bottom the road meets the bed of the Orlegna river, but this is no flat valley and it falls almost continuously all the way to Castasegna. After Cassaccia and Lobbia where there is an (electricity?) works on the river bank, there is another series of hairpins, albeit more spaced out, from which one can look up the wires of an industrial cableway to the massive walls of the Albigna hydro-electricity dam.

The road thereafter appears to have undergone considerable improvement so far as Promontogno, by-passing Vicosoprano (marvellous name) and Borgonova. The post office at



Castasegna's main, and only street at the top of the village. The Italian border is about 500 m ahead.

Vicosoprano, with its obligatory bus stand, is on the by-pass but we traversed the old main street at Borgonovo, which is mostly one car wide with the equivalent of 'please mind your head' notices on some of the buildings for the benefit of larger vehicles.

At Promontogno they are digging a major road tunnel under a cliff on which a church stands prominently and around which the present road has to wend a tortuous way. I believe the railway had intended to anticipate this tunnel. After negotiating the present short road tunnel, the bus stopped under the shady trees outside Promontogno Post Office. Here the several other passengers transferred to a short version of our bus for the steep ride up to



Castasegna PTT post bus garage. Outside is a turning circle with its own lane leading up to the post office. This is a useful prototype for modellers: no respectable Swiss station is ever seen (from the train) without its postbus and there needs to be somewhere to house them.

the village of Soglio which could be seen on the mountainside above. Our driver asked if I really wanted Castasegna. I was to learn why!

A short run brought us into that village, which clings to the northern side of the valley with a main street again wide enough only for a single vehicle. The bus terminated at the Post Office at the lower end of the village within 100 m of the border. The narrow wooded valley continued into the distance. Of Chiavenna 10 km away there was no sign.

After dropping the passenger (me), the bus disappeared down a steep side turning, only to reappear again shortly carrying an extra crew member and hurtle into Italy. I was confused. To say that Castasegna was sleepy was an understatement. The driver later told me that there are but two bars there and, forewarned that the one on the Swiss side of the border was having its annual holiday, he had picked up a colleague and headed for the other. Presumably the border officials turn a blind eye to a stray post bus.

I was left with an hour and a half to kill. I did find a small shop which sold me a sandwich

and a lemonade (no alcohol), but otherwise I didn't see a soul, apart from those in the streams of cars to and from Italy which alternated up and down the narrow street. No lorries, no room. I did discover a very neat two-berth bus garage but I was left wondering where the railway would have fitted in.

It would presumably have woken up the sleepy valley as well as providing another connection to Italy, but if I hadn't read the history I would have doubted that the proposals were serious. The civil engineering would have been fantastic, even by RhB standards and the cost difficult to justify.

The return journey was just as interesting. The villages in the Bergel are indeed more in the Italian mountain style, but prosperous, clean and tidy, à la Swiss. The Upper Engadine is nearly all tourist modern but there is a large traditional looking wooden hotel in the middle of Maloja. going down the bus was an ubiquitous Saurer, the return vehicle was the latest Setra whose power steering made light work of the

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Vereinigte-Huttwil-Bahnen (VHB)

I hadn't travelled on the Wasen-in-Emmental line so in February I made a visit here. It was due to go over to bus operation in May. From Bergdorf to Steinhof the track is currently being widened to double track. From the modern RBD4/4 *pendlezug* a change was made at Ramsei into a De4/4+Bt formation for the service to Wasen. The weather was a mixture of fog, wet snow and sleet and with a three minute turnaround at Wasen I didn't hang about! The train was the early afternoon 13:42 Ramsei - Wasen, 13:58 return and was patronised by about six or seven people.

Connections from SBB services at Burgdorf or Langenthal are not good. I could not find a way of avoiding a wait at Ramsei of 30 minutes when travelling from Zürich via Burgdorf. Clearly services may be geared to purely local needs so external connections are less important - but a bus can probably meet local needs of low volume?

Landquart - Bad Ragaz

The new track between Landquart and Maienfeld came into use during January, with all traffic transferring to this line to allow new track and catenary to be installed on the old line. Maienfeld station is currently under reconstruction - the goods loop had been removed by mid-February and pedestrian underpasses were under construction.

Bergellerbahn Postscript

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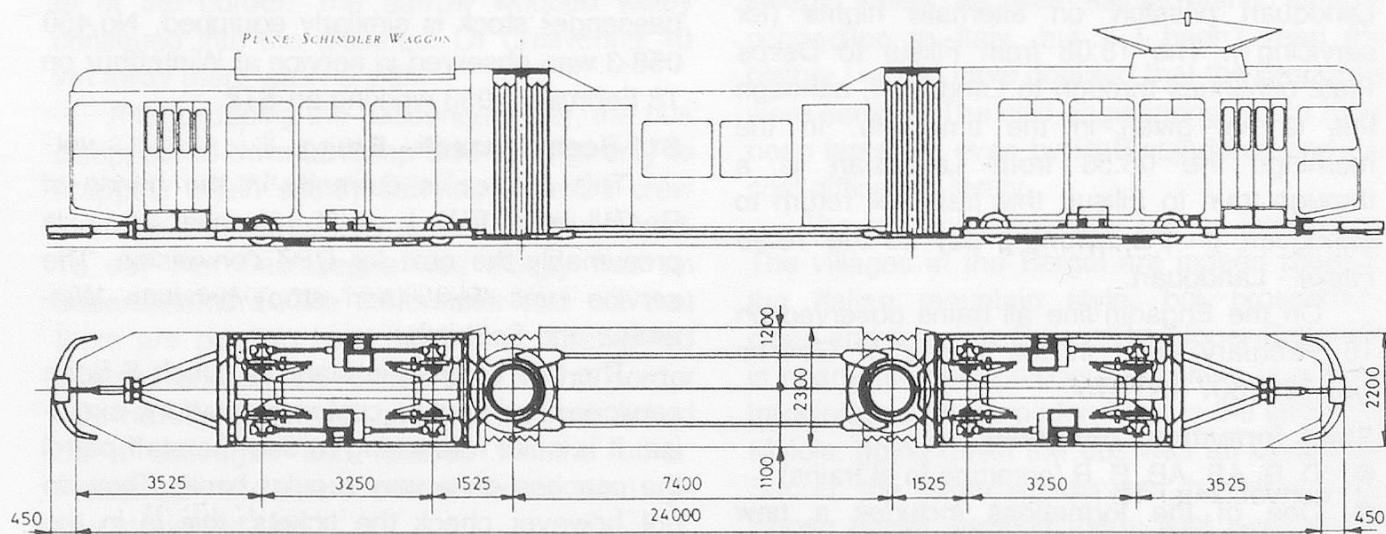
Maloja hairpins, swinging the full width of the road to the accompaniment of imperious use of the horn in true post bus style. At each post office the engine was switched off if we were even the slightest bit ahead of schedule. The drivers, incidentally, addressed the passengers successively in German, what I took to be Romansch and Italian; when a spare one got on they chatted in Schwyzerdütsch. What a ride!

Editors postscript.

Our autumn coach trip last year included an excursion from Lugano to St.Moritz. Taken in a torrential downpour, it was only relived by the thought that at least, inside the coach we were dry. After negotiating the narrow track masquerading as a road along the north shore of Lake Como, we arrived at Chiavenna where we stopped outside a cafe for a much needed break. It was too wet to explore, but as we passed the FS station it seemed there was little space for the proposed RhB terminus. It was fractionally drier when we stopped on the way back, but we didn't feel inclined to explore. St.Moritz turned out to be St.Moritz Bad, which had a toy shop with a model annex, with a fair supply of Bemo. However Swiss prices are too steep, I prefer to support our advertisers.

Cyril Freezer

Low-floor Articulated Tram for Zürich



The above drawing, courtesy Schindler Waggon, depicts the 3-unit low floor articulated *Cobra* tram which has been on trial in Zürich since mid-March.