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Balsthal Rail Festival by Ron Smith

What a railway! The Oe BB was opened in 1899 and was built to serve a VonRoll steel works and the Tela Papierfabrik AG's paperwork. Both companies still provide freight traffic for the railway. The Oe BB also runs a frequent service over the 8 minute run from its base in Balsthal down the valley to join the SBB at Oensingen.

Oensingen station is an amazing construction. The SBB line is straightforward but the Oe BB side of the triangle is cut though by a road which cuts across three tracks and through the platform, isolating the kiosk as a consequence.

During the 1970's the Oe BB was not receiving any subsidy from the government and introduced steam specials (for weddings, clubs or groups) wine and dine specials and other such ventures to improve profitability which all proved very successful. They currently run about 100 specials a year. To cater for this demand the railway has accumulated an impressive collection of rolling stock and it is this as well as several visiting locomotives, that

provide the centre piece for the annual rail festival over the weekend of September 2nd and 3rd.

The evening of Friday the 1st had a spaghetti dining special, Saturday and Sunday featured an intensive roster of trains. The two Karlsruhe tram units were intensively used and caused confusion to regular travellers at Oensingen who didn't believe that they were really the train for Balsthal.

Being an operating railway my Swiss travel pass was sufficient for the travel fare on all trains, a bargain indeed. The trams were fitted with Swiss pantographs and travelled from Karlsruhe to Balsthal under their own power. For interest one of the new Geneva to La Plaine train units was on display at Balsthal but due to its operating under French 1500 kW wires it was hauled by another locomotive to and from Balsthal.

On the Friday night and Saturday, steam was represented by the ex Schweizerische Central



Opposite Page: RBe2/4 202, Roter Pfeil (Red Arrow) at Balsthal Station, Saturday 2nd September 1995.

Above: Mallet SLB 196, Geneve RER unit 002 on the right, at Balsthal 2nd September 1995.

Bahn Mallet 0-4-0 + 0-4-0 superbly restored by volunteers at Balsthal. This machine is owned by the Verkehrshaus in Luzern but the Oe BB have the use of it for two years in exchange for the restoration which did not need a lot of work to return it to running order, this shared the train services with the Roter Pfeil (red arrow) unit, Karsburg tram, and the STS train. The STS is a fine example of what can be achieved with an old shunter and a guards van.

On Sunday 0-6-0 tank engine Kriers Luzern Bahn No. 1 (See Swiss Express 4/5 March 1995) was in action together with Karlsruhe tram, red arrow, Re 4/4' 10011, and the STS. Unfortunately Sunday brought thunder, lightning and monsoon strength rain which gave the excuse to visit the other attractions. In the car park was a loop with two narrow gauge live steam locos pulling rakes of sit-on coaches giving children rides, while at the other end of the station, where the tracks join to a line which continues up to the paper factory, an engineers

covered trolley roared up and down with more children on board. Behind the loco shed are two coaches with the local model railway club layout inside. This is a tremendous layout with so many spiral loops and curves it is difficult to work out which train will emerge from where, and at the end of one of the coaches a small cafe area served delicious calory packed home baking.

Along the goods platform face was the ex Seetal Bahn crocodile with its covers open for the visitors to peer inside its works. This loco, as well as the red arrow, are the subject of an intercantonal appeal to restore them to full working order.

Next was a dining coach with superbly set out tables, and next a two axle open wagon with benches and tables. These two were adjacent to the goods shed which had been opened out, decorated, filled with benches and tables and served excellent hot food and drink all day. The next vehicle was a Feldschlossen van converted into a bar selling their famous beer. Next was



Above: Visiting Karlsruhe tram with SBB pantograph fitted, at Oensingen 2nd September 1995.

the SBB rail shop coach. This turned out to be a disaster for my wallet. They sold all items of SBB clothing so I now possess two SBB shirts, 3 different ties and my wife has a blouse, pullover and scarves. I resisted the station signs, lamps, posters and flags of all the cantons of Switzerland.

In the other part of the goods shed various societies had stands selling models, new and second hand videos, books and other such things, and the kiosk on the platform end was rivaled by other stands there.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable weekend made the more so by it being a "real" operating railway rather than a preserved line, and as such trains were carrying real passengers to timetabled connections with the SBB. The modelling opportunity is impressive. On any layout it would be restricting to have only the branch two car e.m.u. shuttling in and out, but here is a prototypical example to run steam, diesel shunters, electric shunters, units and locos as well as a whole variety of coaching stock all on the one layout.

The Oe BB is to be congratulated on its

enterprising outlook and the rail festival provided a family day out with railway interest which must have given them revenue as well as an excellent public relations exercise to attract more fare paying customers.

The festival is held annually on the first weekend in September and I would heartily recommend a visit to anyone who can make it. Oensingen is on the Olten to Biel/Bienne line, with frequent trains to all destinations in Switzerland via Olten.

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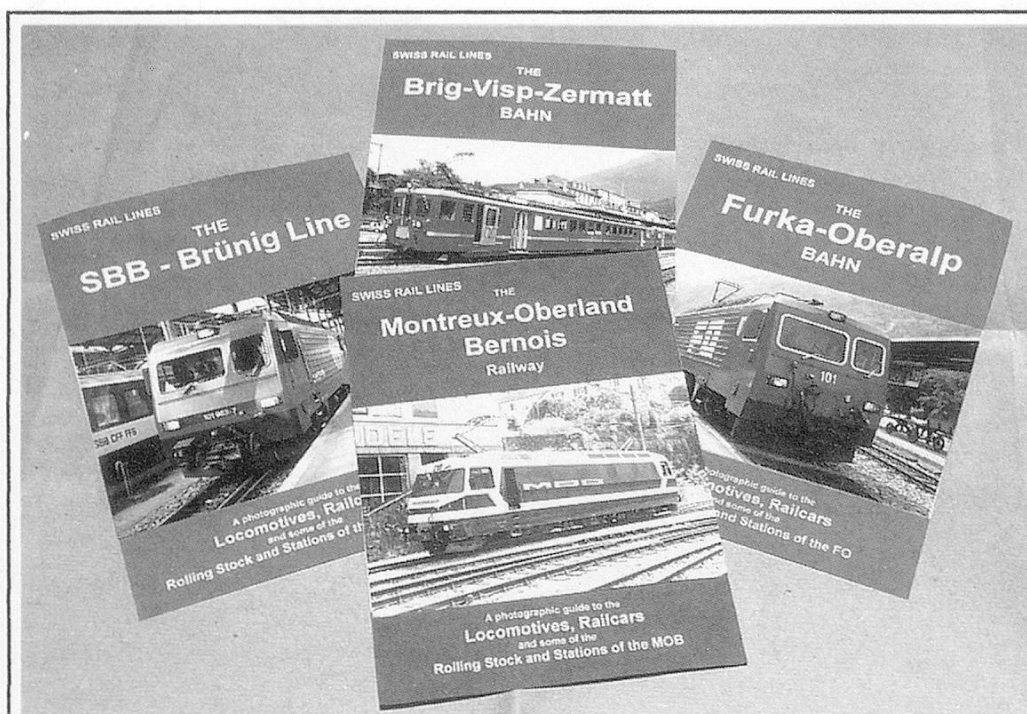
Above: Balsthal station had small live steam as well.

Below: KLB No. 1 leaving Balsthal station on Sunday 3rd September 1995





Above: The new Golden Panoramic on the left and the Crystal Panoramic at Montreux in the carriage sidings, these must be two of the most prestigious trains in Switzerland. The passenger comfort and ride is superb, offering tremendous views of the scenery. September 1995



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