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Erlebnis Pfad: 'Ere we go again by: Mike Harris

Not to be defeated by bad navigating or bad weather we returned to Switzerland in June this year and based ourselves in Kandersteg (just in case we went wrong again!) in the beautiful Kander valley, part of the region known as Frutigland. This time we made it the whole way from Kandersteg to Frutigen without problems.

First however, the journey from Zürich Flughafen to Kandersteg. Travelling with Kuoni we had half tax cards for the duration of our stay with full passes for the first and last days. We also paid the extra to get first class travel on those two days - it is nicer to arrive and depart in relaxed comfort especially when it can be some distance.

Now about that "distance"; the travel schedule provided gives you the quickest trip to the Bernese Oberland via Berne and very quick it is too at around 2 hours 40 minutes but with effectively unlimited travel you could get there in other ways if the connections are there. Instead of travelling on the suggested two sides of the square (so to speak) Zürich - Berne - Kandersteg I thought it would be more interesting to travel the other two sides and arrive via Göschenen - Andermatt - Brig - Kandersteg.

Last year I purchased a Berner Oberland timetable for SF2.00 and this proved very useful as it covered every form of transport in the area and I thought that I would pick up another in the Flughafen station to check our route was feasible. At the SBB Information Office there was no such timetable. However, much better was the service provided in the shape of a personal timetable. The very helpful staff who speak perfect English simply enter your destination and start point with any extras like "via X" and out prints a sheet for you to take away. Not only does this cover the basics like places, changes and times but the type of train (IC, EC, D etc.) and the facilities available on it. This service is free and I would recommend it's use to anyone travelling by rail. I believe a similar service operates from many other stations too but have not tried it.

Incidentally, the Berner Oberland timetable is also widely available. In the Bernese Oberland, you can even pick up a copy in the CO-OP and it is still SF2.00 a copy.

So, armed with our personal timetable we took the long route and had a great journey to Kandersteg, although taking nearly twice as long

as the shorter route it was worth it purely for the short and steep journey from Göschenen to Andermatt and that part of the Glacier Express route down to Brig. One thing about doing this is to be prepared for the disbelief of the conductors (Zugfuhrers), "Why take all this time when it is so quick to go via Berne?" and "Surely you have not come from Zürich today!?" The man in the information office in Zürich had even handed me a print out of the shorter route just in case I came to my senses!

We are lucky that we fly from Manchester and the flight out lands in the mid morning. The return is a late evening departure which allows us some flexibility, I doubt if this is possible from other airports. Incidentally, we made our return trip on the Brünig Panoramic Express and once again those First Class tickets proved their worth as we sat in the carriage looking up out of those windows which curve way up in to the roof, simply fantastic!

Now for the Erlebnis Pfad: As there is no detail at the start, no real start point in fact at Kandersteg, follow these notes. Leave the station and turn right, then right again past the kiosk and go through the tunnel. The car loading dock is to your left and the footpath goes away to the right following parallel with the Spiez bound rails through some chalets and then out in to the fields. After a mile or so you turn right, drop down below the tracks and then take the next left across a foot-bridge, left at the main road and then right in about half a mile and after that it is a case of watching out for the signs.

We went wrong last year when a sign was missed close to a small gate on the left which leads downhill by an avalanche shelter made of rails set into the ground with sleepers fixed between them. This time we did not go wrong and followed the track down to Blausee Mitholz Station where the path crosses below the tracks and then follows the valley side of the rails. Parts of this section are extremely close to the tracks with good scenic as well as railway views. Along this section there is also a barbecue site provided by the publishers of a magazine - handy if you are carrying all the necessary items. Us, well we just kept on walking.

There do appear to be more little brown "Erlebnis Pfad" signs around this year or maybe it is just my imagination. You do need to keep an eye open for the information boards as they are greyish white and are frequently attached to galvanised metal or concrete and tend to blur into

the background. They are very interesting (if you have the translation and make you realise just what went into the building of this line and the current requirements for keeping it open. Even now there are electricity supply cables being replaced and work is going on with the permanent way.

At one point you play dodgems with the viaduct supports, in and out, up and down, perfect for inspecting how the new concrete sections were tied into the original masonry when the line was doubled. In fact there are seats here as well as several information boards, actually under the viaduct, perfect for a rest and a read.

The path leads on down the steep staircases and here I fully agree with Denis Stevens, it really is six channel surround sound with Dolby and I would add, Panavision too. There are trains on your level, above and below you as well as across the valley on the first loop. They are coming up, going down and in and out of the several tunnels on this section of line, you simply cannot take it all in.

As you come down onto the valley floor it is simply a case of following the signs from Kandergrund Church onwards to Frutigen or just catching the bus back to Kandersteg. If you head towards Frutigen you do need to go back uphill and under the line again so if you want to see the Church do it now before you go uphill. When you finally approach Frutigen the twin viaducts you have seen in front all day suddenly become very large and are set off by the ruin of the Tellenburg high above them. You approach the town finally through the fields from Kanderbruck a beautiful collection of chalets and then it is simply a case of buying the return ticket up to Kandersteg and riding up in 20 minutes or so what has just taken you the best part of the day to walk down!

All in all, I would now say that this is a well signed and extremely enjoyable walk which needs a full day to complete properly from Kandersteg to Frutigen. It is a walk which should appeal to the whole family, not just to rail fans. Parts of it are still a little tricky, wet and steep but it is worth doing. GO ON, GIVE IT A TRY!

***Kandersteg Tourist Office should have a leaflet in English prepared by George Hoekstra.

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OR INFORMATION CENTRES.