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The Furka Bergstrecke

by Nick Freezer

Photos by the author

When the Furka-Oberalp-Bahn (FO) line from Oberwald to Realp closed for the last time in October 1981 it appeared that the chance to travel by train past the Rhône Glacier, through the Furka summit tunnel and over the collapsible Steffenbach bridge had gone for ever. 13 years later, while two of these are not yet available, the Steffenbach bridge is approaching the end of its third summer in service carrying the steam trains of the Dampfbahn Furka-Bergstrecke (DFB).

It is now ten years since the idea of reopening the line as a tourist attraction was floated. In that time, a great deal of work has been undertaken to restore the line to operative condition. After proving their credentials, the DFB took over responsibility for the line from the FO in 1987, establishing their operating base in Realp as it was recognised that the east ramp would be the quickest to reopen. The concession to operate the railway was obtained from the Confederation and Cantons

HG3/4 No.2 *Gletschhorn* simmering at Furka station. The summit tunnel can be seen above the staff and passengers around the buffet tables.

in 1990, with the first stretch from Realp to Tiefenbach opening on 31 July 1992. The extension to Furka, with the introduction of a two train service, opened on 30 July 1993.

I visited the line on Sunday 26 June 1994, the second day of the season. The line was reached via the FO to Realp, where a Roco special train including the RhB *Stiva Retica* coach, was waiting in track 2. The DFB station is 500 m away, by the base tunnel entrance, and signs are provided from track 3, through a gap in the Armco barrier at the back of the platform, over the bridge and through the fields to the DFB booking cabin. Visitors by car are directed to a field on the south side of the FO with an equally long walk! The train for the 11.00 departure comprised two coaches, a AB2 (ex Nyon-St.Cergue-Morez) and the new bar coach, a body built at Liestal in 1993 on a 1910 chassis from the SZB, which was *just* sufficient for the traffic. Power was provided by HG3/4 No. 2 *Gletschhorn*.



The small turntable at Furka. On the left, a new siding leads towards the tunnel.

Departure was about one minute late; and was on adhesion to start with. Soon the exhaust beat altered as the engine changed over to compound working for the rack section. The scenery around the line seems unchanged since 1981, the only difference being the slower speed under steam operation. This section is in a confined valley, crossing the Furkareuss river just above Realp. Passage through the three short Alt Senntrum tunnels filled the coach with smoke, as well as highlighting the fact that no lights were fitted! Between the tunnels a snowdrift was spotted by the track in the same place as 13 years earlier. Running over the Steffenbach bridge, Tiefenbach was reached 20 minutes out. Here, the other train, five full coaches headed by HG3/4 No. 1 *Furkahorn*, was waiting.

Tiefenbach is currently a crossing and watering station, which can also be used to change trains for passengers wanting a short

round trip. A siding is provided, which contained spare non-passenger stock including post van No. 9 carrying a PTT circuit board from the long closed Biasca-Acquarossa line. Once all the passengers had been ushered onto the correct trains, they set off for their destinations.

Above Tiefenbach, the valley widens out and the line recrosses the river to climb the north side of the valley to Furka, another 20 minute journey. Furka station itself is perched on a ledge at the entry to the tunnel, with not even a visible footpath. At the end of June, snowdrifts are still plentiful here. A station buffet is provided, which was well patronised as the arrival coincided with the line's lunch time break! Indeed, prices seemed very reasonable, with Eichhof beer on sale at only SFr 3.00 per bottle. The hour's break allowed a close study of the site and tunnel portal, in which the maintenance equipment and the generator for the buffet were kept. The station is still laid with original rail and sleepers dating back to 1913; again, a short siding with a couple of vans, and a turntable, is provided.



Arriving at Tiefenbach, 11:20. No.1 is waiting by van Z9. The passengers have adopted their normal positions.

The return to Realp was slightly more peaceful, as the engine does not have to do much work; being at the back of the train at the descent allowed more of the scenery to be admired. The other train, now reduced to four coaches, but still full, was crossed at Tiefenbach, where water was taken by both trains. The arrival at Realp was on time, shortly before a westbound *Glacier Express* disappeared into the tunnel. Regrettably, I had to leave straight away to catch the next train from Realp; the current FO service pattern meant that the next train east was either 15 minutes or 2 hours later.

Stock on the DFB is mixed in origin but is now taking on a family style all its own. The company has adopted a dark blue livery, with the engines carrying *DFB* in brass letters and the coaches branded *Furka Bergstrecke*. The bar coach is actually in a red livery. The only jarring note are paper data panels attached to the coaches in plastic wallets. Pride of place must go to the steam fleet, which currently

comprises the two HG3/4 Nos. 1 and 2, built for the line in 1913 repatriated from Vietnam in 1990 and overhauled at Meiningen in 1992/3. The third locomotive is former Visp-Zermatt (VZ) HG2/3 No. 7 *Weisshorn*. No main line diesels are in stock, but a number of tractors are in use. Of these ex-RhB No. 68 has been fitted with a rack pinion for use on the main line and is now classified Tmh2/2. The coaches are a mixture of bogie and 2-axle stock from various lines, currently some eight or nine, including two open-sided vehicles, are in service. Of these, recently purchased B2 No. 124 stood out as it retained its SGA branding and orange and white livery. A large semi-round-house depot has been built at Realp, which can hold much of the stock under cover.

The general presentation and operation of the railway was professional, with stock and site being clean, while the staff were courteous and helpful. The return fare to Furka at SFr. 32 seemed remarkably reasonable when compared with other tourist railways when the round trip time of two to three hours is considered. The only comment I could make was that the souvenir shop, housed in an old brake coach at Realp, was not obviously open when I passed.



What of the future? The intention is to reopen to Gletsch in 1996. This is technically feasible, as the summit tunnel is clear and the only major work would where the Furka Pass road has to be crossed. However, taking tourists through an 1858m long tunnel behind steam in the 1990's comes into the 'never again' category. The line's current stock is not suitable for such a service. It would seem better to use diesel or preferably electric traction through the tunnel (the overhead is still

Tiefenbach, 11:30. No 1 can be seen leaving in the background. The fireman is about to pull the bag out of No.2's tank.

in place), but there is no power supply to either end of the tunnel at present.

The DFB was open in 1994 on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays from 25 June until 9 October (all week from 15 July to 14 August). It offers an experience of main line steam operation over the rack which is probably unique in Europe, and is well worth a visit.

Interloper at Lausanne

During our stay in Lausanne in June we frequently used the steps between Avenue de la Gare and Avenue St.Luce, to reach our hotel. Inevitably, we passed the "Station Pub", which has its windows embellished by locomotive drawings, one of which appears alongside. The question is, what connection has a Great Eastern *Claud* with Lausanne? We'd like to know

