

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: 4 (1994-1996)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Old ways to Switzerland, the Rheingold
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855035>

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Old Ways to Switzerland, The Rheingold

by Geoffrey Bryson

Now that new All Rail Routes to Switzerland are coming into use a look back at former routes is interesting.

The Rheingold was started by Mitropa AG in May 1928 to run from the Hoek van Holland to Basel in connection with LNER (former GER) Night boat from Harwich and the Hook Continental Express with Pullmans from Liverpool Street. Rheingold had new coaches in violet and white livery and just two seats aside in first class saloons and three aside in second class (no third class). The route was Utrecht where Amsterdam coaches joined through Emmerich, Köln, Mainz, Mannheim to Basel. In Germany it was usually hauled by ex-Bavarian S3/6 Pacific's, changing at Mannheim.

It generally left the Hoek before 07.00 (Dutch standard time - 20 minutes ahead of GMT) and by 1939 it reached Basel at 17.00 and ran to Milano with its through coaches in the same Swiss train as its great rival the Wagon Litt Pullman Express - Edelweiss which had started in June 1928 to run via Brussels and Luxembourg from Amsterdam.

After the war, Rheingold was restored but with 1st, 2nd and 3rd class and very slow taking from 06.30 until 19.30 in 1951 for the same journey.

I first used the Rheingold in May 1953 when on holiday from National Service in the Army, and I required a permit from the Brigadier I worked for to travel through the British, American and French zones of occupied Germany. It had been speeded up to reach Basel about 17.00hrs with the third class relegated to the Lorely Express. After an exploring holiday based in Bern with a Holiday Ticket we returned to Basel where a pre-war second class, three car diesel unit stood ready to precede the Rheingold north as the 'Roland' to Bremen via Mannheim, Frankfurt, and Hannover, having run in during the morning from Frankfurt. Unfortunately my German was non-existent so I did not try out these "Flying Hamburger" units. We changed to Rhein steamer at Mainz, after staying at the only hotel in the rubble strewn center of Mainz. We stayed for several days at Boppard on the Rhein Gorge

close to the Loreli Rock, an excellent spot to watch steam trains on both sides of the river, plus of course barges and other river boats. We were also able to hear (early morning and late evening) another re-introduction of DB pre-war diesel sets, this being 4 by 3-car sets.

When I left Boppard on a through Eilzug I had an early brush with German Officialdom in that my through ticket had been swapped to a boat ticket to Koblenz and I had to pay a fine and to stand in Third class for 15 minutes. The Eilzug was through to Rotterdam another bombed city just re-building its center with the first pedestrianised shopping street.

In the first days of January 1960 I again travelled on the Rheingold to a secondment in Zürich, by now it was first class only and faster. The Hook Continental had pre-war Coronation first class twin coaches with swivel pairs of seats. After a good crossing we left Hoek in the dark and I slept through the Netherlands, Eindhoven-Venlo had been the post war route.

In 1962 the Rheingold was re-equipped with new stock including Dome cars and two deck restaurant-kitchen cars and paired with the new Rheinpfel from Dortmund to München exchanging cars at Duisberg but the main train was now Amsterdam - Utrecht (Hook cars join) and back on the pre-war route, now all electric with the main train going to Bern and Genève but various through cars at different periods to Zürich/Chur, Chiasso/Milano and Brig.

A special supplement made it the most expensive train, but it only joined the Trans Europe Express network in May 1965. The Roland from Bremen to Basel was extended as a TEE to Milano with a further swap of cars in Basel SBB, with Rheingold from 1969. Another connection was made for some years at Lausanne with the TEE Cisalpin.

The British connection gradually faded away with just one through car from Hoek, then an along-platform connection at Utrecht which was finally broken.