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Switzerland - In My View by Dennis Basford

In recent years I have read a number of accounts of "My Trip to Switzerland" and I have often thought that "I could do that!" So for my most recent visit in early June (my fourth visit in two years) I have done just that. Here goes!

It is not a listing of places visited or locos seen or trains ridden on. More a collection of thoughts and impressions from along the permanent way. You, the reader, may agree or disagree with my views.

In the beginning then, a lot of ways of getting to and from Switzerland have been described and I would like to add one more to them. We have heard a lot about the low cost airlines in competition with the big boys. Most recently British Airways subsidiary "Go". Their main rival and market leader is Easyjet operating mainly from Luton Airport.

Easyjet fly from Luton to Geneva on a daily basis and it was this service I elected to use. Passenger handling at both ends is brisk and efficient whilst the aircraft are comfortable and

clean. There is a trolley service on board from which snacks may be purchased. At a little over £100 return for the ninety minute flight, I considered that I had done well. N.B. Fares are on a sliding scale. The earlier you book the less you pay. Passenger loadings on both flights were good.

So onto the train at Geneva Aeroport. My Swiss Pass in one hand (surprisingly in this day and age reduced in price from last year. No doubt as a result of the strong pound) and my brand new Kursbuch clasped in the other.

My destination was Montreux and my home for the week was to be the Pension Wilhelm. This is located adjacent to the station. In fact when a train passes through, it is very adjacent to the station. Again; clean, friendly, comfortable and at 45 francs a night B & B, I consider it good value.

I should add at this stage that I have no connection with either Easyjet or the Pension Wilhelm other than as a satisfied customer.

I like Montreux. It seems to be an older



persons' town and for me lacks the vibrancy of, say, Lausanne. It has a feel of slightly faded elegance. A cross, perhaps, between Harrogate and Scarborough.

My first full day was to Goshenen via Brig and back via the Lötschberg and Bern. The thing that struck me most was the standard of ride in the coaches of the SBB and the Furka Oberalp. On the main line; smooth, quiet and comfortable. On the metre gauge, anything but. The enthusiast would say "Ah, yes, that's part of the experience". Whether the locals who have to ride on them on a regular basis would agree is questionable.

Perhaps the time has come for the metre gauge lines to get together with the coach builders and bogie manufacturers to agree a common specification that carries us literally into the 21st century and does not leave us in the early 20th century in quality of ride terms.

The second day was one of the most beautiful days in weather terms that one could wish for. Warm, blue skies, fluffy white clouds. Put that together with the M.O.B.'s line from Montreux to Zweisimmen and Lenk and what have you got?

Previous page: GFM 2 car set at Chatel St. Denis, 9/6/98

Above: Yverdon St. Croix loco at Yverdon painted as a crocodile, 9/6/98.

Paradise!

It was whilst I was watching the shunting at Zweisimmen that I considered the M.O.B.'s vans, two of which were sat facing me. Both carried extremely attractive all-over liveries. I recalled a number of similarly painted specimens at Chernex and another at Les Avants. Do they ever run as part of a train? I have never seen one. Are they placed at strategic points around the system as mobile advertisement hoardings and just moved from time to time to vary the scene? Are they part of a Swiss lottery where the public gambles on which van turns up where on a particular day? I wonder.

I could have spent all day on the M.O.B. but I tore myself away at Montbovon to go across country for a ride on another favourite railway; the Orbe-Chavornay. It was on this trip that I promised myself that in future I would avoid local trains at the end of the school day. I had the



misfortune to share a train from Payerne to Yverdon with some of the local schoolchildren. Their behaviour and noise output was appalling. Some elderly people were obviously distressed by windows being flung open and the lack of ability by three staff members to control or quieten things down.

To set against that, I am always impressed by the behaviour of the Swiss military on trains. Usually armed but always quiet, unassuming, no fooling about. Serious young people with a purpose. Maybe Switzerland's national service can claim credit for sorting it out.

The Orbe-Chavornay then. In Britain it would have been "rationalised" out of existence years ago. At Orbe the rolling stock of yesteryear stands in the station yard unvandalised, and undamaged (maybe I was a bit harsh on the youngsters).

I was a bit unfortunate at Chavornay. The uncharacteristic late arrival of my train from Yverdon and another from Lausanne led to the O-C train running quite late. I got talking to the driver and explained that I was English and that I

Above: Orbe-Chavornay Be2/2 No. 14 railcar dating from 1990, 9/6/98.

was in Switzerland to ride on his train amongst others. He was quite perturbed at my being delayed and apologised profusely for something that wasn't his fault. We parted with a handshake at Chavornay. A gentleman in every way.

I was a bit sceptical when the O-C train, a four wheel railcar, arrived at Chavornay. I well remember British Rail's four wheelers based on the Leyland National bus as being rough riders. Well the O-C railcar is to say the least "boisterous"!

When I have been train riding all day I like a walk at night just for the exercise. There is an excellent lakeside walk in both directions from Montreux, either towards Vevey or towards the Chateau de Chillon. I don't know how far the walk stretches because although I walked until I was tired I never got to either end. Highly recommended.

The third day was good in parts. A quick trip up to Les Avants on one of the M.O.B.'s new



Above: MOB Be2/6 'push-pull' articulated unit at Les Avant, 10/6/98.

articulated "push pull" units which are quite good and then onto the M.T.G.N. for a trip up to Rochers De Naye. This line could be marketed as the Marmot Line. Like its mammal (or is it rodent) namesake it emerges tentatively from its burrow in Montreux, scuttles up the mountain and dives into another burrow at the summit. In Montreux it was sunny, at Caux it was misty and at the top it was thick cloud. The Swiss pass is only valid as far as Caux so before you fork out the additional 34 francs to reach the top make sure you have checked the weather forecast first.

Now it was raining steadily and any more mountain lines were out of the question. So then, off to Geneva for a ride to La Plaine, which I think is Switzerland's most westerly station. The service is run by twin sets which seem to have more in common with tramways than railways. I am never sure where tramways finish and railways start perhaps one of our readers might care to explain.

Seeing that it was still raining I just sat at Geneva and train watched. One sight I will never

tire of watching are the Re 4/4 II's. These majestic, stylish-nay classical locos have been around for years and I hope that there as yet unborn generations of enthusiasts who will appreciate these machines for years to come. I suspect that if any railway enthusiast in the world who wasn't particularly Switzerland orientated was asked to conjure up a mental image of a Swiss railway connection the that image would be of the Re 4/4 II's. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not permanently looking backwards. My second favourite loco is the 465 in the beautiful BLS blue.

As I left Geneva the rain stopped. By the time we pulled into Morges the sun was shining and what is more it was shining on an attractive green and cream train. The Biere - Apples - Morges. An immaculate little line, Spotless vehicles smartly painted. A credit to all concerned. The surprise comes at Biere. Heavy freight loco and an array



of tracks and sidings that would be substantial on a much larger enterprise. A few discreet questions elicited the reply that the Swiss military supplies a lot of traffic. Some of it no doubt coming down the line that disappears mysteriously into the distance.

I find the Swiss attitude to things military an interesting contradiction. A nation traditionally neutral who seem to be more openly prepared for conflict than some other European nations (including ours) who seem to be involved in everyone's fights. The runways on the valley bottoms with arrester gear perhaps indicating high speed jet aircraft. The discreet metal doors that you rarely see open that lead into caverns in the hillsides. The stocks of vehicles, tank traps, wires etc, that are in open quite obvious storage. The message is clear. Any biter will certainly get bitten!

One port of call was at Bex, pronounced Bay, for a ride on the Bex Villars Bretaye. I have passed this place several times on my various excursions up and down the Rhone Valley. The little collection of wagons that can be seen from

Above: Biere-Apples-Morges Ge4/4 No. 21 named Morges at Biere, 10/6/98.

the main line has never tempted me to visit before but I had an hour or two to kill, so, why not? Why not indeed. The collection of vehicles on display do not do any justice at all to the B.V.B. It appears to be mainly passenger services, presumably round the skiing season. Their fleet is bright, clean, modern and smooth. In fact, everything you would expect of Switzerland. If you haven't tried it before, give it a go. The ride is interesting and the view is superb.

So back to Bex to await a train to Visp. Across the track westbound was a train quite liberally painted up by the graffiti artists. This seems to be a worsening problem in Switzerland. Not only on rolling stock but also on infrastructure. Who, I wonder, perpetrates this mess? I have never seen anybody. Do they do it at night? Have they got cats eyes or nightscopes?

There seems to be two types of graffiti, The



simply obscene which doesn't require any artistic flair (or brains for that matter) and the other sort. The one that has pretensions to artistry. Have you ever noticed that wherever you go, no matter which country, how similar the style of graffiti is? Is there a school that teaches the technique, or is there a college somewhere doing graffiti degrees? Are there manuals on how to spray paint gibberish? One last observation on the subject of graffiti. In my experience the worst afflicted stock is Italian, then Swiss. Curiously, I have never seen a German coach in Switzerland with any graffiti on it.

All in all, it despoils a beautiful country that we have all come to admire, respect and, yes, even love. It is a sad reflection of the times that we all, not only the Swiss, live in.

The final journey of any consequence during this holiday was a highlight I had saved all week. A ride on a Cisalpino set from Brig to Lausanne having read other peoples' reports I was prepared to be disappointed, but overall I wasn't. For: fast, quiet, smooth, comfortable, roomy and a quite stylish design both inside and out.

Above: Le Train de Vignes at Vevey. 560-135 used on the Vevey - Puidoux shuttle, 11/6/98.

Against: I did not like the high floor line, the steep steps, the small windows but most seriously the tendency to throw standing or walking passengers sideways when going into a tilt. As your correspondent observes in the last issue these are not vehicles to carry hot drinks in.

So take off from Geneva care of Easyjet. Blue skies, warm breeze; a summer morning we all used to know. Back at Luton: cold, wet and windy. The summer morning we have all become used to.

Ah well, here's to the next time.

Acknowledgments and Thanks

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