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MAILBAG

The Editor,

I read Richard Baker's article, 'Go By Rail etc.' with interest, especially as the main thrust of his argument seemed to be aimed at people like me. I first went, almost by accident, to Switzerland by coach on a package tour in 1964. I have been back every year since, sometimes more than once, and, since 1970, always by car, and for the last twelve years on my own, but never by train.

Whilst largely agreeing in principal with what he says I feel I should offer some mitigation for those, who like me, either cannot or prefer not to travel by rail.

First of all there is the question of cost. Most of us already own our cars; they are taxed, insured and depreciating, whether left at home or being used as holiday transport. Very few of us consider the cost of our journeys in real terms, even excluding green considerations. Having kept comprehensive records since I started to drive I know that it cost me 23p per mile or £56 per week last year to run my car but I never consider this to be a holiday expense. These expenses will be incurred whether I go on holiday or not. The cost of my holiday is the actual cash I pay out in terms of ferries, tunnels, fuel, food, accommodation, entertainment and being unemployed, this has to be limited to about £600. This limit effectively means that the only way I can enjoy three weeks in Switzerland is to take my tent and go camping. I am too old and unfit to carry all the gear for a comfortable stay on my back but it will all fit into my car, I appreciate that firms like Eurocamp offer camping holidays at sites in Switzerland, but these are few in number and still outside my budget, and in any event not sited at the places at which I wish to stay.

Secondly I do not find the driving stressful. Generally I prefer to be driven but I find driving on the Continent easier than at home and for the most part, enjoyable. I like the planning involved in preparing the route which I can vary as much as I like from year to year. I am not tied to a timetable once off the ferry, and if I see something interesting en route I can stop to look at it. In contrast when using railways there is the burden of your luggage, the worries of missing connections, and ensuring you get a decent seat.

Interesting sights flash past almost before you realise they are there, and before any of this just finding the information about routes and fares is a nightmare!

A third point is that you cannot effectively take photographs of trains from trains. If you are taking photographs for a slide show based on Swiss railways which is going to last two hours you will need a minimum of 180 slides. If these are not to come from stock you will need all of two weeks to take them. For this you must for the most part be on foot and a car gives you the mobility to choose locations not easily accessible in this time scale if tied to public transport. Those of us that present the shows to our members, friends and others, serve a genuine purpose in promoting the railways of the country we love. We may well have preferred to have been riding on them but even the Swiss Pass is no longer as cheap as it was when I bought number 003 many years ago.

And finally, not all of us belong to the Society for the same reasons. A few of us have joined, not because we are passionate about railways but because we are passionate about Switzerland and her railways are a part of the charm. We will, if we can, finance and issues of practicality permitting, use them – they are probably the best in the world – but until travelling there and staying there is simpler and cheaper you will not convince us to leave our cars at home.

R Payne, Bradford on Avon.

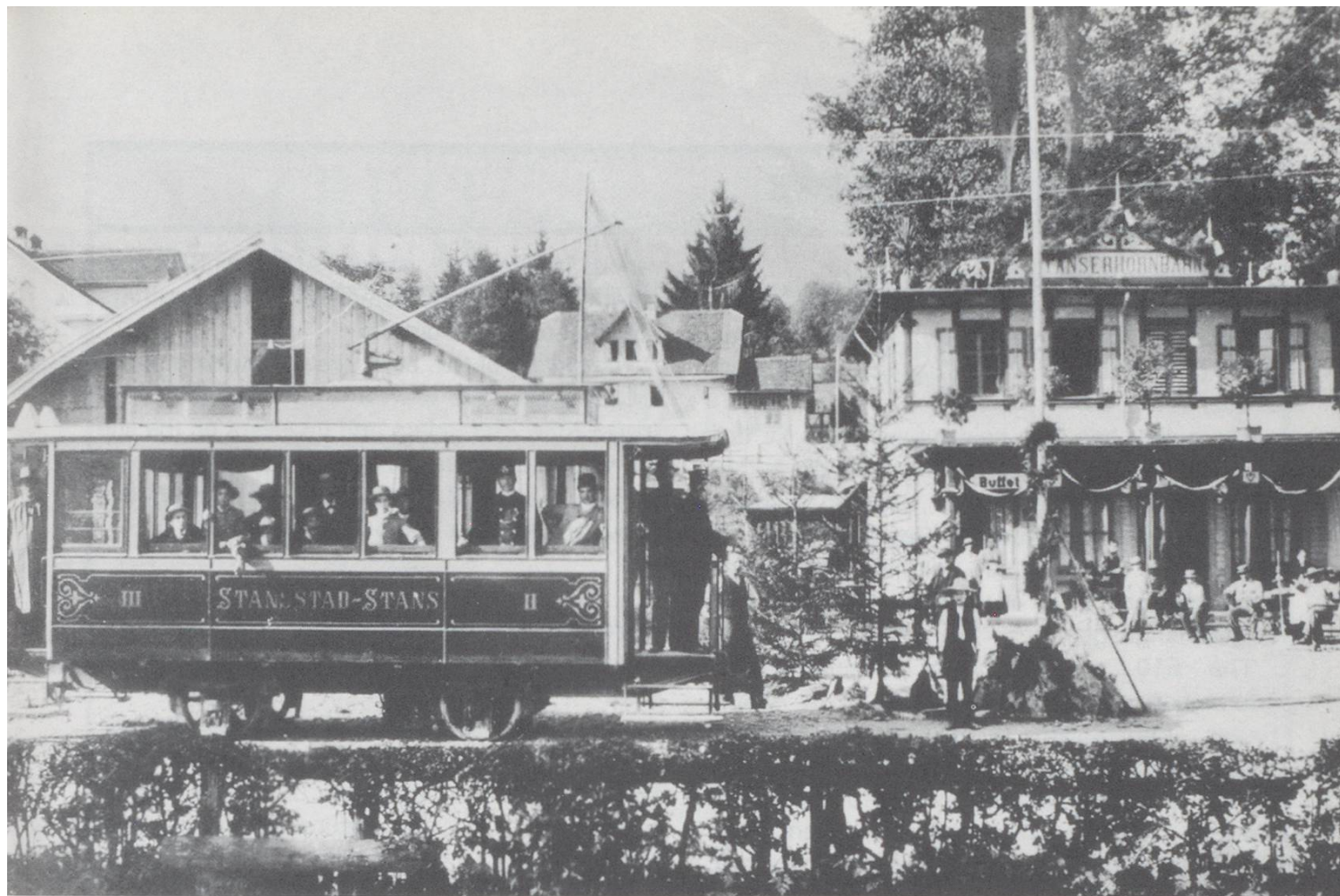
Dear Editor

"Go by rail..... Richard Baker, Sept 1998"

I whole heartedly agree with the gist of Richard Baker's article stressing *the need to use and not just "admire"* Switzerland's railways and I suppose I speak from an advantageous point of view in that my partner is permanently based in Geneva although this does not prevent us taking nights out in other parts of the country in addition to day trips. It is also surprising how far you can actually travel in a day from any of the major bases.

The points I would make are, in no particular order, that:

1. Air travel to Switzerland can be obtained for reasonable rates from both SwissAir and BA, in



Above: A print from the book review on page 58 on the stanstad - Stans Trams

addition to charter and low cost airlines. In mid August I was paying around one hundred and thirty pounds ex-tax on SwissAir for a long weekend.

2. Certainly SwissAir and BA allow you to fly into one airport and out of another, at half the sum of the applicable cheap rates. Remember here that the UK air tax is ten pounds for Geneva and Basle and twenty pounds elsewhere - hence it can be advantageous to organise a routing into Geneva and out of Zurich.

3. With a two year half fare pass available for SFr 220 the frequent "infrequent" visitor can take advantage of half fare tickets; a one year pass is still available for SFr 150. These passes are available to all passengers and not simply Swiss citizens. Also and possibly of more use are the cartes journaliere, which provide a day's freedom of the network, in conjunction with a half fare pass, for fifty francs, even on the Furka although a supplement is payable there in the high season. A half fare pass can also be upgraded to a monthly season for just SFr 325. These tickets are valid, of course, not only on CFF and most of the private rail companies but also on the PTT buses and most local services.

4. Make use of the offers that CFF frequently have offering combined rail and admission fees

to museums and exhibitions - which give around twenty percent discounts - if you don't mine what you see.

5. Otherwise simply get on the move and take days as they come. Rail buffs will know that with an hourly service on most lines they can get on and off at will. If you are travelling on normal tickets simply advise the conductors that you wish to break your journey at and you will have no problem.

6. The entire Swiss timetable is available via their Internet site (www.cff.ch) so planning can be done at home. The timetable also used to be sold by the Tourist Office in London.

7. Switzerland is not expensive, even at the already declining exchange rate - as I write around 2.20 - if you use common-sense. Don't stay in the most expensive hotels or eat in the expensive restaurants; for example whenever I am in Geneva on a Sunday night we will eat at the Gare Cornavin for around forty francs a head for a good four course meal including beer. Take packed lunches on the train, there are supermarkets everywhere.

Duncan McKay