

Get off the train

Autor(en): **Rose, Peter**

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GET OFF THE TRAIN by Peter Rose

inspired by the recent article by my fellow East Midlands member, Dennis Basford, I thought "If Dennis can do it, so can I!"

The articles in Swiss Express which always seem a bit sad to me are those where a member bemoans the fact that although the family has been talked into a holiday in Switzerland, he is lucky to be allowed 20 minutes on the platform at Brig. Help is at hand. Get off the train! This is not to advocate driving around but to use all aspects of the Swiss Transport System to see the country, often away from tourists.

The following recounts my week in Switzerland in September 1998. I was on, my own this time but when my Partner, Patricia, is with me the week follows a similar pattern. Although Pat knows the Furka Oberalp when she sees it, this type of visit should appeal to any non-train fan.

I always have a first class Swiss Pass. The pass gives the greatest flexibility and in first class one avoids the gangs of children which can be such a distraction. OK, you are likely to be travelling with Americans and -Japanese tourists

but that can have a humorous side. These are real cases: One American to another on just leaving Basel "What are all those red-cross flags? "It will be where paramedics live, I guess" and another; one American reading the platform information display saying 'Bitte Nicht Einsteigen' says to the other Einsteigen. That's where the big church is"

So after Midland Mainline I had treated myself to first class on Eurostar to Brussel and was therefore given the full dinner treatment, in a thinly populated carriage in which I was the only male not wearing a tie. The 22.30 to Basel left with four persons in my carriage (I can't sleep couchettes or sleepers) and yet the only 2 reserved seats were directly opposite each other. Arrival was on time in Basel at 05 something and after a coffee I joined the first train to Luzern.

I love Luzern. I usually stay in the Hotel Continental-Park but this time I was being adventurous. and starting the week in Meiringen. I presented myself at the Hotel Weises Kreuz. The room was not ready (it was only 0900) so having got the opportunity to use some of the



German I try to learn at evening class I changed into walking boots and the real holiday started.

Switzerland has a wonderful network of Wanderwegs and Bergwegs and there are a range of good maps available so you can make the most of them. So having bought a map I caught a Brünig train to Brünig-Hasliberg. The Postauto was already packed but there was just me so I barged in and headed for the start of the most scenic and interesting Hasliberger Dorfweg. A fine easy graded walk at high level with a detailed leaflet (in German) of the architectural features. The sun was beating down so at lunch, I renewed my relationship with that most refreshing product of Luzern; Eichhoff Braugold.

I then walked on to Innertkirchen. Don't spend too long admiring the rustic charms of the Meiringen Innertkirchen Bahn's Hof. Walk, along to the terminus at the power station where all of the Company's historic rolling stock is available for inspection. This is only a short line which was until recently worked by former Mannheim Trams but now there is a modern railcar. The Swiss pass is only good for a discount but the fare was still only Sfr 1.40.

On Sunday I joined the first Postauto of the day to Engstlenalp, paying a SFr 1 supplement to use

Previous page: Matterhorn reflected in the Grindjisee.
Above: Gornergratbahn Bhe4/8 3043 at Rffelalp, 23/9/98. Photos: Author

a private road. From there a serious uphill walk to the Jochpass in more blazing sunshine. There is, however, a chairlift. In fact, many of these walks can be mechanically assisted although usually not cheaply. Having rested I set off through snow to walk down to the Trubsee and Engleberg. A sudden burst of tourists at the Trubsee having come up on the cablecar (part-way to Titlis) wearing Sunday best and unsuitable shoes no doubt wondering where I had sprung from! Return by LSE to Luzern and then SBB Brünig Bahn. Whilst awaiting the latter I strolled along the lakeside licking a Solero (lolly) and thought how nice a paddle steamer journey would be. Mistake.

Monday dawned bright and sunny so I set off early to Luzern to catch the 0915 paddler to Burgenstock. On arrival in Luzern I was disappointed to find it very overcast with low cloud where I was headed. I therefore stepped off my train and straight on to the 0910 back to Brienz. No first class! Packed with Children! So it had to be the smoking compartment with luckily



Above: The Brienz Rothorn Bahn, H11/3 No. 7 at Geldried, 21/9/98

Photo: Author

no smokers. Back to the sun and also steam up to Planalp, the halfway point on the Brienz Rothorn Bahn. After some photography I set off to walk back down to Brienz. A bit steep but nice and shady with a stop-off for photos of the view and trains. I was even complimented on my German by a Swiss lady with whom I fell into conversation at a path junction. She had an apartment in Bern and a chalet at Planalp. My, type.

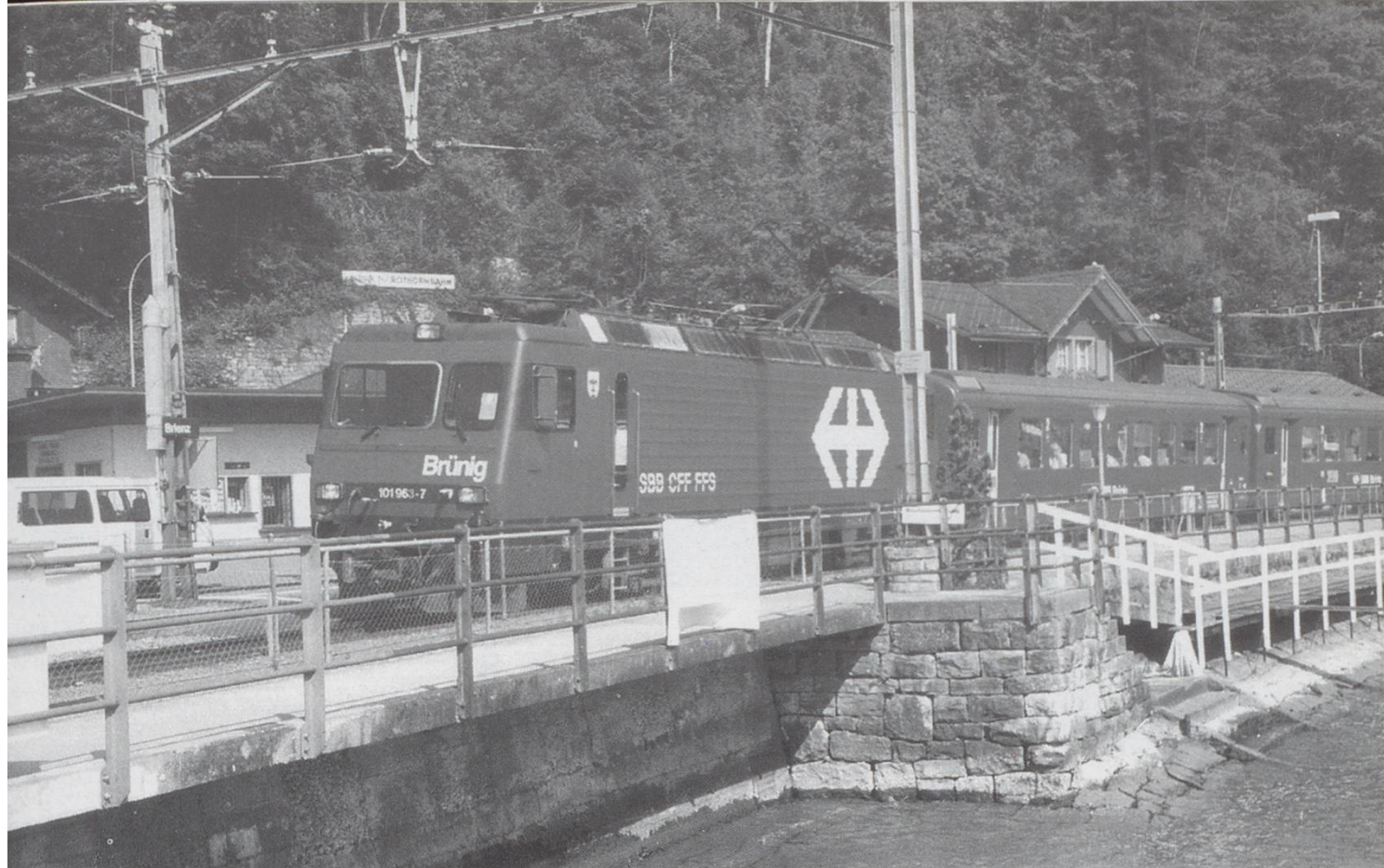
I followed with a cruise on the Brienzsee which I found a poor substitute for the Vierwaldstattersee. I did, however, have a most enjoyable walk around Meiringen in the evening finding that the town has more of interest than I had realised, with many good houses, and a village feel in a glorious mountain setting.

On Tuesday I moved on to Brig. Departing from Meiringen, I proceeded via Interlaken to Spiez. Here I expected a long wait but due to that rarest of events; a late running train, I was able to make a cross platform change directly into the Brig train. I checked in to the Victoria Hotel which is right next to the station and then joined the 603 Cisalpino service to Lausanne. This was not too convenient as I only wanted to go as far as Montreux but it was my first time in the Cisalpino. I played with the electric blinds, I was expecting the tilt to be more exciting and was disappointed

when we slowed for the curve at, Martigny.

My destination for the afternoon was the Chateau Chillon which I have passed many times and seen on countless calendars and biscuit tins. It is worth a visit and on a Tuesday afternoon, was not too busy. There are over 25 rooms open. Allow 1 1/2 hours. I returned by the local station via Aigle (camera out) to Brig where I dined outdoors with a view of the Furka Oberalp station with its famous pilot. No Braugold though. An evening stroll around Brig revealed a pleasant old town area which was new to me.

Wednesday dawned another bright day with clear skies so I joined an early train to Zermatt. I turned the heating off in the carriage as it was hard to breathe. The conductor turned it back on and it became apparent why when we arrived in a very cold Zermatt. With fleece fully zipped I made my way to the Alpen Metro, the underground funicular to Sunegga. And there it was; the Matterhorn with no cloud. My aim for the day was to end up at the point that a post-card photo on my office wall was taken. I walked up by the Leisee at-id Grindjisee with the Matterhorn reflected in the water, then over the Findelbach



Above: SBB Brünig line, 101 963-7 'Alpnach' at Brienz station, 21/9/98.

Photo: Author

towards Riffelalp, a station on the Gornergrat Bahn. The last stretch passes through fine larch and mountain pine forests but thinly spaced enough, to see the mountain vista. A great path but not the right one.

I arrived at Riffelalp just in time to photograph two pairs of passing trains before setting off downhill again. I was again surprised how after only a few paces you can be away from mass tourism and in fact I did not pass another walker from here to Zermatt. At the GGB's Findelbach station I burst out of the trees and must have looked like the original Swiss mountain dweller judging by the expression on the Japanese passengers' faces. Zermatt itself is very developed but there are still some nice old houses if you look for them. A Solero and then the train back to Brig.

On Thursday I headed for Sion in order to walk the Bisse de Clavau. This is one of several irrigation channels built to serve the vineyards with walks fully detailed in the booklet from the Valais. Tourist Office. Clavau was finished in 1453 and consists of mainly channel with sections in cast-iron troughs with high level views the Rhone Valley. The start of the walk is at Icongne which is reached by postbus from Sion. After a forest section the path narrows and

enters a valley with a deep gorge to the left. In places the path is on a wooden walkway which would cause a British Health & Safety Inspector to take a sharp intake of breath. And then the path arrives at what appears to be a cave. I peer inside. Total darkness. To the left is the gorge and to the right a steep wooded slope. And then a dim light comes on in my brain. There was a mention in the guide of the need for a "Lampe de Poche" and reference to stone-age cave-paintings. I had assumed that the torch was to inspect the paintings but not that it was advised for the actual walk. At the entrance, at least, the tunnel was wide enough to touch each side so I entered, head down to, avoid any protruding rocks. In the total blackness the 30 seconds seemed more like 30 minutes.

After this the Bisse proper started and continued to wind around the contours to just above Sion. I did sample a few grapes until I saw an operative with a spray-gun. After another walk in full sunshine I stopped down in the shadiest cafe I could find and decided that I had done enough for one week. After lunch I returned to



Above: Meiringen - Innerkirchen Bahn, Be4/4 8 at Innerkirchen Hof, 19/9/98.

Photo: Author

Brig to check out the town's big culture attraction.

The Schloss Stockalper was the home and business HQ of the Great Stockalper, a seventeenth century tycoon whose wealth seems to have been based on monopoly control of the Simplon trade routes and ownership of a vast number of cows. Some of the more interesting rooms are included on the tour although the impressive courtyard two former post-coaches- is always open. The guide sold me a book in English which seemed a bit dog-eared and I later noticed that it was printed in 1966! The tour was in German; with some English tagged on for my benefit. This consisted of mostly:-this door from the time of Stockalper, this window from the time of Stockalper, this stove. etc. In the lift the guide leaned over to me and said "this bit is, we think, not from the time of Stockalper " Who say that the Swiss have no sense of humour? Afterwards, another Solero.

So on Friday I decided on a tour of Vaud. Starting with Chavornay-Orbe I then proceeded by postbus to Yverdon and then by another to Bercher. This was heavily populated with children on their way home for lunch, each being

bid "Bon Appetit-" as they alighted. From there I proceeded to Lausanne Chauderon, and during the walk to Flon I noticed a lift down to the TSOL at Vigie. This modern metro to Renens is very smooth and well used but the door closing warning tone is uncomfortably loud. At Renens I just had time for another Solero before returning to Flon and the original Metro to the CFF station. Then proceeded to Puidoux-Chexbres for the line to Vevey. Although a CFF branch the stock is dedicated to Le Train de Vignes with a distinctive livery. The train juddered to a halt at a tunnel mouth due to a gang of grape pickers who obviously thought that the name gave them some priority. My French is not fluent but I think the exchange went something like Pickers "I say, do be careful with that train" Driver "I am so sorry, you certainly have right of way"

On Saturday I checked out of the Victoria and crossed the road to catch a Furka Oberalp service to Disentis. I usually save my favourite



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Above: Furka Oberalp Bahn, HGe4/4 No. 33 at Brig, 24/9/98.

Photo: Author

line to last, but the new air-conditioned stock, does not allow my usual practice of leaning by an open window for the whole journey. The kiosk at Disentis had some tasty snacks and I particularly enjoyed thie Appenzeller Barli Biber, so much so that when the RhB trolley came around I ordered another. This brought more approval for at least trying to use my German rather than assuming that the vendor could speak English, which of course she could.

From Chur I went on to Zürich and then made a diversion to Dietikon in order to travel over the Dietikon-Bremgarten Bahn. This is a mainly roadside line that passes through Bremgarten with its numerous interesting buildings and or to Wohlen. From there I went on to Basel and took a tram to the Barfusserplatz in order to have dinner at my favourite cafe, the Stadt Casino. Although better at lunchtime I could still sit outside and watch the world go by with a constant background of trams.

After a long evening and failing to find a kiosk at 2230 to sell me a last Solero I joined the 0001 to Brussel and again found that there were only

two reserved seats, facing each other and not even by a window. Arrival in Belgium and London was on time and so after a week of hassle-free punctual travel I arrived at St. Pancras. Hassle. Late trains, failed power car, another new timetable, no obvious weekend first on a packed train and a diveraion via Corby which might have been interesting had I been awake.

The above walks do not require exceptional levels of fitness but boots should be worn (if they fit into my luggage they will fit into yours) and weatherproof clothing should always be taken even it seems fine when you go out for a day. There are plenty of walks which need no preparation such as the shore of the Sarnersee from Sarnen to Giswell so there is no excuse.

Leave the end of the platform at Brig, join a train/bus/ship and Get Off The Train: