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Commuting to Geneva by Ian Jack

One of the advantages of working for a multi-national company is the opportunity to travel occurs from time to time. In November 97 began the first of 13 trips to Geneva, where I was to work for the majority of the next 7 months.

The usual travel pattern was to take the lunch time BA shuttle from Edinburgh to Heathrow and there connect with the afternoon BA flight to Geneva, returning at the end of the trip on the late afternoon flight to Heathrow and catching the 18.00 shuttle to Edinburgh. The minimum connection time advertised for BA flights in Heathrow is 45 minutes, my record plane to plane via the flight connections centre on a Friday night is 14 minutes! The duration of the trips would be usually four nights, but on some occasions would be less.

When in Geneva I would stay at the Holiday Inn close to the airport. On arrival day and at the end of each working day, after returning to the hotel to freshen up, I would head off for the evening's railway pleasure. This would commence with the 500m or so walk to the station at Geneva Airport, buy a return ticket from the self-service ticket machine and then catch a train down town. In the early evening there was a pretty good selection of trains and it was not long before the timetable was memorised. The journey only took six minutes and Cornavin station was soon reached. On one occasion an American colleague was in town and we went out for dinner, I suggested that we take the train down town. This to him was not a good idea and he persisted that we go in his hire car. It took us 45 minutes from my hotel to the lake! I kept muttering about the benefits of the train and in the end he conceded, that in Geneva at least, the train was the best way to travel!

Once alighted from the train at Cornavin, I would stay on the platforms watching all the station activities for anything up to an hour, observing how each train would be attended to by the station and postal staff. The amount of attaching and detaching of vans and coaches was amazing. This was a real working railway station.

Geneva Cornavin is an interesting station as it functions as a terminus for local and most international trains, as well as a through station for Inter City and Inter Regio trains, which terminate and commence at Geneva Airport. The international trains that terminate and originate, are the Cisalpino services to Milan and Venice as well as the SNCF services, which arrive and depart from the west end of the station. A good number of freight trains would also pass, these regularly containing wagons

belonging to the railways of Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Spain and occasionally with a wagon from the UK. Having been able to download from the Internet a full listing of UIC coach and wagon numbering scheme, this made identifying vehicles from other countries and their owners possible.

The SNCF services arrive from La Plaine traversing a dedicated single track, the overhead catenary being fed at 1500 volts DC and the line is signalled using SNCF equipment. The trains are routed into Platforms 7 & 8, which have customs and immigration facilities for the Swiss and French authorities. For operational reasons the overhead power supply for the tracks through these two platforms and to certain tracks in the carriage sidings at the east end can be supplied with the Swiss voltage of 15kv AC as well as the SNCF voltage.

Geneva is well served with trains to other parts of Switzerland, the principal routes to Zurich and Brig being operated by Class 460s in push/pull mode and EWIV stock plus a Bt, while trains to Romanashorn via Neuchatel were hauled by Class 460s and EWIV stock. The remaining services were in the hands of the ubiquitous Re4/4²s, with the exception of the Nyon and La Plaine services, which were operated by EMUs. One interesting train to pass through every second day was the Pau Casals Talgo hotel train, which runs between Barcelona and Zurich. This train would change over from SNCF to Swiss motive power in Platform 7. The evening departure to Lucerne was formed of Swiss Express EWIII stock and usually pulled by a matching liveried Re4/4², always towed a mail van behind the driving trailer. The highlight of my stay would be the arrival of the Monte Verdi Express from Venice hauled by a graceful Re6/6, still the most powerful electric locomotive in the world despite being built 23 years ago. This train was not a good timekeeper and could be anything up to 45 minutes late on occasions. The formation of this train was Italian international coaches in any one of three liveries. Some of the vehicles were partially covered in graffiti, not a pleasant site.

After dinner I would return to Geneva Airport on the train that formed the Simplon Express, this being the overnight train to Venice, Triest, Vinkovci and Zagreb. Haulage of this train is by the Re6/6, which arrived earlier with the Monte Verdi Express. After watching the locomotive run round the train and couple up, I noticed how the brake test was undertaken. The guard, who supervises the test,

would be positioned by the rear bogie of the last coach holding a yellow pole. Every platform on the SBB where break tests are performed, a yellow pole with a small T head can be found. Along each platform, usually suspended from the platform awning and also underneath the starting signal is a four aspect square signal. This signal is controlled by the guard and performs two functions, one being for the break test, the second as the right away signal for the driver at departure time. To communicate with the driver, who performs the test, the guard opens one of the orange signal departure cupboards located at different points along the platform. These cupboards carry a small plate indicating the number of the starting signal to which they relate. They contain several switches for different displays and when the test is to commence, the top left light is illuminated and the driver applies the brakes. The guard using his pole checks that the application has occurred. Next, when top right and bottom left white lights are displayed, the driver releases the brakes and the guard with his pole checks that the brake shoes have separated from the wheels. Once the test is complete the signal will show all three white lights. These lights will remain illuminated until the guard gives the right away instruction. At this point the top left white light and bottom right green light are displayed. The right away signal is common at all stations.

Having discovered the principals of Swiss railway signalling meant being able to understand the information from the various displays given to train drivers. I must admit ground signals still perplex me and I can never work out just what they mean. At Geneva it was interesting to note that at the west end of platform 2, tracks 1 and 2 converge prior to the starting signal for platform 2. This starting signal which incorporates a caution signal, is positioned prior to the points on track 2. As platform 1 is usually used for the Geneva - Nyon local service through running on track 1 is occasional. However, when this does occur, usually for light locomotives bound for the freight yard this caution signal would change to a mandatory signal when the track on platform 1 was set for a through train. This was something new to me and only the Swiss would do this!

On four occasions due to international conventions taking up all available accommodation in Geneva, it was not possible to stay at my usual hotel. The alternative was to stay in Lausanne. On the first occasion the commute was by car, which became unbearable due to innumerable delays on the motorway. Presented with staying in Lausanne again and remembering the car journeys, the decision was taken to travel by train, which turned out to be really

enjoyable. For the first week's travel, four-second class returns were collectively purchased for SFr 166. On the next occasion I asked for the same tickets and the girl at the booking office suggested a first class weekly ticket for SFr 140. A saving of SFr 26 and being able to travel first class, no delay was made in signing up to that agreement! Using the train and taxis turned out to be cheaper than hiring a car, even when the car hire was at corporate rates!

From the daily journey to and from Lausanne, work in connection with Rail 2000 could be observed. The principal work at Geneva is the construction of the new maintenance depot and associated sidings for the IC2000 double decker stock that will be used on the Zurich route. At Rolle and just east of Renens, new high-speed crossovers and associated catenary were being installed.

As well as being a principal station, Lausanne is a major location in the Swiss Post network. During the evening, several mail trains arrive and depart and with the volume of this traffic, at least two station pilots are kept fully employed. The Swiss Post depot employs its own shunting locomotive with much shunting being undertaken between the depot and the SBB sidings. The post locomotive performs a very different shunting move to what I have ever seen before. A postal van would be parked inside the post depot and the locomotive would arrive, buffer up and couple. The engine driver would then open up the controller and reverse out at full speed towing the postal van when the most amazing event would occur. The speeding locomotive would detach itself from the van while continuing flat out until it passed a set of points. A ground shunter would then change the points and the still moving postal van would disappear down a separate track! The van would be brought to a halt by the brakeman on board. This method of shunting seemed to quite normal and I discovered that the post office locomotive had a special coupling with a hydraulically operated release capability that allowed uncoupling at speed.

When in Lausanne I could not miss the opportunity to ride the world's shortest metro. This line runs from Flon to Ouchy a distance of 1.80 kilometres. Travelling to Ouchy the line descends 250 metres in 6 minutes! The company employs some dedicated drivers who are prepared to do the same return journey four times every hour! I believe this is the last standard gauge operated rack railway in Europe.

All in all I have to thank my employers who allowed me the opportunity to commute to Geneva by plane and train and learn much more about the operation of the SBB albeit, in my own time.