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SWITZERLAND'S RAILWAYS - Another perspective

Mrs A Williams

Having been a member of the Swiss Railways Society for over 2 years, I always enjoy the articles in Swiss Express. However, I noticed that most of them are written by men (for men?) and I wondered if members would be interested in a different aspect of Swiss Railways.

First and foremost, I love Switzerland, and public transport (particularly the railways) is the easiest way to travel. However, I personally do not feel that the prime reason for visiting the country is to view the rolling stock, but to see the scenery, and in that I probably differ from many of the other members. With that in mind, I would like to suggest some not-to-be-missed routes which hopefully would please both lovers of beautiful scenery and avid rail fans who would rather note down locomotive numbers! The following are not

in any particular order, and would probably be difficult to visit on a single holiday in Switzerland, as they cover most parts of the country.

There are numerous wonderful train rides in the eastern canton of Graubünden, too many to list here, but my particular favourites have to be:

The Bernina Line from St Moritz to Tirano in Italy - there are so many spectacular parts of this line that it is worth doing the whole trip at least once. The steep, rugged wilderness on the approach to Ospizio Bernina contrasts in a truly amazing way with the street running in Le Prese; the view from the station at Alp Grüm as the train begins its descent to Poschiavo; the open spiral at Brush - all these sights just have to be experienced.

The famous and spectacular view at Alp Grüm. 55 "Hakone" leaves for Tirano with the 1501 service on Friday 15th May 1998.

Photo: David Stevenson





Nothing prepares you for this incredible view, so no excuses needed to see it again! 641 heads the 1652 Chur-St Moritz on Wednesday 6th May 1998.

Photo: David Stevenson

The trip from Thusis to St Moritz, across the Landwasser Viaduct, and through the Preda curves is very scenic. As this forms part of the Glacier Express route, the trains are often quite busy. For a different view of the famous curves, do the railway walk from Preda to Bergün (not the other way around - this way is mostly downhill!).

Moving across to Western Switzerland, I have travelled on many of the narrow gauge lines which predominate around here, and my particular favourite is the Montreux-Oberland-Bernois line from Montreux to Les Avants. The climb from Montreux station to Combo has breathtaking views of Lake Geneva, first from one side of the train, then the other, as the train spirals around to gain height - all achieved without rack assistance. I have travelled this line many times (sometimes going up to Combo just for the ride and a drink at the Cafe des Narcisses!), and I never tire of the views. Definitely not to be missed!

The line from Bex to Villars climbs up from the Rhone Valley to the ski resort of Villars, using a mixture of rack and adhesion. In parts it is like a tramway, but the rack sections are quite steep and the views over the Rhone Valley are lovely. What is unusual about this railway is the attitude of the train drivers - they get off at the halts and help old ladies with their bags; they load and unload baggage and packages at the termini stations; in general they seem quite keen to be helpful, and they really appear to take pride in their job. There are many local passengers on this line out of season, and they all murmur "bonjour" to the rest of the railcar as they get on.

Kandersteg to Brig through the Lötchsberg Tunnel is a true mountain railway, despite being main line standard gauge, with several spirals to help it achieve height. The views over the Rhone Valley after Goppenstein on a clear day are quite remarkable, as is the speed at which the railway loses height to come down to Brig.

Because each track is signalled for two way running, one of my most remarkable railway experiences occurred on this line in 1995, when the train on which we were travelling was overtaken by the "Monteverdi" on the descent to Brig - being overtaken by a train travelling in the same direction down the mountainside is not something that happens in Britain! Most unusually on that occasion, some of the trains were late-running because of work in the tunnel, and the "Monteverdi" combined at Brig with a portion from Geneva to travel through the Simplon Tunnel into Italy - hence the overtaking manoeuvre.

very steep for main line trains, and it is very interesting to see the Gotthard main line far below. The countryside between Arth and Biberbrugg is not highly populated, and looks just how rural, untouched Switzerland ought to look. Rapperswil itself is a small town which I like very much situated on Zürichsee, it has a castle and a church (and lots of charm) which is worth looking at.

I suppose that I must mention the Gotthard route from Erstfeld to the tunnel mouth at Göschenen, passing the famous church at Wassen on three levels - this is very spectacular, but has already been described very lyrically numerous times. I



A view through the Drivers cab on Südostbahn Bt 922 as it prepares to leave Samstagern for Biberbrugg at 1241 on Monday May 4th 1998. Look at the gradient! Photo:David Stevenson

For a different trip which is not on the usual tourist itinerary, try the Arth-Goldau to Rapperswil trip some of the trains are designated as the "Voralpen Express". The climb from Arth-Goldau is 1 in 20 which is

always enjoy the descent from Airolo to Biasca through the Valle Leventina, with several chances from the train window to see different levels on the spirals. The other part of this route which rates very little publicity,

but is definitely worth a mention because of the view, is the ascent from Guibiasco on the main line to Lugano - from the right hand side of the train, you can see down to Locarno and Lake Maggiore about three hundred feet below.

The descent to Andermatt from Sedrun on the Furka Oberalp Railway is very spectacular, as the train twists and turns in order to lose height. It seems to amuse visiting American and Japanese tourists who travel this way on the Glacier Express, as they try to anticipate where the next spiral will find the train! It is also quite enjoyable to stand on Andermatt Station (not the most interesting or architecturally exciting of Swiss stations!) and photograph the little red trains of the FO climbing out of Andermatt on their way to the Oberalp Pass - they are easily visible for most of their way up the mountain.

For a really interesting round trip on a Saturday or Sunday in the summer, with something for everyone, take the train from St Maurice to Le Bouveret, and then the tourist train known as the Rive Bleue Express around the south side of Lake Geneva to Evian-les-Bains. There are good views of a side of the lake which is not so well known, and plenty of interest - for instance, there are many level crossings on this route and no automatic barriers,

so that at each one, a member of the train staff has to get down and operate the gates manually! Have a good look around Evian, which is a small town with an attractive lakeside promenade, then catch the boat across to Lausanne Ouchy. A funicular metro connects Ouchy with the city centre. Don't forget your passports!

My final choice for the most scenically interesting train ride in Switzerland would be the line from Winterthur to Schaffhausen, which actually crosses the River Rhine very close to the Rhine Falls. All I can say is, if you have never seen the Rhine Falls at close quarters, then you do not know what you are missing. They are MAGNIFICENT! Get as close to them as you can (personally, I favour staying on the bank and not getting a boat any nearer!), then follow this up with a stroll along the banks of the Rhine, and a train from Neuhausen back to Schaffhausen. If the weather is good, this trip is unbeatable.

Finally, may I say that we have just spent a very enjoyable holiday based in Lugano, and can I recommend the Hotel Continental Park there for its wonderful views of the trains using the Gotthard Line. Ask for a lakeside view there, and not only do you get brilliant views of Lake Lugano, but also closeup pictures of the Gotthard Line.

SWISS FEDERAL RAILWAYS STOCK CHANGES

Brian Hemming

March 1999

No changes

May 1999

Rebuilt & Renumbered:

RABDe12/12 1118 to RABDe 510 017

Withdrawn:

Ee3/3 16342

Bm6/6 18514

April 1999

Rebuilt & Renumbered:

RABDe12/12 1113 to RABDe 510 012

June 1999

New:

Tm 234 000

Withdrawn:

RBe540 540 008 (accident)

Ee3/3 16338, 16341, 16350

Tm II 777