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208 rests at Brienz in September 1997

Photo. Malcolm Cross

To Switzerland for steam ? Not my first expectation perhaps, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover the activities of the Ballenberg Dampfbahn, Brienz.

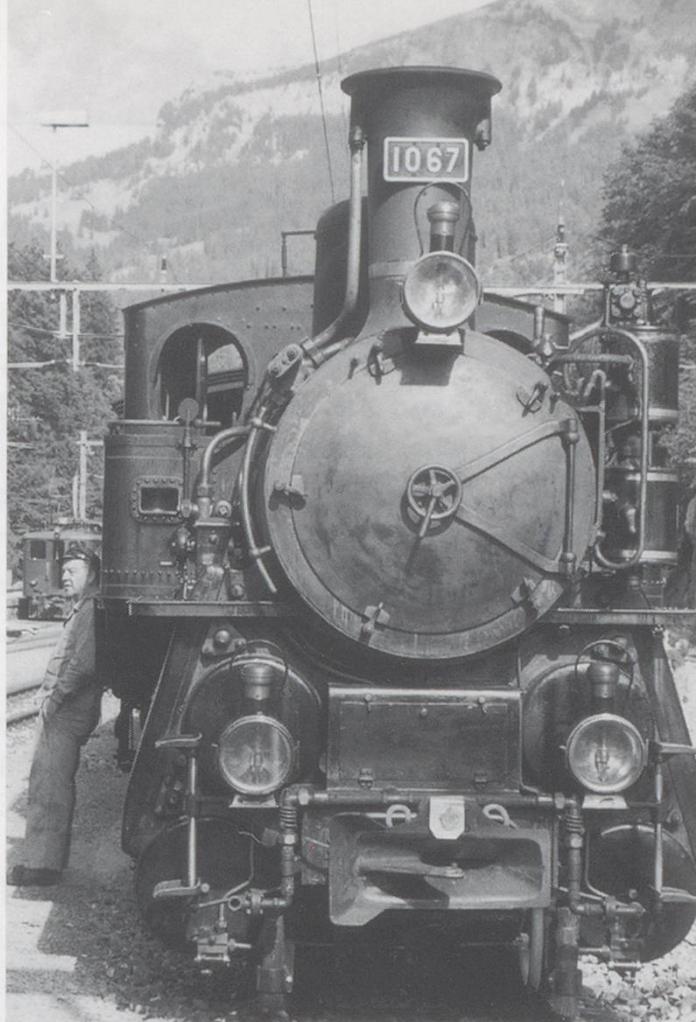
Although having visited a variety of resorts, Wengen has become an established favourite. Interlaken, of course, is relatively nearby, and is the starting point for regular steam-hauled excursions. The route is by way of Brienz, Meiringen and Brünig-Hasliberg.

My first trip (September 1997) commenced with the 07.06 from Wengen, to be in good time for the 08.53 departure from Interlaken Ost. So early was I, that by walking along platform 5 in the Bönigen direction, I could view loco 208 (built 1913) and its train of four vintage coaches being prepared. The panting of 208's air pump, the

hiss of steam and the sound of the coal hammer was in direct contrast to the hi-tech activities of the busy station in the background. Soon the aged cavalcade shunted into Interlaken Ost to be ready for a prompt departure. This provided a rare spectacle for many travellers on the adjacent platforms. Remember that, this being Switzerland, the regular services must not be interrupted. The train's rapid exit from Interlaken Ost and over the Aare bridge was almost "electric". 208 sprinted along, permitting extensive views of Lake Brienz waking up in the morning sunshine, to the first stop at Oberried, to allow service trains to pass. This location allowed passengers to alight, view the train and take photos. The loco's crew could check their steed was not feeling her age.

The next stop was Brienz, where there is limited space and time, so the lengthier halt at Brienzwiler (introduced in 1999) was welcome. From there, the line to Meiringen is virtually level and straight, so our train became a "sprinter" again. The approach to Meiringen passes the extensive depot, where the second loco, No. 1067 (built 1913) was waiting. The respective crews exchanged "Gruss Gott" on their whistles, and we drew to a halt at the station.

At Meiringen all trains reverse direction to obtain the much steeper route, via the Brünig Pass, to Lucerne. Consequently, No. 1067, which now backed on to our train, is rack and pinion/cogwheel assisted. For the initial climb to Hasliberg and the return from Lungern, the synchronisation of this loco's driving pinions to the rack between the running rails, depends on the driver's skill and manual dexterity at the controls. The loco's exhaust becomes more rapid with the application of additional drive. "Fascinating rhythm" indeed. Before leaving Meiringen, 1067's "sister" 1068 can be seen as a silent memorial to the heyday of regular steam operation over this tortuous route. After the passing, including reversal, of service trains bound for either Interlaken or Lucerne with their incredulous passengers, 1067 commenced the "Long Drag" to Brünig-Hasliberg. This year (Sept 1999) the loco's air pump was giving the crew some cause for concern. However, following some "tender loving care" with a heavy spanner, we were soon on our way. I am not sure how to interpret Swiss gradient signs, but "120", "200" (1 in 8, 1 in 5?) certainly dictated assistance from the rack. A lengthy water stop, clear of the main lines, at Brünig-Hasliberg allowed passengers to alight (carefully of course, no HSE here) for their own refreshment and "water stop" there being no facilities on the train. The sinuous route then descends via Lungern and Kaiserstuhl to



1067 waits at Brünig-Hasliberg 09/99

Photo. Lester Weeks

Giswil, our destination. The mountain views and lake scenery are constantly changing. Again, a leisurely station stop permits more photo opportunities to the delight of patrons (also Kodak, Fuji etc !!). At Giswil, the loco is serviced and manually turned for the return journey.

Meanwhile, most of the passengers adjourn to the station hotel for luncheon, and what a luncheon! These excursions, and their customers, are made most welcome.

The return journey follows a similar pattern. To sum up: a leisurely day's outing; plenty of steam action and nostalgia; for the hardy there are open coaches with end balconies enabling close-up views of the loco and its crew. Among many vivid memories is that of standing on the end balcony, next to 208, racing back from Brienz through narrow cuttings and smoky tunnels.

Great stuff! "Aufwiedersehen"