

The Vereina opens

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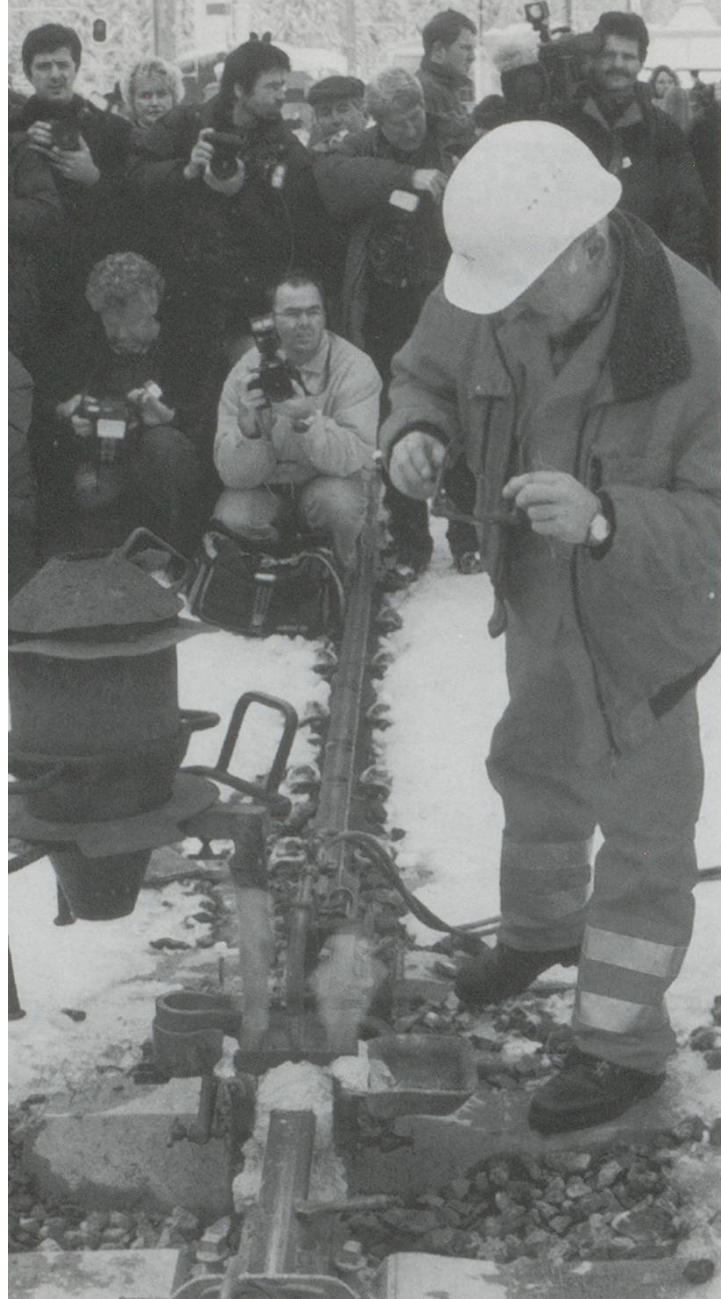
*The first official RhB train through the Vereina headed by Ge 4/4^{III} 648 Susch 19th November 1999.
Photo: Colin Jarman*

The Swiss certainly know how to throw a good party, and on the 19th November 1999 the Rhätische Bahn had the perfect excuse for a celebration. For the first time since the beginning of the 20th century the RhB opened a new route to connect two parts of their extensive network, which included a major alpine excavation. The Vereina Line joins the tracks along the lower Engadine valley with the Davos Line at Klosters, and reduces journey times enormously. It will also be used to bring goods trains from the Rhine valley to Pontresina and over the Bernina pass to Italy.

We were very pleased to be invited to join in the opening day, as we had filmed the excavation of the Vereina tunnel at various times during the 7 years in which work had been going on, and had been present at the

breakthrough (which was featured in the special edition of Swiss Express in Spring 1997). We had no idea of what was going to happen on the day, but were just told to arrive at Landquart station not later than 9.30 in the morning. The RhB was justly proud of its achievement - the tunnel came into operation 6 months early and 9 million Swiss francs under budget. We were just part of a large press contingent to witness the opening, mainly coming from Switzerland but France, Austria, Italy and Germany were also represented. A large variety of invited guests from Graubünden and beyond were there, including the Swiss Transport minister Moritz Leuenberger.

Fortunately we had been warned that winter had come early to Switzerland and had taken plenty of warm clothing and snow



*The RhB's Chief Engineer, Willy Altermatt prepares the thermic weld at Selfranga joining the rails.
Photo: Chris Harnett*

rendezvous at Landquart as the celebrations were by "invitation only" and the only access to the events was by the two special trains.

We passed smoothly through Klosters station and then into the impressive new double-track bridge, which was opened in 1993. After a few metres the bridge merges into two tunnels; one taking the line from Klosters to Davos, and the other bringing the new route in a curve towards Selfranga. The Vereina tunnel is so superlative that the small "Zugwald" tunnel (2.17 km. long), is easy to forget, but it is this bore which is the start of the new route.

We left our train at Selfranga, the site of the car transporter terminal at the northern portal of the Vereina tunnel, to join in the first ceremonies of the day. We had filmed the construction going on there in September and had wondered at the time if the building site which we then saw would be completed within the next few weeks. I suspect the snow had been a blessing in disguising the odd rubble pile, as the complex will not be finally finished until the new car by-pass road and tunnel have been made in a few years time. Meanwhile car traffic will still pass through Klosters village.

No Swiss celebration is complete without a series of long speeches, and this was no exception. I have to confess that, though we have sat through these in the past, as we didn't need to film them this time we avoided the tent and instead went off to the tunnel mouth to get into position for the really photogenic part of the opening which was the joining of the last piece of track and the switching on of the first green signal. The setting up was only witnessed by ourselves and a few others who were wandering around. A small section of rail had previously been

boots, for which we were very grateful as there was a thick layer of snow lying on the ground and the temperature didn't get above freezing all day. At Landquart station two of the longest rakes of coaches we had ever seen on the Davos line were waiting, including the newly restored Salon Wagons (these were for lucky celebrities not the press), hauled by some of the fleet of Ge 4/4^{III} locos. We settled down for the journey along the Prättigau and with true Swiss efficiency were handed press packs (ours in English) and special souvenir newspapers in German language. Coffee, orange juice, and croissants appeared and we learned what the day had in store. It became apparent why we had to make the



Molten metal flows through to join the rails as the worlds railway press snap in unison.

Photo: Chris Harnett

removed and the track gang prepared to make a thermic weld. The gas was lit to pre-heat the weld vessel and rail about half an hour in advance and was ready by the time all the dignitaries and the rest of the press corps had assembled. Herr. Willy Altermatt, the RhB's Chief Engineer threw a lighted taper into the vessel and the subsequent pyrotechnic display was impressive indeed. It wasn't long before the molten steel poured into the mould around the rail to make the final connection. Herr Altermatt declared the Vereina line officially open in both Swiss German and Romansh, and he and Moritz Leuenberger pressed the button to set the tunnel signal to green.

There were various brass bands playing throughout the day. Many Swiss villages boast their own bands with smart uniforms and an excellent musical repertoire, and they play at all local celebrations. The Rhätische Bahn also has its own band which were present here, as they had been at the breakthrough.



The reception platform greeting the guests at Sagliains.

Photo: Colin Jarman

The Vereina tunnel at 19.042km is the longest metre gauge tunnel in the world (there is a slightly longer tunnel in Japan which gets the record for the longest narrow gauge bore). It is single track through the majority of its length, although there is a 2km long double track passing loop in the centre and the tracks become triple at either mouth, with a Y junction at the southern end so trains can either go to Scuol or towards St. Moritz.

Once the VIP train had left we resumed our seats and set off into the tunnel. By now people were getting to know each other and a variety of languages was being spoken in our carriage. The party spirit became even jollier as bottles of wine were opened and "apero"s served to everyone. At the central passing place our train stopped and the lights were turned off, and to everyone's surprise a film and laser show began, the complete darkness of the tunnel being the ideal venue

for this spectacular event which lasted at least a quarter of an hour. A little further down the tracks we were serenaded by a live rock band from Chur who performed a specially composed number called "Vereina", the tunnel adding a natural echo which would be the envy of any sound engineer. One feature which was attracting a lot of attention (trust the media to be up on this) was that our mobile phones worked perfectly the whole way through the tunnel, the signal switching from Klosters to Susch somewhere mid journey. It apparently is also possible to pick up Swiss radio throughout when travelling on the car transporter.

At Sagliains (the new station on the Engadine line between Lavin and Susch) the next part of the party was underway. The RhB had walled in the sides and end of the covered approach ramp for the car transporter service with heavy duty polythene sheeting, installed powerful heaters and

The approach ramp avalanche gallery converted to a huge dining room.

Photo: Chris Harnett





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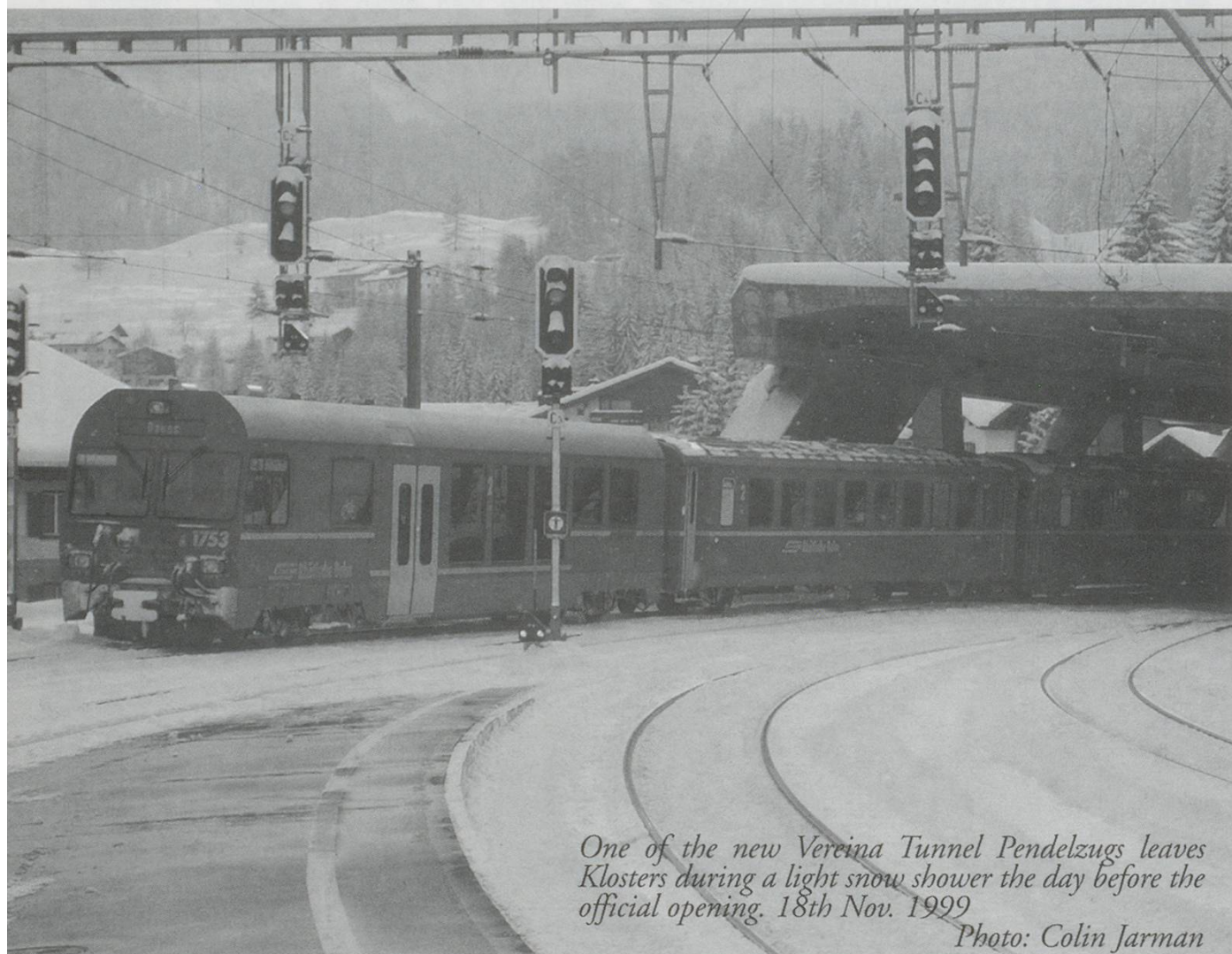
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transformed it into a huge refreshment area. Here we all sat down at long tables to enjoy a splendid hot three course meal with wine, all Graubünden specialities. Even the menu was in the two main languages of this region Swiss-German and Romansh. The catering company were to be congratulated on feeding if not the five thousand then at least about 1200 people. A real logistical feat given the circumstances.

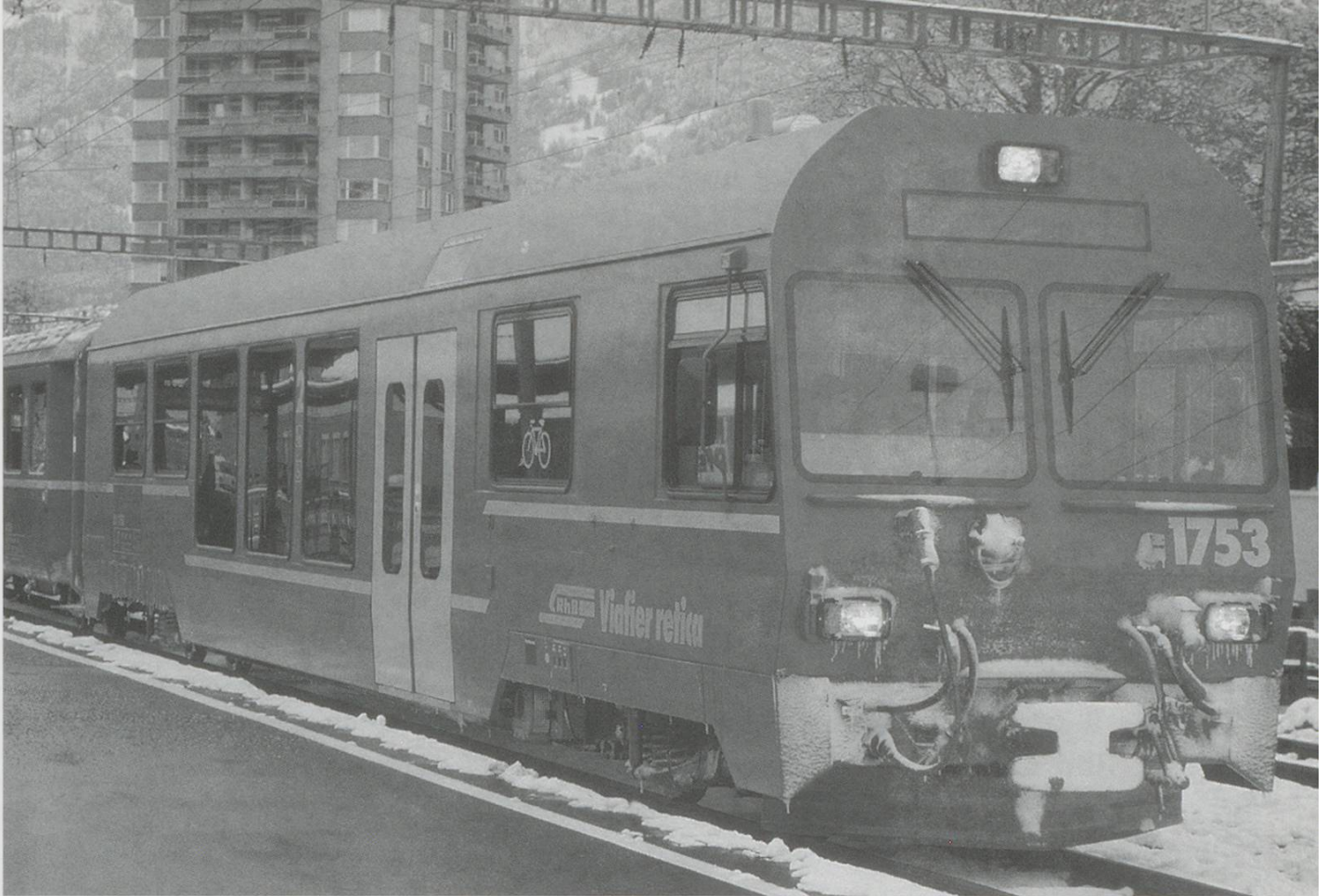
We had met up with a couple of old friends who worked for the RhB and caught up with life on the railway, and learned of some of the latest gossip, including the return of the historic Bernina "crocodile" loco from La Mure in France to undergo restoration. We also heard about new timetable changes. The line along the Engadine now runs from Pontresina (not

St.Moritz) to Scuol, and the same train then normally runs from Scuol to Landquart, with the return from Landquart to Scuol to Pontresina. It is now very important to note the destination board on the front of the trains as it is easy if you are used to the old shuttle system to get on board what you think is a train to Samedan only to be whisked into the darkness of the Vereina tunnel to Klosters. The same thing applies on the Davos line as only certain trains leaving Landquart now end at Davos. These through trains are normally now pushpull sets and new driving trailers have been purchased from Standler AG which have low floored entrances and space for both bicycles and wheelchairs, with Ge 4/4¹ and "11" locos providing the motive power. The services along the Albula Line will continue as before, although



One of the new Vereina Tunnel Pendelzugs leaves Klosters during a light snow shower the day before the official opening. 18th Nov. 1999

Photo: Colin Jarman



*Above: One of the new Pendelzug driving trailers awaits departure at Landquart. 18th Nov. 1999
Below: 20th Nov. 1999. The official public opening day. Car Shuttle transporter wagons were used to ferry people between Klosters and Sagliains. Shown here returning into the tunnel at Sagliains bound for Klosters.
Both photos: Colin Jarman*



it is now possible to take the "Engadine Star" which makes a circular trip from Chur to Klosters, through the Tunnel to St. Moritz and back along the Albula line to Chur. While Sagliains is now a passenger station incorporated into the timetable so passengers can change here from other services in the Engadine, at the northern tunnel portal the station at Selfranga is only for the car transporter service and no passenger trains will halt here. The car transporter service will operate year round and as a consequence there will be no attempt to keep the Fluela pass road open in winter.

While the 19th was for invited guests only, the RhB opened their new facility to the public over the weekend for a two day "Tunnelfest", and were overwhelmed with visitors. The car transporter wagons were fitted with bench seats to give people an open-air ride through the Vereina tunnel, and refreshment stalls, local produce and information was on hand at either end. On the

Saturday a world record was organised. The Director of St. Moritz Tourist Office, Hans-Peter Danuser assembled 222 alphorn players to perform a specially composed piece. This was a splendid sight as the participants, who came from all corners of Switzerland, were dressed in their local costumes. Flag throwers accompanied them in their performances, first at Selfranga, and then, after a trip through the tunnel, at Sagliains where they filled most of the platform.

On the Monday, with celebrations over and the clearing up operation taking place, normal services came into operation with a new timetable being implemented. Certainly on day 1, when we filmed along the line, loadings were heavy and the passengers we spoke to were most enthusiastic about this new route. The RhB are looking forward to an optimistic future in the 21st century, and I for one certainly hope they will find a good excuse for a party again before too long.

EXHIBITIONS REPORT - Andy Nelson

Into the new century and already it's time to plan your trips. Loads of offers around at the moment, especially on the new "no frills" airlines. The secret is to book as far in advance as possible and know your return times and dates. Be careful though as if you do change the dates there is usually quite a premium to pay.

I will be attending the SRS AGM at Derby assisting our Sales Officer with the Society Sales and look forward to meeting you there.

Finally if you have a Swiss layout which you are exhibiting at any shows in the future let me know so that we can spread the word around the land. Try to give me as much notice as possible, three months at least.

The SRS Stand together with my own diorama "The Wrong Kind of Snow" (see Dec. 98 CM) will be attending the exhibitions listed below. Come along and meet us and buy those indispensable Society items from the Sales List.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 18th March | SRS AGM - Derby |
| 17th June | Newmarket Continental Exhibition - St Felix Middle School, Fordham Road |
| 23rd September | GRS Continental Show at Oxford (TBC) |