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Autor: Hoekstra, George
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George Hoekstra

FAREWELL GREY MOUSE AND HELLO TGV... AND NINA!

A major change took place on the 28th of November 1999 in the scheduling of the "ligne de Coeur" TGV services between Paris and Switzerland.

It was also the occasion for a farewell to the four-current ex TEE RA(B)e "Grey Mouse" trains. These sets, introduced in 1961 as all 1st class TEE sets, were at the absolute top of what could be achieved in comfort and speed: real showpieces for the Swiss railway industry. The four current equipment installed made it possible for these sets to travel almost everywhere in electrified Europe. Milan and Paris were their first destinations, then came Brussels. From 1984 onwards they operated the Berne-Frasne -TGV connection to Paris supplementing the early morning direct TGV. 1988 saw their conversion to 1st and 2nd class sets with new seats and interiors by designer Franz Romero. This caused some access problems as not all carriages had their own doors. When they were all 1st class this was not a problem. After conversion and during the summer rush this sometimes caused delays. At the same time they lost their TEE

livery and got their "Grey Mouse" look. After 1992, alas, age was beginning to take its toll (and don't I know it myself . . .). More importantly though their asbestos content means they will be banned from international traffic from 1st January 2000. This fact unfortunately will also make preserving one of these sets a very costly affair. Maybe a sponsor could be found. The original 1st class seating and restaurant car equipment was preserved and is still in store. With their ample seating capacity and bar car they would make a perfect excursion train. An outing to the Scala in Milan, to a Paris fashion show, the Frankfurt Book Fair and why not even the Nürnberg Toy Fair.

The nine three current "ligne de Coeur" TGV sets operated on the Paris to Switzerland routes now have all been modernised and refurbished. On the outside this is visible by their smart grey/blue outfit in line with the other French TGVs. The difference is in the "ligne de Coeur" red centre line. Inside fewer seats have made the 2nd class a lot more comfortable for non French size people like myself. The bar car has also

Previous page: Old and new in Neuchâtel on the 25th November 1999. The elegance of the "Grey Mouse" ex TEE set still compares well with the sleek refurbished TGV which now will run all the services.

Photo: George M. Hoekstra

been improved and with the new Mitropa France service prices have become affordable.

A consequence of the new time table is that the 06.45 early morning connection from Bern to Neuchâtel is lost. For many years, a service was run at this time. First by the (then orange) TGV -this used to be my usual way to Britain, via Paris- and then by the "Grey Mouse" sets. In the beginning, they ran direct to Neuchâtel via Kerzers, later via Bienne. This service was lately used by about 60-80 civil servants of the Federal Office of Statistics, which was relocated to Neuchâtel, with the promise of good connections. To compensate for the loss of the "Grey Mouse" service, the BLS had to introduce a new service at short notice. As there

was no free path from Bern to Neuchâtel on this single line at this time in the morning (remember that the service it replaced ran via Bienne) a NINA-set is coupled onto the front of the existing NINA-service to Avenches. At Kerzers, it continues on to Neuchâtel on its own. This is exactly the kind of flexibility offered by the multiple unit running capability of these sets. Passengers are treated to a trolley service on this train: a first on this three car local service vehicle. Anybody buying a tea or coffee, gets a croissant offered free by the BLS! Your correspondent sampled the service on the first day of operation, the 29th of November, for which I had to leave Kandersteg at 0521 and I can confirm that about 70 people were on board. 20 hot drinks with croissants were sold. No doubt once the word gets around more will take up the offer!



The Furka-Oberalp Göschenen-Andermatt train awaits departure at the former. Summer 1999

Photo: David Swan