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FLOODING IN KANDERSTEG

Christian and the BLS to the rescue!



In Kandersteg, the railway runs on a dam, so it stayed dry. Not like the land behind it. The houses in the background in this shot taken from my balcony - remember, I could not leave the house - were also inundated and like our house, lost everything in the cellars and on the ground floor as well.

All photos in this article George Hoekstra

Those of you, who spent the middle of August in Switzerland, will know that it has been a very wet period. On August 22nd, the day before I had to catch an easyJet flight for the UK, the floods came to Kandersteg. Up in the mountains where I live, floods are very different from down in the lowlands. There is no gradual rising of the river. The floods arrive very fast, practically with no warning, and then run down the valley as quickly as they have come. But, due to the speed, the force of the water is awesome. Fifteen minutes after I saw the first waves of the River Kander run over the bank, the cellar of the house in which I live was filled up to the ceiling and the ground floor was two feet under very fast running water.

We had closed the doors to the ground floor and the cellar, but the water had so much pressure, that it shot out on both sides of the door, another foot and a half straight up in the air! We had to tie the front door open to let the water out, otherwise it would have broken the door down. I live on the

third floor, so no immediate danger there; only I had no electricity, no telephone and could not leave the house, as the road was four feet under water! Every time I opened my door in the night, I heard the sound of a waterfall - only it was the water rushing through the house. Christian, one of the part owners, brought me a camping stove, so I could at least make some tea and fry some eggs. In the dark and on the balcony, as ironically fire is one of the great hazards in a flood: nobody can reach you to put it out!

At half past six in the morning, it was barely light, Christian came back to help me wade through the new river - which used to be the road - to his car, which was parked higher up. We then drove over the high forest track to the other side of the village and back over the car transport feeder road to the station: the normal road being impassable. The forest track is very narrow and in some places the side drops a long way down. A distance of just over a mile took us 20 minutes. Nobody but a local could have done it: "Merci vielmal, Christian"!



The view from my rear balcony; normally there is only one waterfall here, even when the snows are melting.

We got to the station and I could take my wellington boots off. I dried my legs off, as water had gotten into the top of the boots. I had taken extra socks and normal shoes to put on. The wellingtons are still at the station. The news was not good: there were no trains running. The track down to Bern was blocked past Frutigen (the road as well) and the SBB, who are now responsible for running passenger services over the Lötschberg, felt unable to run just between Frutigen and Brig. The BLS runs both a regional train to Goppenstein and a bus from Kandersteg to Frutigen, which should be enough. This way though, there is no connection through the tunnel between Goppenstein and Kandersteg. Car trains were not operating, as there were no cars: they could not get to Frutigen... What a mess! However, the BLS is a flexible organisation. A "Tem" shunting engine was organised for us to take the four of us that had to get to an airport and put all of us in the cab with the driver! The person organising this had just lost his whole model railway – Swiss outline scenery with Hag & Roco rolling stock – in his cellar, as well as kitchen and living room on the ground floor – and

still he was there to help us! So we went at 40 mph through the tunnel to Goppenstein, where the local (BLS) train to Goppenstein was held for us. After a quick change, we were off to Brig. Again, a big "Merci vielmal" to everybody at the BLS!

However, it was not over yet: only in the train, did I realise the change had been too quick. The other passengers had kindly offered to help me with my luggage, but had forgotten my shoulder bag with all the important stuff in it in the shunter. My fault, not theirs, I should have checked. I walked through the train to the driver and explained to him at the next stop what had happened and asked him to ask Goppenstein on the radio. All the trains on the whole BLS system have radio communication. However, when we got to Brig, the driver told me the shunter already had gone back to Kandersteg! I again explained the urgency of the situation and he called Kandersteg on the way back to Goppenstein. We had to go straight back, as waiting for us at Goppenstein had made him late at Brig. Upon arrival at Goppenstein, the driver of the shunter was there, waving my bag.

He had made another trip! That was actually quite lucky, as there were some homeowners of Kandersteg property waiting at Goppenstein, frantically trying to get there and see about their houses. So they all piled on the shunter for the ride back through the tunnel. I rode down to Brig for the second time and in spite of all this, got to Geneva in time to catch my flight. I always allow a huge amount of time to catch flights. I would much rather sit in the airport waiting, than worry on the way if something went wrong. Anyway, for the BLS to arrange two trips through the tunnel was, in one word: "grossartig"!! I will have to thank the team at Kandersteg properly with some liquid refreshment after work, when I get back!

The news about our house is, that everything I had in the cellar is totally lost. It had to be removed from there and thrown away while still damp. Anything with that very fine silt in it, which is in the river here, dries up like concrete and can only be removed with a pickaxe! I know, I helped at Brig when they had their big flood there. I lost some model railway stuff, books, pictures, some household stuff and most unfortunately some memorabilia that cannot be replaced. The replaceable stuff is of course



The view from my other balcony: Instead of a meadow, there is a river rushing towards us. The River Kander normally runs way behind the second row of trees!

insured – Swiss are usually insured against almost everything imaginable – but the Souvenirs are a big loss. Well, life and limb are the most important ones and although there is extensive flood damage, nobody

in Kandersteg got seriously hurt and the structural damage was limited. Not like Reichenbach, down in the valley, which was at least 50 % destroyed. But it brings back to you, that nature is as powerful as it is beautiful. And how quickly things happen in the mountains. You tend to forget.



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