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A CAB RIDE ACROSS THE GOTTHARD

- or sometimes being 60 is good!

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever expect to travel over this spectacular route in the cab of a locomotive, and not just any loco but the classic Ae 4/7!

The story starts with the arrival of the September 2004 issue of the *Swiss Express* in the morning mail. My 60th birthday was looming and my wife Sandra said I should plan something special for it. Glancing through the magazine over breakfast I came across the advertisement of Serge Bourguinet for a cab ride in an Ae 4/7 over the Gotthard. The problem of what to do for my birthday was solved in an instant! So a week's holiday in Lugano in August was planned, one day of which Sandra would go shopping and I would join Serge for this very special trip.

Serge purchased the Ae4/7 No.10997 some ten years ago. It is stored in an open shed on the west side of Mendrisio station. Keen eyed observers may spot it as they pass through. Serge was originally looking to purchase a steam loco but had found nothing suitable, but then a chance encounter in a scrapyard in Kaiseraugst changed his ideas! He met someone who was looking for brakeshoes for an Ae 4/7, they fell into conversation and he learnt that a number of Ae 4/7's had been purchased privately for preservation. He also learnt of loco number 10997 which was still occasionally in use by the SBB and so in good running order. It had been the intention of



Our driver Herr Schmidt and loco owner Serge Bourguinet.
ALL PHOTOS BY PETE RIGBY 06/08/2005

the SBB to keep this loco and several other Ae 4/7's running until 2005, but a drop in traffic coupled with an excess of new locos made it redundant. The other attraction was that this locomotive was the MFO type and had regenerative braking. This meant that the loco could act as a banking engine up the Gotthard ramp and then run down without a train. The other types of Ae 4/7, the BBC and SAAS types cannot run down without an attached train since they do not have regenerative braking. This was an important advantage for a loco in private ownership since it might often run on its own without a train. The SBB has preserved

three Ae 4/7's, No.10905 (BBC), No.10949 (SAAS) and No.10976 (MFO). Another 17, not in running order, are in private ownership. Finally Ae 4/7 No.11026 is in running order at the Mikado Club in Brugg.

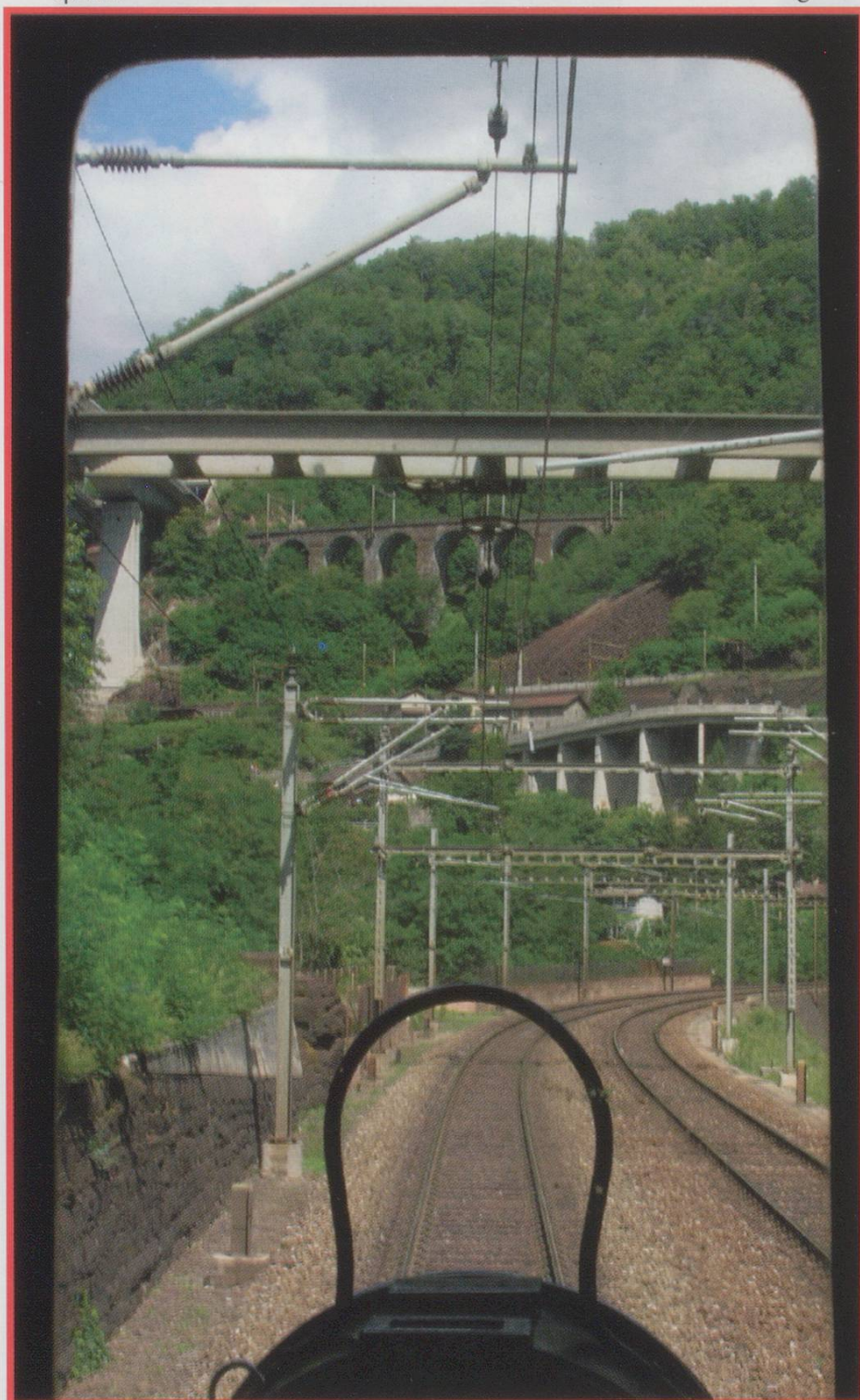
Serge kept his loco in storage until 2001 when its first run was to bring Ae 4/7 No. 11015 from Urdorf (near Zürich) to Schwyz. For the next few years he ran a number of

historic trains for the Club del san Gotthardo in Mendrisio. More serious running began in 2005 when he ran a number of special trains over the Gotthard and other parts of Switzerland, including banking duties over the Gotthard with Ae 4/7 No.11026 and the Nostalgie Rhein Express from Eurovapor. The loco has also needed some significant maintenance such as replacing the spring centres in the gear wheels of all four Buchli link flexible axle drives, with Serge doing the majority of the work

himself! With the enlightened view of the SBB he is able to take the Ae 4/7 out on the main line provided he has a driver who is qualified for the road and the loco. With only a few days notice he can request a run and the SBB work out a timetable for the trip.

On the morning of August 6th 2005 we met at Mendrisio. Serge had driven down early that morning with Chris Knight of MITV, well known member of the SRS!! We were also joined by several other Swiss enthusiasts and Herr Kistler from Zurich, who was making a video about Serge and his Ae 4/7. Our driver was Herr Schmid who had recently retired from the SBB. Serge had just finished bolting on the various number and makers plates – he has to remove them each time he stores the locomotive to prevent them being stolen. We were given a detailed tour of the inside of the locomotive as our driver made preparations for the trip. The SBB had provided a schedule for the trip that included a timetable of

Driver's eye view approaching the Travi and Pianotondo spirals





ABOVE: Waiting in Lavorgo for the *Cisalpino*

BELOW: Old and New – the *Cisalpino* races past the Ae 4/7

the outward and return journey. Although the Ae 4/7 is capable of a top speed of 100 km/h the timetable limited us to 80 km/h over most of the route.

At 11.05 we pulled out of the siding and onto the main line, our driver asking for permission on his portable radio. We were travelling faster than the local trains and made rapid progress. One thing I hadn't considered is that these old locomotives made no provision for driver comfort. There is no seat for the driver; he has to stand for the entire trip. Imagine what that would have been like on the regular Chiasso to Luzern or Zurich service. There is a fold down seat to the left of the driver that can be used by others in the cab, but it is out of his reach. The only effort



by SBB to improve driver comfort in recent years was to weld shut the door on the driver's side of the cab to prevent draughts from the loose fitting doors freezing the driver in winter! The steps and yellow painted handrails have also been removed on the driver's side spoiling the original symmetrical appearance. These old machines also sway and bounce around more than you might expect. On entering the first spiral tunnel just after Giornico you realise just how hard the leading pony truck has to fight the locomotive to push it into the bend. The overall impression is just how tight these spirals are, a fact not really appreciated when travelling as a regular passenger.

We then had a fabulous photo opportunity as the loco made a special stop between the first and second spirals, at the portal of the Pianotondo spiral. A truly unique opportunity to capture the locomotive in this most spectacular of locations. We all climbed down onto the trackside with our cameras and had a couple of minutes to capture the event. Meanwhile the

local northbound train was routed around us on the southbound line.

Our next stop was at Lavorgo where we had a twenty-minute break while we waited for the northbound Cisalpino to pass us, yet another excellent photo opportunity.

We set off from Lavorgo at 13.00 looking forward to the next two spirals and the Gotthard tunnel. The southern ramp provides spectacular scenery and the view from the cab was truly magnificent. A short while after entering the Gotthard tunnel the line straightens and it is possible to see the pinprick of light from the north portal, some 9 miles distant. It seems to take forever to grow in size, only in the last few hundred metres does it appear to approach and then suddenly you burst out into the wonderful alpine scenery again. The famous multiple views of the church in Wassen are much more easily appreciated as the loco descends the zigzag track.

We arrived in Erstfeld at 14.05 and made our way to the local hostelry for lunch. After lunch, Serge had arranged a special visit for us

The Ae 4/7 standing at Erstfeld





Examining Gotthard Crocodile,
Ae 6/8 No. 14253 in Erstfeld shed.

back to Mendrisio.

As we passed the various works associated with the new Gotthard base tunnel I asked Serge what will happen to the old Gotthard line when the new tunnel opens. The answer is apparently not known, so take the opportunity now and plan a cab ride over the old route in the wonderful Ae 4/7, I am certainly tempted to repeat the trip and can heart-

ily recommend it to any SRS member. Next year is the 125th anniversary of the Gotthard and Serge plans to do some special trips, possibly when other historic trains are also running. Serge also has plans to run over the Simplon and Lötschberg route. If you are interested contact Serge Bourguinet, Chiemerrütiweg 15, CH 6405, Immensee. Telephone +41 41 810 32 63. All proceeds from cab rides go towards the upkeep of this historic locomotive.

to the SBB workshops, the guide being our very knowledgeable driver Herr Schmid. Highlights were the enormous Ae 8/14, No.11801 and a Gotthard Crocodile, Ae 6/8 No. 14253. The time passed too quickly and soon we had to make our way back to the Ae 4/7 for our return trip. Unfortunately Chris Knight and several of our Swiss friends had to catch trains further north and so were unable to make the return trip. We set off at 16.28 for our non-stop trip

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For brochure and reservation details:

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