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THE CURSE OF THE KROKODIL

or how the “Mike Factor” can take control



Crossing the Weisen viaduct bound for Filisur. The low September 2004 sun playing havoc with lens flare.

ALL THE PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE BY MIKE THOMAS

This is the story of two young(ish) people, Mike and Katie, whom you will have met in print before if you read in the December 2004 issue of Swiss Express “Krokodils und Mich”.

Sadly, Mike (and therefore by association, Katie) is afflicted by a debilitating condition known as “The Mike Factor”. This can be best described by the following formula: - “The perceived success of any one action is inversely proportional to the actual success of said action.” In real language; if you think something will be easy, it will take forever to achieve. If you think it will be a complete pain to get right, just forget you ever considered it!

Since their first trip to Graubünden in 2003, Mike has dragged his long-suffering ‘other half’ back to the land of red trains and Toblerone on three further occasions. They have enjoyed many happy hours hanging out of carriage windows (hence Mike’s receding hairline) and have partaken of the best of Swiss hospitality. Their holidays are always meticulously planned in advance. Planning

is easy. Reality, however, has an annoying habit of spiralling out of control, a bit like all those ‘simple’ D.I.Y jobs that take 6 months and 38 trips to B&Q to complete. Katie has a few tales to tell about those, but this is not the place...

All the precision planning in the world comes to nothing when the “The Mike Factor” rears its ugly head during a holiday in Rhätische Bahn country. The resulting chaos we will call The Curse

of the Krokodil, a few examples of which follow. The events are real and the words are Mike’s own, but to protect his identity the typeface has been changed and the text has been typed by an actor!

Our first Swiss holiday ran perfectly, like the proverbial Swiss watch. This just lulled us into a false sense of security. Switzerland is generally perceived as the land of perfection after all – everything works, as it should.

Holiday Number 2 also started well. Gatwick to Zürich by *easyjet*. On time and luggage all present and correct. Through passport control and downstairs to catch the shuttle train to the main terminal. In less than 3 minutes the state-of-the-art shuttle arrives and with computer-controlled efficiency glides to a halt. We board, the doors slide shut and we head off into a tunnel. After only a few minutes into the journey, mid tunnel, suddenly there is a loud Bang! and a rather abrupt and unexpect-

ed deceleration accompanied by varied and multinational exclamations of surprise. The train comes to a halt. The lights go out. We are somewhat concerned. Shortly the lights come back on and from under the carriage comes the sound of machinery powering back up. Another loud Bang! The lights go out. We are now somewhat more concerned. In the gloom of the emergency lighting the wide, staring eyes of our worried fellow passengers are easily discernible.

More noises of machinery coming back to life, the lights come on again. A loud Bang! Darkness. The process repeats several times. Light-Bang!-Dark.

The emergency exit signs in the tunnel now come on. The Swiss teenager standing opposite us grins and says in flawless English "I hope that you have come to Switzerland for a walking holiday!" Great. A member of the airport staff appears in the tunnel outside the train, the doors open and he beckons us out



ABOVE: Truly the "Kurse of the Krok". As he mentions in the article the Kroks seem to elude him! This was taken at Filisur, September 2004.

BELLOW: Mike does in fact take many really good pictures as this text book one shows. Ge4/4" 648 above Bergün 29/8/05

onto a narrow metal catwalk. Like children on a school outing we shuffle single file back down the tunnel to the station area where we board another train on the other platform and resume our journey. We later learn the incident has made national TV news. "The Mike Factor" has caused part of the super-efficient airport rapid transit system to grind to a halt.

Our next visit to Graubünden in March





415 this time more successfully, with the Alpine Classic Pullman between Landwasser and Filisur. 31/08/05

2004 passed off without a hitch. Unless you count getting up early one snowy morning to travel down the Bernina line to photograph a special outing of the famous steam rotary snowplough. We eventually twigged, after spending hours in snow up to our knees with not a sniff of the Dampfschneeschleude, that I had read Samstag as Sonntag – D’oh!! “The Mike Factor” again. My foreign language skills are at best limited, although I can order a full 4-course meal with wine in Greek – admittedly of little use in Switzerland. Since then I have at least learned the days of the week in German – and some handy expletives. Kindly, Katie has almost let me forget the incident.

Our latest trip occurred in September 2004 and in terms of **The Curse of the Krokodil** was our best to date.

We flew to Geneva as *easyjet* had fallen out with the management at Zurich Airport over the high landing fees - no doubt levied to help offset the huge cost of repairs to their doomed shuttle train. We managed to complete the mammoth 6-and-a-bit-hours journey from Geneva to Filisur without a problem and enjoyed

a week of stunning weather – bright sunshine and 25 °C everyday. Apart from the day when a steam special came to Filisur. The clouds gathered and the rain arrived about 10 minutes before the train! However, we had also come to see an Alpine Classic Pullman special hauled by one of my all-time favourite Ge 6/6 Krokodils.

Imagine the scene. We travel to Bergün under a cloudless sky and arrive in good time to find a suitably photogenic vantage point. A very pleasant pair of hours is spent enjoying the late summer warmth and snapping pictures. In due course the distinctive sound of a Krokodil can be heard in the distance. Around a bend appears the train, at its head Krok 412 glinting in the September sunlight. Staring intently into the viewfinder, I wait for just the right moment and press the shutter. The camera display blinks once – BATTERY LOW – and promptly shuts down. Katie continues to video the passage of the Krokodil through the lush Swiss countryside, cowbells sounding in the clear mountain air, wild flowers swaying in the gentle breeze. I somehow manage to suppress the urge to condense my Fuji Finepix into the dimensions



Once the camera batteries had been replaced..... Love it or Loathe it, blue Krokodil 412 at Samedan. 30/08/05

of a Frisbee and suddenly remember quite a lot of my new-found German vocabulary!

Undaunted, the next day we travelled down to Bernina Diavolezza to ride the cable car; a new experience for us. As we arrived, a yellow helicopter landed in the base station car park, deposited a handful of people and took off, heading towards the mountains. In a short while it returned, landed, dropped off some more people and departed again. We watched the proceedings for a while and then made our way to buy our cable-car tickets. On entering the terminus building we were aware of a general air of excitement, and I was able to pick out a few words of German I recognised both "Luftseilbahn" and "Geschlossen". Not surprisingly, the day we had picked to ride the cable-car, it had in fact broken – the helicopter had been ferrying the stranded passengers from the top station back to ground level.

Despite the various foul-ups, our Swiss adventure was thoroughly enjoyable, but as usual ended far too quickly and we safely made the long return trip back to Geneva in good time to catch our flight home. This was uncharacter-

istically good fortune, as between Zürich and Geneva the tilting InterCity Express we were travelling on decided that it didn't want to tilt any more and we had to proceed at a less than express-like 40kmh as far as Yverdon-les-Bains, where it failed completely. **The Curse of the Krokodil** had struck again!

Postscript:

Although it appears unlikely, **The Curse of the Krokodil** seems to be real. Despite these machines being my all-time favourites (or perhaps because of it), on studying my photo collection I realise that I am somehow unable to take a decent picture of them. Nearly all the shots I have taken exhibit some minor technical flaw or other blemish: - slightly out of focus; lens flare; camera shake; slightly out of frame; view partially blocked by passing bus/Katie/herd of cows/foliage etc. I even managed to take 30 seconds of video before realising I still had the lens cap on. Katie, my ever-encouraging wife, puts it all down to my obvious creeping senility, but I have another theory...