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BREAKING THE ICE

Robin Oxborough

Photos: Robin Oxborough



BLS celebrity loco Ae6/6 205 at the Leissigen photo-stop.

"Breaking the Ice" was the title that Mercia Charters gave to their first ever tour in Switzerland, based in Spiez in November 2005. Travelling out by air via Geneva a day early I had arranged B&B accommodation a short walk from Spiez station through the highly recommended myswitzerland.com website. On my spare day prior to the tour a trip to Interlaken behind BLS Re4/4 - 191, with a stop at Leissigen to photograph a SBB Ae6/6, enabled me to see the new liveries of both the Zentralbahn (formerly the Brünigbahn) and the BOB. A return to Spiez station after lunch not only allowed viewing of SBB Re4/4s and BLS 485s working on freights but also the passing of an intermodal train behind a pair of German 185s.

The next morning it was back to the station for the 08.05 departure of Mercia's charter train. It had two of BLS's heritage stock (Nos.205 and

273) topping and tailing it to Interlaken West and back, with a photo stop at Leissigen thrown in for good measure. Back at Spiez we swapped our two locos for 465-018 which took us to Burgdorf via the Bern avoiding line where, after a reversal, we headed on the RM line to Solothurn that is normally only worked by EMU stock. A further reversal and we travelled via Moutier on the RM and BLS secondary lines to our next photo stop at Grenchen Nord. The plan was for our train to then travel on towards Biel and traverse the avoiding line in order to head directly to Bern, using its avoiding line to return to Spiez.

However, the Biel avoiding line runs through a yard that is closed at weekends resulting in the train having to reverse yet again, this time in Biel station.

Back at Spiez two BLS shunters took over the train (one at either end) and hauled the tour



The German shunting loco that halted further progress into the quarry at Keistag.

1920-built EZB loco Ce4/6 307 waits at Spiez to propel the charter train into the depot.



south to Heustrich-Emdthal before reversing in order to run up a short branch to a quarry at Keistag for a photo session. Unfortunately, a privately owned ex-German loco 260-355 was parked on the loading line and this served to block our progress further up the branch. Whilst waiting to rejoin the main line at Hondrich Süd we could see the entry to the former main line tunnel – the short section remaining is now used to train staff in emergency evacuation procedures. The day finished with the train being coupled up to heritage loco No. 307 at Spiez station and being propelled into the depot for an hour long organised visit.

On the second day we set off behind BLS freight loco 485-020 through the Lötschberg Tunnel to our first photo stop at Ausserberg on the south ramp high above the Rhône, with the Lausanne –Brig line in the valley below. After a brief pause at Brig we continued through the Simplon tunnel to Domodossola where we paused for an hour whilst our loco was removed and reattached by an Italian loco. Now, for me, followed the highlight of the tour.

Earlier, having realised that if it is possible Mercia will try to arrange cab rides providing the train crew agree, I approached one of the organisers regarding the possibility of doing this. Not being a regular on their trips I did not get my hopes up too much. However, prior to departure, I was asked by the person with whom I had enquired about cab rides if I would like to be in the front cab on the return trip through the Simplon. I did not need to be asked twice! Entering the cab the driver took my photo sitting in his seat and then, along with two other people from the tour who had also been invited up front, we set off for the short run back to Brig.

The driver was very helpful, warning us when we were just about to enter the tunnel so that we could all get a photo, and also pointing out the emergency crossover about mid way through the tunnel. Arriving at Brig we had to rejoin the train, but what a fantastic way to spend half an hour! After a brief pause at Brig to let an InterCity train proceed before us up the

Lötschberg line we set off again now hauled by 484-017. Another photo stop was again scheduled at Ausserberg this time involving our train making a short reversal so it could be caught on camera as it re-entered the station. Our next stop was at Blausee-Mitholz but after some ten minutes there we were asked to rejoin the charter train as we were being treated to a short deviation to the local quarry. Although the branch was only about a quarter of a mile long it was an added bonus and we drew forward to buffer-up to 3 or 4 wagons that were being loaded. A rumour circulated on our train that the person loading the wagons thought ours was the train coming to collect them and he was a bit surprised to see a lot of people jump out of the train!

After rejoining the main line we proceeded on to Reichenbach where I bumped into SRS Joint President Alan Pike who had been chasing our charter train and taking photographs. The tour continued to Spiez for a loco change which brought Nos. 251 and 258 on to work in top and tail mode as we headed for Zweisimmen, along a stretch of line that had only just been reopened after the severe floods the previous August. After a photo stop at Erlenbach we reached Zweisimmen and after another short break, with some manoeuvring by No.258, the tour finished with our return to Spiez.

In conclusion Mercia Charters had organised a very enjoyable two days travelling using First Class coaching stock, complete with a buffet that stocked some excellent local beers. Although I had not been with the company before I would recommend them.



0-6-0T GTB No.3, resident of Spiez depot.



The charter train buffers up to wagons being loaded at the Blausee Mitholz quarry.

Designated 'Historic Locomotive' Ae4/4 251 pauses for the photo-stop at Erlenbach, enroute to Zweisimmen.

