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ROUTES FROM THE RHÔNE



Mont Blanc group from Montroc.

PHOTOS: Jason Sargeson

Founded by the Romans between 41 and 47AD the busy cultural and commercial town of Martigny in Canton Valais lies in the Rhône valley at the point where it is joined by the ancient highway over the Grand St Bernard Pass. Martigny's Gare CFF is on the busy main line along the Rhône valley where it is a stopping place on the through services from Genève to Brig as well as on the RegionAlps local services. It is also the terminus of two quite different local railways both operated by Transports de Martigny et régions (TMR). One, the standard gauge MO, runs up to Orsières and Le Châble, its services operating as the "St Bernard Express". The other line is the metre gauge Martigny-Châtelard (MC). The TMR is also a partner with CFF/SBB in the RegionAlps operation. These two articles give a flavour of the railways around this town.

MONT BLANC EXPRESS

Jason Sargeson

Services on the Martigny-Châtelard (MC) are marketed as the "Mont Blanc Express" for after it leaves Le Châtelard in Switzerland it enters France where its operation is taken over by the RFF(SNCF) and it continues on to Chamonix –Mont-

Blanc. It takes on average around 90 minutes to complete the trip from Martigny to Chamonix as the train is unhurried due to numerous station stops and waits for oncoming trains. On a good day the trip is very scenic and there are

many interesting villages en-route that are worth stopping off at. The MC is unusual as its 830V electricity supply comes from either the usual overhead wires or, in some locations, from a third-rail. On the French section the power is supplied entirely from a third-rail so the French rolling stock cannot proceed further into Switzerland than Le Châtelard-Frontière station which is just the Swiss side of the border.

At Martigny the platforms for the Mont Blanc Express are at the west end of the station with the 13c Tour de la Bâtiaz in full view (Photo 1). The train runs along the valley beside the main line to Vernayaz. After this stop there is a steep ascent on the Riggenbach rack up the hill and into the Trient Valley. There are superb views back down the Rhône Valley from the train. At Le Châtelard-Frontière there is sometimes a train change (Photo 2). There is a fine view from the station of the surrounding mountains (Photo 3). On the Swiss side of the border all the train announcements are in three languages, but once over into France - expect only French...

After the train enters France there is a long



1. MBE Bdeh 4/4 No 8 at Martigny Station with the castle in the background.



2. Changing trains at Le Chatelard.

3. MBE No 53 waits at Le Chatelard.



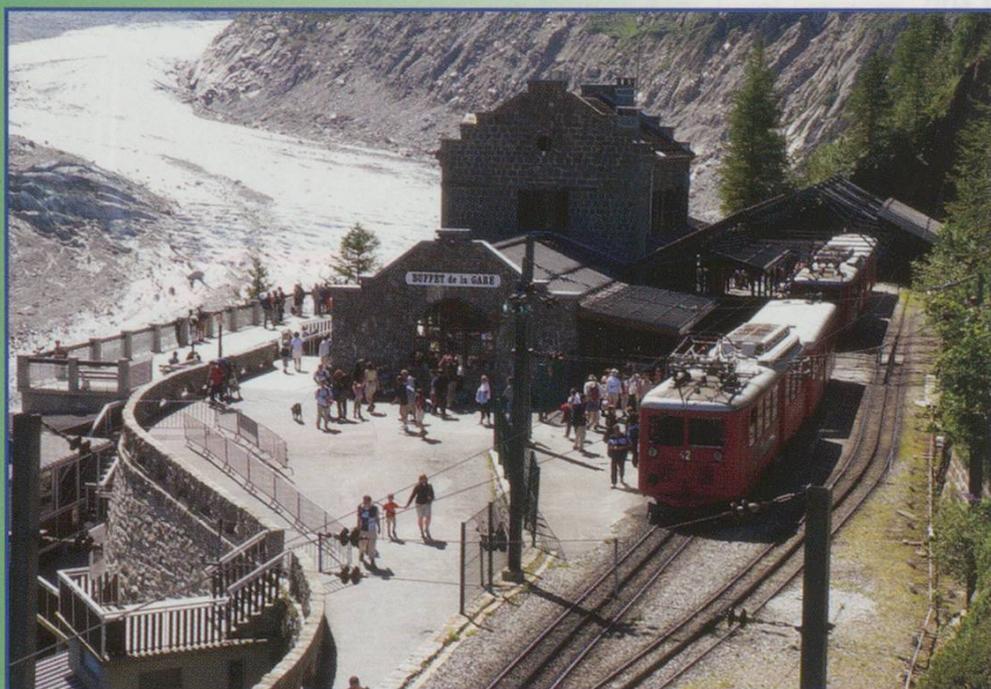


4. A MBE Bdeh 4/8 pulls into Montroc Le Panet on 27/7/07.



5. The sun glints blindingly from MBE No 53 at Chamonix Station.

6. CM Bhe 4/4 No 42 and Montenvers Station while the passengers admire the Mer de Glace.



tunnel from the Trient Valley through to the Arve (or Chamonix) Valley. When the train emerges at Montroc-Le Planet there are superb views of the Aiguille Verte and other surrounding peaks (Photo 4). The Mont Blanc Group first becomes visible from this station. As the train continues down the valley the views of Mont Blanc become

even more special. At Chamonix station there are good views of Mont Blanc and the Glacier des Bossons from the station (Photo 5). The Swiss Pass is valid all the way to Chamonix.

At Chamonix there are numerous attractions including cable cars to Le Brevent and the Aiguille du Midi. For railway enthusiasts a further train ride up a rack railway to Le Montenvers is a good choice (Photo 6).

The views of the Mer de Glace and the surrounding mountains are stunning. I liked the instruction at the ticket office in Chamonix – “Only one family member in the queue please”. Maybe we could start applying this in England, especially in Marks and Spencer!