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Autor: Adams, David
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BY BUS TO BAHN

David Adams goes branch line hopping by post bus

"MAN" Post bus arriving at Balsthal station to form the 10:32 to Waldenburg.

ALL PHOTOS: David Adams

After countless visits to Switzerland over the years there are very few lines that I have failed to travel over. Every visit I try to devise some trips that include something new but many of those bits of track that have eluded me to date do not always appeal, either being in areas that I have considered less scenic, or they seem too short to make the effort. However, last May I decided to try and fit in rides over the branches from Oensingen to Balsthal (OeBB), the Waldenburgerbahn (WB) and the short branch from Wattwil to Nesslau-Neu St Johann, operated by the Südostbahn although part-owned by the SBB. Rather than commit to return trips on these lines I started studying bus routes finding that I could make round tips through previously uncharted territory for me.

Both the OeBB and WB were covered one sunny May morning. Arriving at Oensingen at 10.14 by the hourly Konstanz – Biel InterRegional service I had just 3 minutes to cross via the subway to the waiting RBe540 three-car unit No.206 (ex-SBB 1477). This was easily achieved with time for two quick photos before joining. The service to Balsthal proceeds at quite a sedate pace as the journey progresses into the Jura foothills along a narrowing valley. Even so, with two intermediate stops at Klus and

OeBB De4/4 641 at Balsthal.

OeBB RBe 540 206 at the rear of the 10:17 to Balsthal.

Thalbrücke, the 4 km journey only takes 8 minutes. An Em4/4 diesel shunter, No. 22 (former Class 345 of DBAG(D)), was shunting near Klus. All other rolling stock seen was stabled at the Balsthal terminus. This consisted of another Class "540" unit No.205 (ex SBB 1421) and a Class "560" unit No.207 (ex SBB 560000). Also present were three De4/4 motor coaches numbered 641, 651 & 1632 (ex SBB BDe4/4 1641/1651/1632) which are used for freight haulage. All OeBB's rolling stock is second hand and the last time I saw No.651 was in 1996 when it was working the staff shuttle between Basel SBB and Muttenz.

View from the Postbus nearing Langenbruck.

On arrival at Balsthal there is a seven minute wait for the bus connection to Waldenburg, which I nearly missed. I had already ascertained that it was Route No. 94 and shortly before the 10.32 departure time a double-decker showing No. 94 arrived, but then went empty to the depot. A "MAN" single decker showing No.129 arrived soon after and I continued to look down the road for an approaching No.94. Happening to turn round I noticed that the "MAN" had become a No. 94 and I fortunately just managed to board before it departed as the service is only hourly.

The ride was far more scenic than expected with castle ruins on rock promontories passed en route. At Holderbank (SO), about 7-8 minutes into the journey, there was a shout of "shtop" from a lady at the rear and we came smartly to a stand some way past her stop. At Langenbruck Post the bus is scheduled to wait 6 minutes. The driver duly switched off the engine and started browsing through a holiday brochure while we passengers were "treated" to some music on the bus radio - not traditional Swiss but Sonny and Cher singing "I've got you babe"! The journey then continued, dropping down into Waldenburg where I alighted at the terminus outside the station. I had 6 minutes here, time for a couple of shots of units outside the nearby WB Depot before joining the 11.08, BDe4/4 unit No.15, for the run to Liestal.

This branch is unique in being 750mm gauge. After

leaving the station the line is sandwiched between a road on the left and a narrow stream on the right where a grey heron stood unperturbed as we passed close by. We crossed unit No.14 at Hölstein after which we ran alongside a main road on the right side of the train as far as Altmarkt. From there the line parallels the SBB main line for the last 1.4 km into Leistal where I arrived on time at 11.32, more than pleased with my delightful 1 hour trip from Oensingen.

WB BDe4/4 units 11, 13 & 12 outside Waldenburg depot.

On another day in May this year I took the Südostbahn (SOB) *Voralpen Express* from Arth-Goldau to Wattwil. From there a SOB FLIRT RABe 526 049 worked the connecting branch train for the pleasant run to Nesslau which took 16 minutes. The first

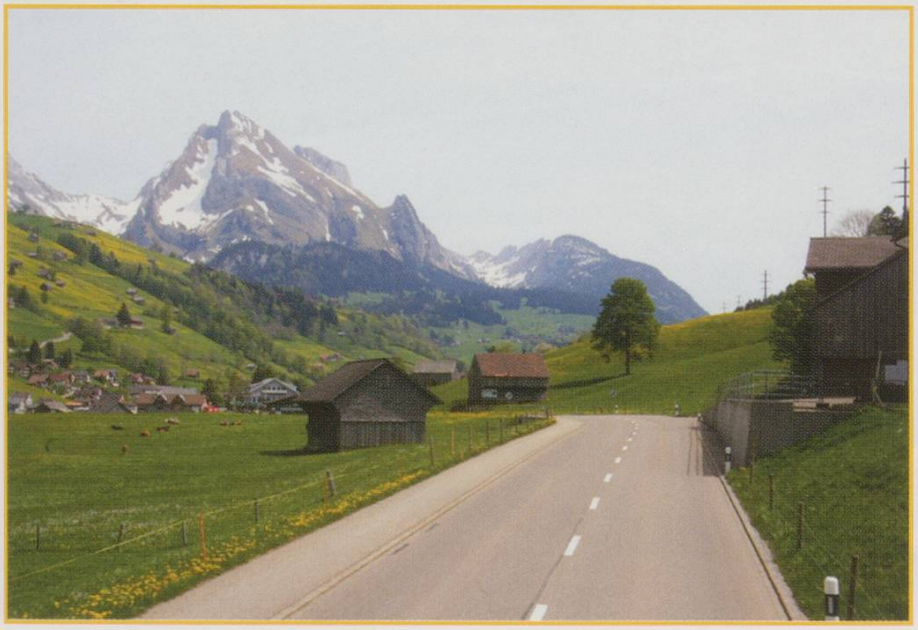
"NEOPLAN" double decker post bus and luggage trailer arriving at Nesslau to form the 11:55 to Buchs SG.

gradually being introduced on routes which have a substantial commuter and tourist demand. However, despite it being a Sunday with excellent weather only about 20 people were waiting, of which about half were probably on a leisure day out. I duly went to the top deck, accessed by one of two stairways, and after 15 minutes I secured a front seat. The side windows were tinted but photography from the front was not too difficult.

of two stops was at Ebnat-Kappel where SOB tractor Tm2/2 236 011 was present. This station was staffed (a rare sight in Switzerland these days) and the operator saw the train away in the traditional manner,.

To save a lot of backtracking to reach the Chur area I then rode the 11.55 Route 790 bus to Buchs (SG). Double-decker buses were not something that I expected to find in Switzerland but such a monster duly arrived, a "NEOPLAN" with 3-axles plus a single axle luggage trailer in tow. These vehicles are

The route climbs steadily to the village of Wildhaus, 25 minutes into the one hour journey. The road follows a valley on the south side of the Säntis range and the Säntis itself can be seen several times on this leg of the journey. After Wildhaus the road starts a steeper descent as it winds down to the broad valley of the Rhine, running alongside a stream in a narrow valley for some of the way. At a point on this descent the driver suddenly gave a four-note blast on the traditional post horn and at the next stop a ticket seller/checker boarded, obviously an advance warning of our approach for his benefit.



Eventually the Rhine Valley and the Austrian/ Liechtenstein mountains come into view, a scene similar to that viewed from the Appenzeller Bahn on the descent from Gais to Altstätten. The valley floor is reached at Gams. From

there the last 15 minutes or so of the trip take on a more suburban aspect although a close up view of a red kite, which flew down across the front of the bus whilst being chased by a pair of carrion crows, was an unexpected spectacle along this stretch. I alighted outside the station at Buchs (SG), arriving 3 minutes early at 12.52 for my onward train to Chur at 13.01. This was a thoroughly entertaining ride through some marvellous scenery which I highly recommend.

All the train and bus routes described in the article are open to Swiss Pass holders.

TOP LEFT: *SOB "FLIRT" 526049 after arrival at Nesslau-Neu St Johann.*

BOTTOM LEFT: *The Säntis (right hand peak) seen between Unterwasser and Wildhaus.*

TOP: *Approaching Alt St Johann.*

MIDDLE: *Descent from Wildhaus.*

BOTTOM: *View over the Rhine valley. The town below is Grabs with Buchs SG and the mountains of Austria and Liechtenstein beyond.*