

Sidetracks... a miscellany of items

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● Railtour Organisation

Condensing Robin Oxborough's "Rail-touring 2009" article to fit into the June edition of the magazine resulted in the contact details of Charters Helvetica (2008), the organisers, being omitted.

The company is run by Alan Spencer, an SRS member, who can be contacted at 34, Camp Street, Derby, DE1 3SD, by email at spencera2@sky.com, or on 07933 509 987. He has tours to Switzerland coming-up in April and August next year. In addition to Robin we understand that a number of other members of the Society have travelled on previous trips that he has organized. Up-to-date details of Charters Helvetica tours are often listed in the "Railtours Diary" in *Today's Railways Europe* as well as on their website.

● Zurich gains a "Luxury Lounge"

From the 1st June 2009 passengers holding first-class rail tickets have been able to enjoy complimentary snacks, coffee, tea, soft drinks, alcohol-free beer and internet access in a new "Luxury Lounge" at Zürich Hbf. Announcing the opening of the facility SBB noted that it was their policy that "Customers who pay more for their tickets should also profit from a better service". If any SRS members get to use the lounge perhaps they will report back.

● High speed rail into Genève

An historic agreement in April between Cantons Vaud and Genève could lead to a 2015 start on schemes to unclog the congested rail line alongside Le Léman west of Lausanne. With Vaud putting up CHF200 million and Genève CHF100m as pre-finance, work will be able to start on upgrading the rail link to allow more and faster trains. It is apparently the first time that two Cantons have come together to promote joint infrastructure improvements in neighbouring administrations, this work having previously been seen as a Federal prerogative. Due to an unprecedented economic boom in the whole of the Léman area both the road and rail communication corridors are saturated during the rush hours. It is the one area of the SBB network where

significant delays can regularly occur. Due to the complexity of the work needed and the limited availability of national funding it was originally intended that the works would be programmed for a 2020 start. The funding from the Cantons should allow some 5-years to be cut off the planning and design process.

● Swiss travellers pay more?

In an apparent attempt to justify the high cost of rail fares in Britain our Department of Transport published a study earlier this year of fares in several European countries that purported to show that fares in Switzerland were almost on a par with those in the UK. This was widely reported in our mainstream media. Reading into the report it transpires that the comparison was only valid for unrestricted day return fares over two distance categories; 17 – 40 km and 41 – 80km. In all other categories surveyed the UK fares were out on their own in expense. The report actually showed that trips under 17km in Switzerland were comparable in price to other mainland European countries, and that Swiss annual season ticket holders had some of the cheapest fares in Europe. What the report did not discuss was the fact that some 300,000 Swiss pay less than £2,000 for an annual "go-anywhere-by-anything" ticket and another two million have a half-price discount ticket so few actually pay the high fares that the UK Government chose to quote. As usual our lazy media swallowed the spin without question. If you want cheap over-the-counter rail travel try Italy or Ireland, which unsurprisingly was not included in the study. Also in Ireland (both north and south of the border) all resident over-60s have unrestricted free travel by train as well as by bus.

● SBB to audit litter levels

Following customer surveys that have highlighted that litter levels on trains and in stations was one of the top three concerns for regular travellers SBB is introducing sixteen wholly independent "Cleanliness Detectives". These people will travel the length and breadth of the system to audit the tidiness of what many outside Switzerland consider to

be one of the cleanest railways in the world. The idea is that when these people spot problem areas (or specific lines) where litter is seen to be a problem, they will report back to management who will then commit additional resources to tackle the issues that have been identified. The President of Pro Bahn, the Swiss public transport users group, has even suggested that in some places the problems were as bad as on trains serving major British cities. Surely not!

● **RAIpin make progress**

RAIpin operate the "Rollende Autobahn" train service between Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, and Novara, Italy, through Switzerland. In 2008 they carried 85,106 trucks, a new record and 6% more than in 2007. There would have been more, but the strike in the SBB workshop in Bellinzona, which specialises in the maintenance of their low wheel bogies, held them back. Nevertheless, 5,375 trains were run, 283 more than in 2007, and they look forward with confidence to 2009. The economic climate should encourage more road haulage operators to take advantage of the benefits of carrying their vehicles through the Alps by train.

● **Missing maps**

On a recent trip to Switzerland one of our members noticed that the SBB apparently had removed the large maps showing the full rail system that were usually located near the ticket machines. Enquiries at the ticket office of one station resulted in the suggestion that the member should purchase the official rail map. Not wishing to do that they were then offered the map that comes with the "Generalabonnement", which is a larger version of the one which comes with the Swiss Pass.

● **Problems on Stations**

Unfortunately Switzerland does not seem immune to the mindless vandalism of railway property that we get in the UK. For example overnight on the 21st and 22nd June vandals attacked the station at Läuelfingen (BL) on the quiet line SBB line from Sissach to Olten

causing over CHF 4,000 of damage. This station is just north of the original 2495m Hauenstein Tunnel through the Jura that was built by the British civil engineer Thomas Brassey.

● **Gotthard Breakthrough**

It is reported that on the 16th June engineers working on the new 57km long Gotthard Tunnel broke through on the Amsteg to Erstfeld section nine months ahead of schedule. Opening of the complete tunnel to traffic is scheduled for 2017.

● **Voralpen Express**

Following-on from ... *and Finally* in the last magazine we learn that the Südostbahn (SOB) are now marketing the *Voralpen Express* totally themselves. One of their initiatives is a little booklet, which contains details of 44 attractions at places along the route. There is a "ticket" card attached to the inside of the front cover. If this is stamped at the six main stations en-route (Romanshorn, St. Gallen, Wattwil, Rapperswil, Arth-Goldau and Luzern) over a two day period it can be exchanged for either a CHF50 coupon redeemable at stores in the Sherpa Outdoor chain on purchases of outdoor clothing, rucksacks, etc, or for a *Voralpen Express* drinks flask. Get travelling!

● **Book Search**

Is there an out-of-print Swiss railway book you need? Michael Farr notes that it is worth checking the Swiss Rail Collector website whose Dutch owner, Bart de Bock, tracked down three titles he needed. He was able to supply two of them quickly and kept a look-out for the third for several months. Michael considered that the prices were fair and they arrived safely packed. The site also apparently lists many metal models of Swiss prototypes and other miscellaneous collectables to tempt you! To browse the website go to www.swissrailcollector.net.

Information supplied by: Keith Scotland; Bill Weber; Michael Farr; Ron Smith; SBB; Swissinfo.