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MEMBERS' LETTERS

From David Stevenson – By email

I recently went to Switzerland with a colleague for a week's holiday. I don't want to go into the details of the mistake I made as it is not relevant but I do want to mention the Swiss Travel Centre who, on my return, handled my query and request with great diligence and with a highly satisfactory and exceedingly welcome outcome from my point of view.

Many thanks all at Swiss Travel Centre; I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am. Highly recommended!

From Michael Donovan – By email

There was reference in a recent *Swiss Express* to the changed method of working of trains at Davos, with the Regional Express (RE) from Landquart continuing (less a few coaches) as the stopping service to Filisur, and vice-versa. A visit in June 2009 confirms that this method of working is continuing whilst the reason for the change appears to be improving on-time performance.

The Landquart – Davos RE shuttle had a tight turn-round at Davos Platz that included running round the locomotive plus unloading/loading significant numbers of passengers, often with much baggage. The Filisur – Davos Platz shuttle also had tight turn-rounds at both ends, although being formed of a push-pull set it avoided the run-rounds at both ends. In both cases, late running in one direction would translate into late running in the other, with implications for connecting services and, in the case of the RE, for services crossed on the single line. Late running from Davos to Filisur would affect connections into the flagship Chur – St Moritz services in both directions as these have connections both at Samedan for Pontresina (and thence for Tirano) and at Chur into the SBB InterCity services. Late running of the Filisur shuttle frequently occurred if it made "request" stops at the minor stations en-route as the trains appeared to be under-timed if all these stops were required.

Through working (albeit unadvertised as there is a significant lay-over at Davos Platz between arrival and departure of the "through" trains) required the insertion of an extra train set and locomotive, plus the use of a shunting locomotive and shunter at Davos, but has significant performance benefits. It appears that the strengthening vehicles are detached from the

rear of the RE in Platform 2 before it continues to Filisur. The shunting locomotive can then place these vehicles in Platform 1. The train from Filisur having been propelled back to Davos (no run-round required at Filisur) enters Platform 1 and couples to the strengthening vehicles. The locomotive then uncouples from the rear of the formation and runs around the train prior to departing.

Modern, low-floor, driving trailers have been transferred from the Scuol-Tarasp – Pontresina Engadin shuttles where two the regular sets now have older vehicles resembling the DBSOs that used to operate on the Liverpool Street – Norwich services.

From Malcolm J Godfrey – By email

Having received value for money many times by way of a Swiss Pass, and having read "Swiss Travellers Pay More?" in *Sidetracks* (Issue 99) I feel that I must share with members my first experience of German train fares. This year, staying at a hotel in Schliersee, I was told that the hotel sold a special day ticket to Munich. It did! One ticket for up to 5 adults, day return to Munich (almost 1-hour each way), including unlimited travel on Munich's buses, trams, U-Bahn and S-Bahn; total cost 21 Euros!

Where is there better value for money, in Switzerland or anywhere else?!

From Michael Farr – By email

Following on from David Stevenson's letter (Issue 99) comparing the cost of travelling to Switzerland by rail and by air, I found that this year it was cheaper for me to book through a tour operator than to arrange accommodation at Vevey or Montreux and flights to Genève myself.

I contacted two of the cheaper hotels in the area, whose bed and breakfast rate was almost exactly the same as the inclusive charge by Inghams – which included not only the easyJet flights from Bristol but also a Swiss Card for the journey between Genève-Aéroport and Montreux which also meant I could buy the discounted version of the Regional Pass.

If I had flown from Heathrow or Gatwick certain flights did not attract a supplement and my luggage would have been delivered direct to my hotel. As easyJet do not subscribe to this service I had to manhandle my bag on the train, but Inghams provided a car to ferry me to the

hotel – and my wife was much happier knowing there was a friendly local representative on hand in case of any emergency.

It would also have been slightly cheaper for me to book my Regional Pass through Inghams (to whom the “usual disclaimer” applies) but this may have been due to variations in the exchange rate.

From David Adams – By email

It is with sadness and concern that I wrote a letter of complaint regarding the failure in May this year of railway staff to hold an advertised connecting service for just one minute. This then cannot be about Switzerland. Isn't that what I and most members would think with regard to the Swiss integrated transport policy, which has always been acclaimed by virtually all visitors to that country?

Unfortunately, this is about deepest Switzerland on a line heavily used by tourists, the Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn (MGB). I caught the 08.12 from Göschenen, due into Andermatt at 08.22 with an advertised connection into the 08.27 to Disentis. This day the connecting Locarno train was late so the MGB connection was held for 4-minutes. Arriving at 08.26 in Andermatt I had less than a minute to negotiate the subway and, emerging from it onto Platform 1, the 08.27 moved away, throwing my plans for the morning into disarray. Seeking an explanation from the ticket office all I got was “sorry” – and an hour to kick my heels. Even the much berated UK train operators do better than that. A complimentary coffee would have been a nice gesture but it seems MGB do not find it necessary to give goodwill gestures even when they are totally at fault. If they had, then this letter would have been written in a different tone.

I wrote to MGB relating my experience; questioning the apparent lack of platform staff – none in evidence at either Göschenen or Andermatt; and noting that as the train between them was driver-only I could not draw anyone's attention to the fact that I wanted the Disentis connection. After three-weeks it took a prompt to elicit a reply. My concerns regarding the lack of staffing were completely ignored and statements such as “no one saw you coming on the stairs” (because there was no one there to look) and “the train left bang on time after making the connection” fuelled my annoyance. I

strongly resent being treated with contempt so I wrote to the Chief Executive, the letter marked “Personal and Confidential”. After a further eight-week delay I did receive a response, apparently delayed “due to staff absences”. In it they would not be drawn on the staffing issue and reiterated that the dispatcher at Andermatt was solely at fault and has been warned for the future. MGB is certainly light years behind when it comes to customer service, indeed early in the letter I am told that “we shall not be responding to any further letters from you”. Obviously I am just a nuisance to them. They really do not appear to have any idea about customer perception and how it can damage a business.

The reply indicates that 3-minutes is the maximum permitted for holding connection. For people with heavy luggage, or for strangers, it is unfortunate if you cannot find your onward train in time. From my own observations it seems that the holding of connections at Andermatt is solely down to the signal panel operator whose view across the platforms is often impaired by a train standing in front of his position.

No doubt the need to reduce operating costs has driven these staff reductions but like all such initiatives it seems that the organisation does not know where to stop. In their responses MGB has clearly shown it is unable to defend its staffing policy and has absolutely no concept of quality customer service. Reading *Swiss Express* I was surprised to learn that a gang of immigrant pick pockets can operate at a major interchange like Visp without coming to the notice of the station staff. However, visiting Visp it appears that the answer is that this jointly used MGB/SBB station also appeared to be devoid of staff at platform level able to “police” the situation.

I have contacted other Swiss transport operators on occasion in the past and have always found their responses extremely helpful and timely, a model in professional customer service and a glowing advert for the Swiss way of doing things. MGB apparently has a lot to learn. I therefore urge other members to be watchful of a seemingly growing trend of this most un-Swiss like behaviour and if they are unfortunate enough to experience anything similar to make their feelings known to the organisation concerned. Let's hope that other Swiss operators do not follow this business model. We all might become far less enthusiastic about things Swiss if that is the case.