

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2010)
Heft: 102

Artikel: Bernina 100
Autor: Smith, Ron
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854422>

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BERNINA 100

Ron Smith



A service train on the Bernina at Alp Grüm on 17.01.10.

ALL PHOTOS: Ron Smith

The Rhätian Railway (RhB) is the charismatic metre-gauge railway that is probably the best known and admired in Switzerland and abroad. It is even recognised by UNESCO as a world heritage site! Operating wholly within the Canton Graubünden, it runs through 3 language zones. The 61 km section south from the Oberengadin over the Bernina Pass to the Valposchiavo was opened in 1910, electrified from the start at 1000 volts dc. Construction included the hydro-electric plant at Valposchiavo, which still provides the traction current today – 100 years of using renewable energy.

Rotary snowplough Xrotd 6/6 No.9213 & ABe4/4II No 53 arrives at St Moritz.



In the south, the terminus is at Tirano, in Italy, where the line meets the Italian State Railway (FS) in the Mediterranean climate of this typical regional town. The RhB have their own station adjacent to the FS one and trains set off through the town – quite literally – as the track crosses a square and goes up a street. Entering Switzerland it then climbs up a valley to the famous open-air spiral viaduct at Brusio, which it needs to gain height. This stone structure has a tight radius of just 70 metres, is 110 metres long, and rises on nine 10 metre wide arches. The line has an incredible 196 bridges and viaducts and 55 tunnels and cuttings as it fights its way through this fantastic landscape. It rises from the palm trees of Tirano at 429 m to the highest point on the RhB network at Ospizio Bernina at 2253m, located below the Piz Bernina at 4049m. This alpine pass is a natural barrier, marking a watershed, language divide, and even different weather systems! The mountainous route always attracts heavy snowfalls each year. In 1910 the builders ordered a rotary steam snow plough, which started work in 1912. Now Xrotd 6/6 No. 9213, it is still in operation today – the only one in the world – and it will be part of the many celebrations throughout the centenary year.

Today this remarkable line welcomes over 700,000 tourists annually, including many Japanese as links with this country go back a long way. In 1912 the Hakone Tozen Railway of Japan sent its engineer Mr. Handa, to see how to build railways in difficult terrain. He came to the RhB, took note of the way it was built, and returned home to build their line in Japan. Since 1979 the two railways have been twinned, with some RhB stations including Japanese writing on their station signs.

The events planned for 2010 are many and varied – too many to list here. To find out more go to www.mybernina.ch where there is also a link to details of a free pass for various attractions and gifts available from any manned RhB station. The famous “Crocodile” locomotives will be pulling a

classic Pullman train on several days in the summer, as well as special trains with historic rolling stock, such as the railcar fitted with wicker chairs. There is even an evening/night train with fondue and wine, but without lights in the observation car so that you can experience the night sky. Special offers abound, such as a CHF1 supplement to turn a winter sports pass into a rail pass; cab rides in service trains will be available throughout the year; and RhB's new “Allegra” trains will be introduced on the line.

The celebrations were launched at St Moritz in January. The quality, quantity, and variety of events throughout 2010 are remarkable, and must have taken a great deal of planning. It is going to be a memorable centenary celebration, and one not to be missed.

1. Ge4/4II No.619 at St Moritz on 16.01.10. 2. ABe4/4II No.52 at St Moritz on 16.01.10. Notice the passengers! 3. Ge6/6 415 at St Moritz on 16.01.10.
4. A new Allegra unit approaches Alp Grüm on 17.01.10.



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