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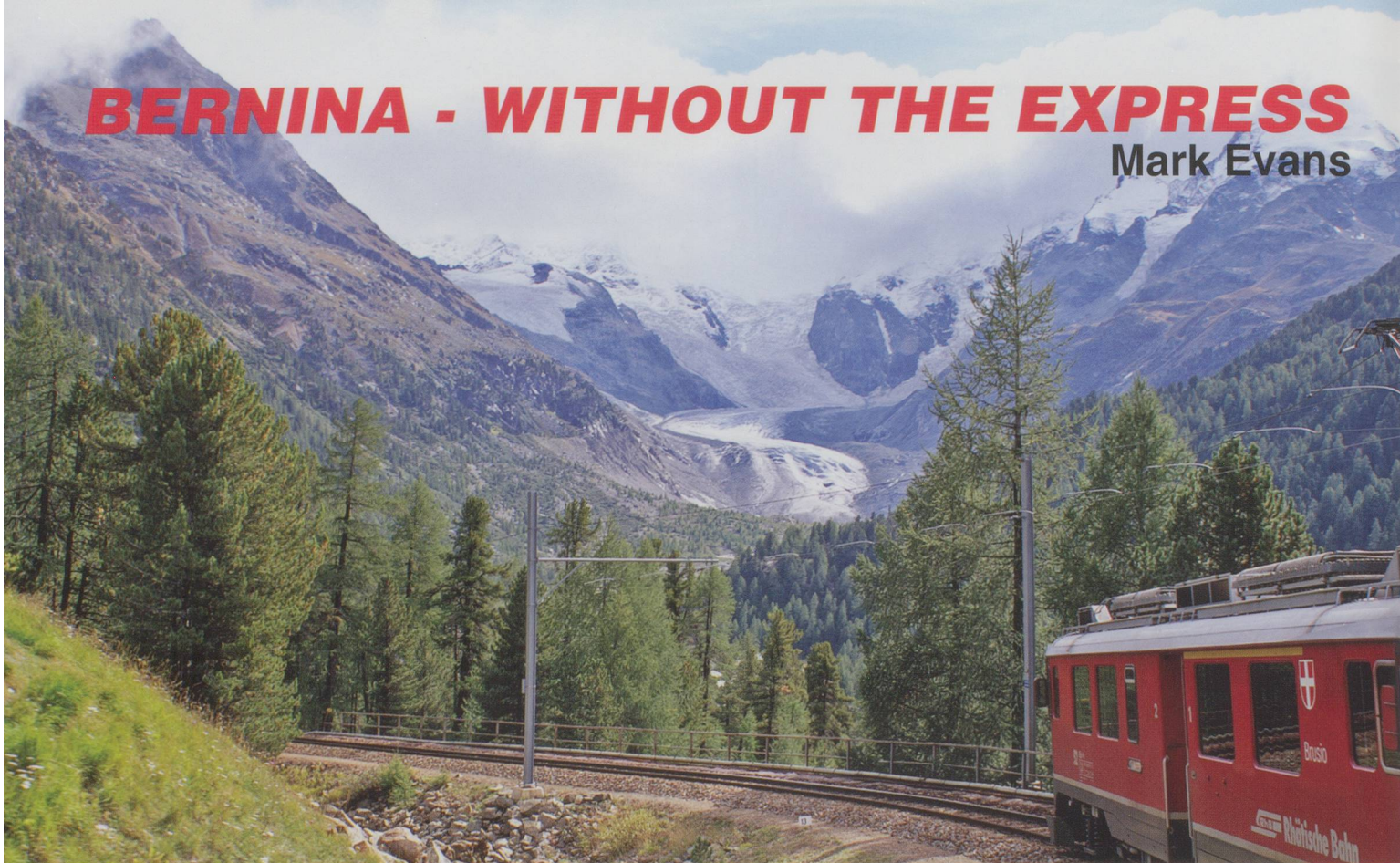
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BERNINA - WITHOUT THE EXPRESS

Mark Evans



Morsatch Glacier, 15/09/06.

ALL PHOTOS: Mark Evans

When in Switzerland I go for a *Swiss Pass* with its freedom to hop on and off trains without a plan. I don't like to have to make reservations, so *Bernina Express/Glacier Express* type trips are not usually on the agenda. Observing the latest incarnations of these trains too, they look more and more like organised coach trips on rails. Posh new vehicles they may have, but looking at the way everyone is crammed in, eating either a restaurant meal or their packed lunch all at the same time – no, that's not for me! Real trains do intermediate business, people come and go without fuss or ceremony, sitting where they choose, but not on the land cruises that the tourists frequent.

That said, having arrived at Chur at about 08.20 in September 2006, and deciding that I wanted to go to Tirano, the *Bernina Express* was the only train on offer. Six panorama cars, only a handful of people on board, so I asked the conductor if I could get a first class seat – 'fully booked' was the response. I didn't press the point, watched it depart, and then caught the next service to St Moritz, changing at Samedan for the connection to Pontresina. There a service train came in headed by a pair of ABe 4/4's including No 54 'Hakone', relevant to me as the first time I had consciously seen a *Glacier Express* destination board had been on the Japanese *Hakone Railway*.

Setting off on the trip south, it began to dawn on me why a railcar was so enjoyable for this trip. I always enjoy the sound of machinery working hard and in the ABe 4/4 I was right over the motors and could hear what was happening – great! The day was wet, and the train was slipping slightly on the climb up to Bernina Daviolezza.

No traffic on the adjacent road to race us and, rather than getting brighter the higher we climbed, it got gloomier. By Ospizio Bernina it was nothing like the photos in the brochures, you could hardly see 10m, but I decided to stick with it and go all the way down to Tirano. The street running was enjoyable but on arrival in Tirano it was still raining; after passing through the passport check, sniffing at the main square and taking a photo of a steam loco in the Trenitalia yard, I retraced my steps to catch the next train back over the pass. Probably five minutes in Italy – a record short stay even for me!

Again the climb north was in continual rain with some slipping; the spiral viaduct is much more interesting going up! There were seven coaches behind the two railcars, but few passengers in the train until Poschiavo, where passengers from a tour-bus joined the train accounting for at least two of the coaches. Theirs was a one-way-trip, with the bus collecting them at Pontresina, but they would have seen little as any lingering hopes that the weather might have cleared were soon dashed – the summit was even less visible than before. Both the GeM 4/4's were in action on the line that day and given the ABe 4/4's opening windows they could be clearly seen and photographed on passing trains. I enjoyed the trip and even though the sightseeing element had been marginal at best, it did give me a respect for the ABe 4/4's and the engineering of the Bernina route.

Forward six months and I found myself back at Chur during a fabulous weather window so I decided to see if the brochures were right and that there were views on

the Bernina. I always travel with the 'Cookbook' – Thomas Cook's European timetable. It is detailed enough for my needs and, having first used it *Inter-railing* in 1972 I am used to it. However, deciphering how to get from Chur to Tirano, leaving at around 09.00 in March without using the *Bernina Express* took a bit of time! The Bernina Express proper left Chur at 08.58, at that time of year combined with the hourly train to St Moritz. Normally there is a connection at Samedan to Pontresina (from Scuol Tarasp), but for this train the 'Cookbook' was confused, presumably so that any intending passengers book the requisite seats and supplement on the *Bernina Express*. Not wanting to be committed to this, I hatched Plan B

This involved the 07.58 from Chur, much to the surprise of my wife at home as she rightly pointed out 'You don't catch the 06.58, (think 'time difference') to Waterloo with that much enthusiasm!' At St Moritz I was able to secure a prime seat on the 10.45 departure, whilst at Pontresina dozens of passengers were milling up and down looking in vain for seats, including some Swiss who had been on my train from Chur, evidently also intending to avoid the *Bernina Express*. Although the two ABe 4/4s (and a coach) of the service train had been joined by six panorama cars at Pontresina all these were apparently reserved, to the chagrin of the intending passengers. The contrast between this and the September trip could not have been greater, clear skies and plenty of snow to enhance the views. At last I saw how Ospizio Bernina fits into the landscape, and wow what a landscape! Deciding to hop off at Alp Grum and return immediately over the best bit the return train had two 40-series ABe 4/4s, with no-one in the leading unit, so it was a case of window down, leaning out and savouring the sun, snow and the route. Watching the railcars ploughing through the blown snow summed up, for me Swiss railwaying at its finest. Plan B was so much better.

My lack of enthusiasm for air conditioned glass boxes was confirmed later that visit. Whilst sitting in the sun having a coffee at Andermatt station there was a sudden invasion of coach-tour travellers, many smoking heavily. After a while it dawned on me – they had all escaped from a pair of reserved observation cars on the service train from Brig, with time to kill before the departure on to Disentis. As I watched them depart I thought how miserable they all looked crammed into the cars with not a seat to spare, even on a beautiful day. That was all the proof I needed that my way of doing things works, for me at least! Train travellers have been enjoying the rugged beauty of the Bernina for 100 years now, but the opportunity to do it my way on a traditional train is fast disappearing. I am glad that I escaped the Expresses when I did. ✠

1. 626 and 622 heading the 0758 Chur – Arosa 13/03/07
2. Heading up the Brusio spiral viaduct 15/09/06
3. Ospizio Bernina in the sun at last – 14/03/07
4. Abe 4/4's 56 and 52 at Alp Grum, 14/03/07
5. Climbing from Andermatt to Oberalp, 03/03/08

