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LAUBERHORNSKIRENNEN

Glyn Jones witnesses a busy time for the Wengernalpbahn

The Wengernalpbahn uses all its stock on race day.

ALL PHOTOS: Glyn Jones

For many, their only knowledge of Wengen is the annual TV coverage of the Lauberhornrennen, which at 4480m is the longest men's downhill race on the World Cup Ski Circuit. This, Switzerland's premier sporting event, starts 1028m higher than the village on the Lauberhorn and finishes a 20min walk south at Inner Wengen. This location with the permanent buildings and grandstands of the Ski Stadium is reached by the road, signposted to Mary's Café, which goes under the Wengernalpbahn (WAB) station. Over the years that we have visited Wengen for race week we have seen the event grow in stature, with considerable corporate sponsored entertaining attached to an event which generates much media attention, and costs over CHF5.3m to stage.

During the fortnight before the race temporary buildings and a covered stage are constructed on the outdoor ice rink in Wengen, and similar facilities for corporate guests go up on the Girmschbiel below Wengernalp, including large television screens and plenty of "Portaloos". Much of the construction work is undertaken by the Army with the equipment transported by the WAB on extra freight trains. It is

Silvan Zurbruggen just after Canadian Corner. The supports for the safety netting are a permanent structure and can be seen even in summer just below Wengernalp Station, Jan 2011.

not unusual to see Army jeeps sharing flat wagons with burger vans, whilst the yard at Lauterbrunnen is full of material waiting its turn to be transported up. A TV outside broadcast centre is located at Wengernalp with these large vehicles probably travelling by rail via Kleine Scheidegg as they are too tall for the tunnels below Wengen. The WAB also runs extra passenger trains with a half-hourly service until 02:38.

Having raced in Adelboden the previous weekend the ski teams (each staying in a different hotel) arrive on the Monday ready for the start of practice on the Wednesday. Press and TV are also catered-for by a media



centre that is set up in the village school. Surprisingly race week is one of the cheapest to stay in Wengen as the recreational skiers, not liking the disruption that the race preparations cause, tend to stay away. The village gets busier as the week goes by as more-and-more media, advertising people and spectators arrive. On Friday evening the stage at "Welt Cup Dorfli" - the tented village on the ice rink - sees the allocation of start numbers for Saturday's race. An event in itself this is broadcast on Swiss TV. The skiers, famous personalities with adoring female fans, are allowed to mingle with the crowds; there is a large fondue tent for the corporate guests; a disco tent; much drinking and merriment but only two policemen in attendance – probably the entire village force.

Race day morning on the Saturday dawns to the typical Swiss sound of jangling cow bells, but this is January and the large cow bells are being carried by the spectators, many also carrying flags and dressed in the fan-club colours of their favourite skier. This year 35,000 spectators paid CHF40 to attend, although admission is free to anyone with a valid area ski pass. On race day the WAB uses all its available equipment, including some unusual combinations of stock, to try and move the crowds up the mountain. However, this year even this was not enough to cope as many fans had to walk up from Lauterbrunnen and then on to Wengernalp. Later in the day those without skis walked all the way down again. In the morning most up trains only go as far as Wengernalp, whilst occasional empty down trains are turned round in Wengen to move passengers waiting there as it is not easy to catch a through train up. All the services arriving from Lauterbrunnen are jammed full beyond their intended capacity with even the driving trailer cabs being used for passengers alongside the driver.

A good place to watch the race is Girmschbiel/Wengernalp where the scene is incredible with some 10,000 people with their flags, bells, etc on the hillside looking across to the Hundschopf jump. There are food and drink stalls and smoke rises from winter barbeques, whilst pre-race entertainment includes a visit from the "Patrouille Suisse", the Swiss equivalent of the Red Arrows. This team of part-time pilots do a similar display to our RAF professionals - but between the mountain peaks! There are also a couple of "Guggenband"



TOP: The famous Hundschopf where the racers take off, Jan 2011.
MIDDLE: Girmschbiel tented village, Jan 2011.
BOTTOM: A Guggenband entertaining the crowd, Jan 2005.

(carnival bands) dressed in garish uniforms and playing raucous music whilst the appearance of a Swiss skier prompts the crowd to cheering, ringing cow bells and flag waving. It all adds to the atmosphere, as does a commentary, sometimes in English, and the large screens showing the television coverage. The race starts at 12:30 with a few former Swiss Ski racers acting as "course




TOP:
Crowd on Girmschbiel
below Wengernalp
Station, Jan 2011.

MIDDLE:
Television outside
broadcast vehicles on
Wengernalp Station,
Jan 2005.

LEFT:
Ski Stadium situated
at Inner Wengen,
Jan 2011.

RIGHT:
Guggenband
Musicians, Jan 2005.

setters" a few minutes before. The seeded skiers start at two minute intervals with pauses after every few skiers for television advertising breaks during course checks, although the entire run does not have television coverage. Trains full of spectators are still arriving at Wengernalp after 13:00, whereas many spectators start to leave after the first 30 or so skiers have raced, as the result should be known following the seeded skier's runs. Downhill queues now form at the station, although less than for the uphill journey as some will ski down. Those in the know travel up to Kleine Scheidegg and then catch an empty train down before it rapidly fills beyond capacity at Wengernalp.

The scene back in Wengen is incredible. The thousands who witnessed the finish now queue in lines fifteen-wide, stretching all the way into the village, for the trains to Lauterbrunnen. It takes hours to move all these people and again many choose to walk down. Meanwhile, the prize-giving takes place on the Dorfli stage and then it is time for more drinking and partying. Where many people sleep is anyone's guess, but they will be ready for Sunday's slalom race and another taxing, although less manic, day for the WAB. The following week the entire infrastructure is re-loaded back onto the railway to return to the valley. The Wengernalpbahn must cope with this situation three times a year; January for the Lauberhorn weekend, April for the Snowpenair pop concert at Kleine Scheidegg and September for the Jungfrau Marathon. 



SwissTip *Some good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.*

Enjoy real ale? With most beer sold in Switzerland coming from formerly independent regional breweries, now controlled by multi-nationals, it is worth looking out for genuinely local brews, where the brewery's products and profits benefit the area's economy. For example in Basel search out Unser Bier, who offer a range of beer styles and types all brewed in the City. The brewery is a form of co-operative that has over 4,000 shareholders and targets as its customers "Bewusste Liebhaber" or roughly "The beer lover with a conscience". It pays no dividends, just free beer at its AGM! See www.unser-bier.ch.

SwissTip

Travelling to Zurich from Interlaken, Brig and points south? Then change trains at Thun and not Bern. Both the Basel and Romanshorn (through Zurich) services are timed close to each other, enabling an easy stroll across from one train to the other. Not possible changing at Bern.