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PARIS BY THE BACK DOOR

Bryan Stone



10972 arrives at Les Verrières with the Paris car.

PHOTOS: Bryan Stone taken in 1966

The Lyria services between Switzerland and Paris by TGV are commercially very successful, especially the new Zürich – Basel – Strasbourg – Paris Gare l'Est service, now running six times daily. In 2012 this service will divert to the new TGV route from Mulhouse via Belfort and Dijon, and Paris Gare de Lyon will be reached in less than three hours. Both the SNCF and SBB have more trains on order, with the Swiss having reserved CHF100m for this. Today the TGVs have a rising market share of over 30% of the entire Paris-Swiss market, including private travel, while air travel has lost-out and services are severely reduced.

It is all a far cry from the old line from Paris to Switzerland that ran through Troyes, Langres, and Vesoul to Pontarlier. Once a trunk route of trains, like the Arlberg Express, by 2005 it had the reputation of having the highest deficit of all of SNCF's non-TGV lines. My memories are of countless leisurely days and nights, on business trips to and from the UK in the 1960s riding behind twin Class 67000s, or great Class 72000 diesels. Once, 47 years ago, it was behind a 241P (that's boasting, I suppose), steam-hauling sixteen heavy cars.

One curious throwback to the old days is the daily TGV between Paris and Bern that still runs via Pontarlier crossing into Switzerland at Les Verrières. This runs on what has become a backwater of the SBB, with no local service at all above Travers, but just the TGV and two non-stop Regional Express return services from Neuchâtel to Frasné, connecting there with the Paris – Lausanne (via Vallorbe) TGVs. Even freight traffic is sparse. Depending on the timber industry there is an intermittent Ae6/6-powered goods from Neuchâtel to Pontarlier. The route is a last survival, reflecting old agreements of days gone by when, for example, the SBB on behalf of the Confederation, undertook 11km of 15kV electrification in France as a strategic asset linking Les Verrières to Pontarlier. These heavily wooded areas of the high Jura Massive are very lonely places - not much happens up here any more.

So on March 24th this year there was some excitement when the daily TGV 9287, Paris Lyon – Bern never made it past Pontarlier, when the changeover from SNCF's 25kV to

SBB's 15kV failed to work. Passengers had to transfer in haste to the evening Regional Express from Frasné, a 5-car RBDe 562 unit leaving some 50-minutes later. Next morning Bern needed a train to go back, and ran BLS 420 504 (formerly SBB's Re 4/4II No 11123) and a set of EW III cars to get passengers to Pontarlier. That was unusual enough, for No 504 was the BLS cover at Bern for the Neuchâtel and Luzern services, and certainly not for the Val de Travers. For those with long memories this was less surprising. Those days were romantically described in the late George Behrend's "Railway Holiday in Switzerland" when, in the 1950s, the through Paris Gare de Lyon - Interlaken sleeper train, with its heavyweight blue cars, was taken over in Pontarlier with suitable ceremony by a BLS Re4/4. This had spent the night there with the driver 'lodging', something which even then the SBB did not do, but the BLS did. So a wheel turned full circle, and No 504 slipped down the hill (some of it is at 1 in 40) back to home ground, while the Pontarlier line went back to dream of days long gone.

Footnote.

For the 1974 film "Murder on the Orient Express" the railway scenes of the train stuck in deep snow in the Balkans were essential to Hercule Poirot's explanations. In practice these scenes were filmed on-location near Pontarlier using the now abandoned branch to Gilley, notorious for traversing lonely uplands and its deep snow. One of SNCF's last 'Americans', a 141R, was turned out with the snow plough in some convincing drifts. The scenes are transparent enough to anyone who knows railways, but are very satisfying; and they prove that Pontarlier is one very out-of-the-way district! 

10972 at Pontarlier with the Paris car.

