

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2012)
Heft: 109

Artikel: Winter woes
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854338>

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WINTER WOES

Bryan Stone

It is a curious thing. Old photos of the Rhätische Bahn (RhB) so often show the little 2-6-0Ts and 2-8-0s, or Mallet tanks, battling through huge banks of snow in Klosters, Samedan or Davos yet now such quantities fall rarely. However, when they do as over Christmas 2011 and New Year 2012 they are a serious challenge. There are far more trains, there is electric traction, and there are many more passengers. Sometimes it all stops. A blockage from falling trees; broken catenary; drifting; or a slide are obvious. Sometimes the new is its own problem; automatic doors; electronic points and signal controls; less-than-robust computer systems. Sometimes it is because dangers today can be anticipated with increasing confidence - though never certainty. Today in Davos, a place which I normally avoid for its supreme ugliness (just look around outside Davos Platz station, shudder, and then go back inside), there is on the Weissflühjoch the National Snow and Avalanche centre. This has the task of gathering weather forecasts, reports of snow and its characteristics, and conducting international research. It is the source of warnings by TV weather, on-line, and direct to affected bodies, of which police and railways are top of the list.

This preamble explains much of what happened this winter. After a stable period of six weeks without rain, a complex frontal system brought gales, heavy rain, and heavier snow in a short period around Christmas. Such weather conditions are not only unmanageable, but also very dangerous, as the snow is not secure or bonded. A minor disturbance, such as one of the many skiers who ignore all warnings and don't always survive to talk about it, sets it sliding. The warnings stopped trains in a number of areas; on the MOB; on the MGB above Andermatt (where despite all precautions a train was swept away on the Oberalp pass the other winter); on the JB-BOB; and at Goppenstein on the BLS. A slide above Lungern closed the Zentralbahn's Brünig line. This was mostly all cleared up quickly, though Andermatt was cut-off for a day or two. In this period a friend made a long planned trip to Tirano over the Bernina. He enjoyed it hugely but admitted that 'there was a lot of snow'. Contrastingly, below Brusio it became almost Mediterranean.

Then, between Christmas and New Year, came the storm Andreas. Its prodigious snowfall has broken ten-year records, from the Oberland to Graubünden and it was difficult to keep up to date with the problems it brought. The Goms (Reckingen, Oberwald) was closed for a week with snow over 2m deep in the streets. The MGB above Andermatt, and down to Göschenen, was closed yet again. The RhB above Bergün was closed and most unusually St Moritz was cut-off, until the rail line down the Engadine was made safe. Just after reopening above Bergün, a tree fell and destroyed the catenary near Stuls, so it stopped again. On the 3rd January I travelled over the MOB, then a day later it closed again in the gorge below Château d'Oex. The Lötschental above Goppenstein remained in hibernation following earlier

problems, whilst the BLS, relatively clear, improvised a car shuttle between Kandersteg and Brig, avoiding Goppenstein yard, but this could only operate every two hours. The SBB operated a "Glacier Express" from Chur via Zürich and Bern to Visp, which for the many stranded tourists was courageous, but it missed the point as glaciers left Zürich some 11,000 years ago! For a time the only way out of the Engadine by road was the RhB Vereina tunnel auto-shuttle between Sagliains and Klosters. A four-hour wait was the consequence, not some thing one would normally choose to do at Sagláins where entertainment is minimal, but this was with every wagon pressed into service and trains up to the line limit. Delays to the scheduled passenger trains were inevitable, but at least they ran too. In the middle of things, the Gotthard was closed for a couple of hours with fallen trees brought down by the weight of the wet snow between Gurtellen and Göschenen. One fell on a passenger train which caused injuries, but compared to years gone-by they got away lightly. The old 'Rotary' plough from the line is in the VHS in Luzern! Freight across the Alps was mercifully seasonally quiet during the holiday week.

I will not indulge in Schadenfreude (gloating) about the position on the roads, but if you drive into the Alps over Christmas/New Year you must be ready for winter, only, it hasn't happened so much recently and people were unprepared. As I write I have open beside me pages 36 and 37 of *Aus den Anfängen der Rhätischen Bahn* published by AS Verlag in 1999. It notes that on 29th April 1917 near Davos Wolfgang, the Drussetscha Avalanche came down as a steam hauled evening passenger train from Landquart was passing. The footplate crew heard the noise, and put on steam, but the last coach was caught and overturned. The broken vacuum brake pipe stopped the train at once, so that it was completely engulfed by the avalanche. Ten passengers and RhB employees died, many were injured. An irony at this distance was that digging through the night was helped by interned Germans in quarters in Wolfgang. Today, their countrymen form one of the biggest contingents of enthusiastic visitors often forgetting the risks.

Global warming is a factor. The long hard winters of long ago do not occur; the snow and 0° level are rising steadily, but the risks remain. This is partly because today there are more falls of heavy wet snow, at just around or below freezing point, which bring down trees and slide all too easily, whilst snow which in earlier years lay frozen on a tundra mountainside might now be on a slippery muddy slope ready to slip, bringing down trees and rocks too. Many resorts are seriously concerned; one is Pontresina, which has invested heavily to protect itself. Railways keep on improving, and warning is always better than rescue. SRS members should not be afraid of visiting the Alps in winter by train. It's breathtakingly beautiful, and the observant will learn a lot. Just don't expect that the impossible can always be achieved. Swiss railways take their winters, and their warnings, seriously. 