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PARLIAMENTARY TRAINS

s'Murmeli



One of the discrete special saloons parked-up in the sidings awaiting duty. The box on the roof is the radio communication aerial for the Swiss equivalent of the U.S. President's 'Red Telephone'.


PHOTO: by the author

These are something very Swiss which *Swiss Express* readers may not know about. In 19th C. Britain I understand that a Parliamentary Train was an all-stations slow train, often operated in the early hours, and grudgingly run to comply with your 'Railways Act' of 1844. This required a daily train on every public line, to serve all stations and carry 3rd class passengers at fares not exceeding an old-penny-per-mile. Apparently there is a memorable reference to these in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera 'The Mikado'.

In Switzerland our Parliamentary Trains are quite the opposite - they are private, luxurious, and a great privilege. Two ran in early December 2011 after the first session of Parliament when the two Houses elect their session Presidents following the four-yearly Parliamentary elections held earlier in the autumn. These individuals were 'Nationalrat' (MP) Walter, the new Chairman of the lower house, who had his special train from Bern to Frauenfeld, in Canton Thurgau, and 'Ständerat' (Senator) Altherr the new chairman of the

smaller upper house. This trip home to Appenzell meant two specials, one from Bern to St Gallen, and another on the Appenzeller Bahn to Trogen.

I rightly imagine that the day is one great party, usually in one of the private saloon cars, starting in Bern, and ending up with civic receptions, bands, folklore, speeches and 'Apéro' in the classic style. Later in the month there will be more trains, one each for the seven Federal Councillors (the Cabinet) after their election has taken place. Those newly elected, including the President for next year (individuals are elected by the Parliament and only serve one term), will also 'come home' to their cantons in best railway style.

In addition, all 246 members of the Swiss Parliament have, while they are in office, a 1st. Class 'General Abonnement' pass for the national network, and it is quite usual for the electors to be able to greet their MP on a morning train to Bern, or coming home on a Friday night. However, nowadays they are often not relaxing in the restaurant car but are bent over a laptop catching up with their work. 

Swiss Tip

When in Bern why not get taken for a ride? The Standseilbahn Marzili is in the heart of the city, at the west end of the Federal Government building and only 10 minutes walk from Bern HB. It is not the steepest, not the highest, not the fastest, but it is the shortest Swiss funicular. Just 105m long, it takes you 32m down to the road by the Aare in the Marzili district. It runs all day on demand, journey time 1 minute, cost is minimal, and you will meet real Berner going about their affairs. In summer the big riverside swimming pool awaits near the bottom. This is free, and with a good café. The Marzilibahn was built in 1885 and was at first sewage-water-driven: filling one car's tank at the top and emptying the other at the bottom gave a 'balance of power'. There's still one in Fribourg that works like this. Today's Marzili is electrically driven and is clean, modern, delightful. 