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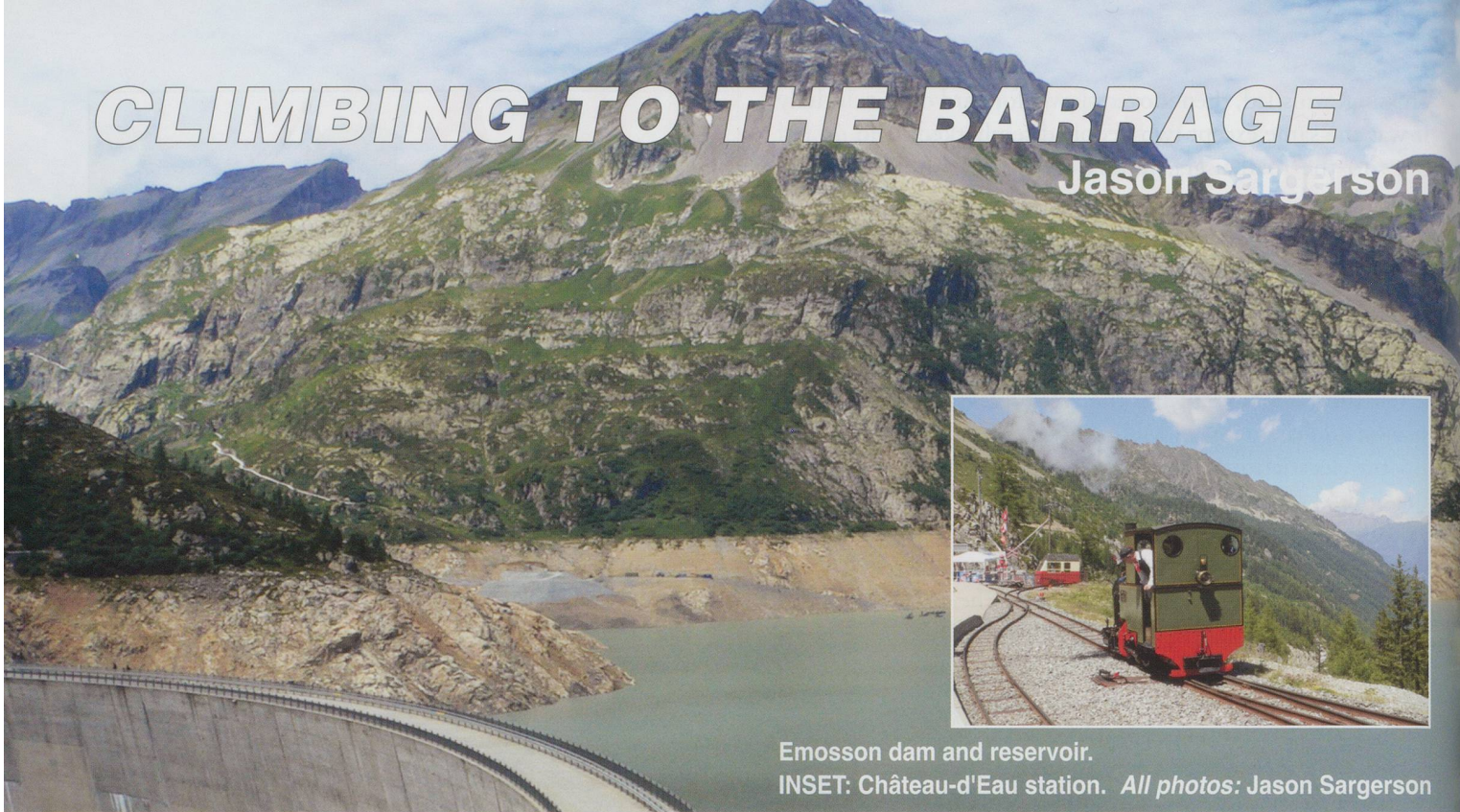
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CLIMBING TO THE BARRAGE

Jason Sargerson




Emosson dam and reservoir.

INSET: Château-d'Eau station. All photos: Jason Sargerson

The Emosson-Barrage, hard on the French border in Canton Valais, is reached by a unique transport arrangement run by the Parc d'Attractions du Châtelard between May and October. The trip is in three stages, initially by funicular, then by train on a 600mm line, finally by mini-funicular. The journey starts at Le Chatelard VS station (1126m) on the Martigny to Chamonix (TMR-mc) metre-gauge line. This request stop is reached after a 40 minute journey from Martigny on the Mont Blanc Express. The funicular is well signposted and lies behind the adjacent hydro-electric plant. I arrived at lunch time when there is a longer wait between trips. A SwissTip here is to go after 2pm as it is most likely to be warmer, and the sun illuminates Mont Blanc.

The funicular was built between 1919 and 1921. With a maximum gradient of 87% it holds the world record for the steepest two-car line. A ballast wagon on the upper part of the line compensates for the differences in cable weight and gantries guide the traction cable round bends, depressions and through tunnels. I was hoping to sit down and enjoy the views but the car does not have seats so expect to stand for the 12 minute journey. The funicular has one potential stop at the village of Gietroz, otherwise the ascent is continuous to the top station at Château d'Eau at 1821m. Although it can be quite warm in the valley, up here it is likely to be much cooler so take some warm clothes. There is a short walk to the Scenic Train that takes 11 minutes on its trip. The carriages are open air, closed on the valley side and offer a welcome seat and opportunity to take photographs. I went on one of the two weekends a year when Decauville steam engines, rather than diesels, haul the trains. These are usually the first weekend in July and one other occasion. The 1.7km long, 600mm-gauge line, runs along a mountain shelf through woods and tunnels with good views towards Mont Blanc on the left. It utilises the alignment of the former 750mm-gauge line that was used to build the barrage.

The barrage comes into sight just before the end station. Here there is a small 10-person cabin known as the Minifunic that climbs another 143m at 72% to the top of the barrage. A tip here is to take some photos through the windows of the Minifunic – they are tinted blue so reducing the glare of light from the mountains. The views at the top across to France are spectacular on a good day. However, don't expect to see the brochure view of the mountains reflected in the lake – location of this is several kms away up the lake - and when it is full! There are walks at the summit to see Dinosaur footprints; you can walk across the barrage and visit a restaurant and gift shop. The barrage, completed in 1975, took six years to build and impounds 227m cubic metres of water - the second largest in Switzerland. There is no reduction with the Swiss Pass for the CHF52 cost of this trip; however an alternative route is the bus from Finhaut station, also on the TMR-mc, that is run from mid-June to mid-September by TMR for the Electricité d'Emosson SA on which the Swiss Pass is valid. 

Château-d'Eau station.

