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SCOUTING AND THE LÖTSCHBERG

Phil Emond



For our annual Swiss visit in 2011 we decided to spend the first week in Kandersteg staying in The Kandersteg International Scout Centre (KISC) which can be seen on the left when travelling north just about a mile after leaving the Lötschberg Tunnel. Outside of Switzerland not too many people know of the KISC which has a very interesting history with railway connections. When the tunnel was being built between 1906 to 1913 over 200 buildings were put up outside Kandersteg to accommodate the workforce of over 3000, which was 97% Italian. After the opening of the tunnel in 1913 most of the buildings were demolished except for a few on the site now occupied by the KISC.

Scouting had started in 1907 at Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour in Dorset, UK, and it took off at a very fast rate spreading to most parts of the World within a few years. Switzerland was no exception with Robert Baden-Powell, the Association founder, having a personal friend in Walther von Bonstetten who, in the early 1920s, was asked to find a location suitable for outdoor life and various other activities, including of course mountaineering. One of the remaining buildings by the Lötschberg tunnel was just what von Bonstetten needed. "The Chalet", as it is now called, had remained when the other building were demolished, although by then it had been empty for some 8 years and was in a very bad state of repair. Baden-Powell visited it in 1922, liked the location very much, and asked for it to be obtained as an International Centre for Scouting, where over 200 Scouts could be accommodated. Switzerland was suffering economic hardship in the post-WW1 period, so it took until 1924 before enough money was raised to buy and rebuild it. This building still exists on the south end of the 1995 KISC main building extension. Parts of the interior are still as the 1920s refurbishment and house three floors of various sized dormitories and the main centre shop. This is in part, what

MAIN PHOTO: Passengers for a "Lötschberger" await its arrival at Kandersteg station. INSET: The Chalet is the first large one on left.

Photos: Phil Emond

was until very recently a very large room that may have been the dining room for the construction workers. Sadly it was in this room that the Chief Engineer for the tunnel hung himself, just 3 days before the breakthrough as he was convinced that he had mis-calculated and the two bores would not meet. In practice they were just centimetres out.

At the KISC we were staying in a very comfortable en-suite room in a new building which was only opened in 2010, and is located between the River Kander and the railway. It was towards the end of our stay that we found out that this too had a Lötschberg connection. It had been a railway contractor's building, originally used on the construction site at the north end of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel at Mitholz, then taken down and rebuilt at the KISC as 'Kander Lodge'. Only a few metres separate this building from the railway boundary fence and at this location is the KISC's very own set-down point on the north-bound line for large groups of over 300 Scouts to detrain with their kit. The time allowance for this is 6-mins, although the facility is now very rarely used, as it requires special loco-hauled trains of old-style stock as the new modern EMUs are not suitable. Southbound trains would cross over to use the same location when required. Railway infrastructure is more integrated into Swiss life than perhaps we know. 