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BY KROK TO THE BELLE ÉPOQUE

Christopher Purdie



SBB Historic Ce 6/8 III
No 14305 and "Belle Époque"
special at Kandersteg.

Inset: A party of "mountain guides" and "skiers" pause outside the Hotel Victoria, Kandersteg. Both photos: Chris Purdie on 22 January 2012

In the last week of January 2012, the village of Kandersteg in the Bernese Oberland hosted its third annual 'Belle Époque week', an enterprising initiative between Kandersteg Tourismus and local businesses to promote winter tourism by staging a nostalgic celebration of the golden age of alpine winter tourism.

For a week, Kandersteg turns the clock back to the 1900s and offers visitors a diverse range of cultural and sporting attractions. These include: open-air ice skating; ice hockey; curling; Telemark (cross-country) skiing; a grand ball; concerts, and even a lecture on the history of the corset! Although by no means mandatory many visitors, whose ranks are swelled by living history fans, embrace the theme enthusiastically by dressing in some remarkably authentic vintage costumes, with the event having established something of a cult following. To coincide with the event's opening ceremony on Sunday 22 January 2012, SBB Historic ran a 'Belle Époque' special train from Bern to Kandersteg, featuring 'Krokodile' Ce6/8 III No.14305 and a rake of preserved vehicles from the 'Schnellzug 1930' collection. From Bern the special was routed via Belp and the Gürbetal line with a scheduled short service stop at Uetendorf for a careful inspection of axle boxes, coupling rods and some top-up lubrication by the locomotive crew. A 15 minute stop at Thun allowed passengers the chance to photograph the ensemble against a contrasting backdrop of modern BLS multiple units. The lightly loaded Crocodile clanked up the Kander Valley in fine style, the glazed vestibule of carriage AB4 2856 at the front of the train providing a novel viewpoint for observing the familiar landmarks of the north ramp of the Lötschberg line, as well as the remarkable side-play of the nearest of the locomotive's distinctive articulated 'snouts'.

Arrival at Kandersteg was welcomed by a Swiss TV crew, a brass band and a sea of people dressed in all manner of vintage costumes. Somewhere in the crowd I'm sure I caught a glimpse of Sherlock Holmes! Those passengers who had not raided the dressing-up box for the occasion waited for a minute or two to allow the more suitably attired to descend onto the platform first for the benefit of the awaiting media and photographers. Whilst the gathering moved

down the steps to the station forecourt for the official opening ceremony of the 'Belle

Époque week', the die-hard railway enthusiasts amongst us remained on the platforms to film and photograph the No. 14305 run round its train and shunt the empty stock into Platform 3. There the loco and its train waited quietly for the remainder of the afternoon, although never neglected as a steady trickle of curious visitors came to investigate the train, greeted by the diligent members of the SBB Historic team who set up a mobile shop on board and later served afternoon tea to all-comers in the Speisewagen. There was plenty of time to explore a snowy Kandersteg sampling the highlights of the first of the week's special programme of events. These included a spectacular promenade around the village of visitors dressed in historic costume, a thrilling toboggan race and, for the more genteel, a sedate tea dance at the Hotel Victoria.

Darkness was descending before our departure, although the vestibule of carriage AB4 2856 - now at the rear of the train - offered a memorable view of the silhouetted mountains south of Kandersteg as the train pulled away. Soon there was little to see from the carriage windows and a visit to the Speisewagen, still doing a brisk trade in drinks and homemade cakes, provided a comfortable and convivial base for the remainder of the return journey, again via the Gürbetal. The journey was punctuated this time by a service stop at Thun. The members of the SBB Historic team who staffed the train throughout the day deserve special mention for their cheerfulness and enthusiasm. They fully entered into the spirit of the event by attiring themselves in period SBB uniforms which although, like the 'Krokodile' and the carriages, may not have exactly matched the 'Belle Époque' timeframe, nevertheless helped to create a wonderfully nostalgic atmosphere on board. SBB Historic operates a number of special trains every year using their fleet of historic steam and electric locomotives and rolling stock - see www.sbbhistoric.ch. For details of the 2013 'Belle Époque' week contact Kandersteg Tourismus on www.kandersteg.ch. 

