

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2012)
Heft: 111

Artikel: At the sign of the yellow diamond : Bryan Stone explains the background to these ubiquitous symbols
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854374>

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AT THE SIGN OF THE YELLOW DIAMOND



Bryan Stone explains the background to these ubiquitous symbols

Walkers at Kemmeribodenbad follow the yellow diamond.

All Photos: Bryan Stone

Many members of the SRS combine their love of Swiss railways with an equal passion for walking in the Swiss countryside where the yellow diamonds, arrows and signs indicating walking routes to a myriad of destinations appear at every turn. These signs are those of the Schweizer Wanderwege/Suisse Rando, (or SAW), a nationwide association formed in 1934, organised in Cantons, and which takes care of the innumerable public footpaths throughout the country. The walking/hiking trails signed by the SAW are free and open to everyone, and they extend from Genève to the Bodensee, and from Basel to Scuol. The SAW says that Switzerland has 62,000 km of Wanderwege/chemin pedestre, of which some 23,000 km are the more difficult Berg (mountain) -ways. These have red and white diamonds and markers, while 39,000 km are the more everyday routes with their yellow diamonds and markers. One third of the Swiss population aged between 15 and 74 claims to be a 'Wanderer' whilst a survey suggests that they each walk about 600m km/year. So you're in good company.


The signing system is standard and simple. Key points, many at stations, are marked by signposts with a white plate giving the place-name and altitude. The pointers in yellow tell you where the paths go (usually places, geographical features, stations, etc.) and the numbers indicate the walking time, without rests, in hours (heures, Stunden) and minutes. The times used to be worked out on the basis of covering 3km horizontally, or 300m vertically in 1 hr, but they are usually a compromise as most routes are mixed. These days the calculations are apparently done by a computer programme, basically to the same rules - but the computer hasn't walked it! Indications should be taken literally. Even if you think it's pointing slightly off beam, still do what it says, and look for the trodden path, or a yellow diamond on a post, or tree, or wall. These are markers to confirm that you are on course.

You may see a yellow painted arrow, often to show where the path turns aside, as from a field path to a forest track. Just occasionally you may see a pointer with 'Wanderweg' or 'chemin pedestre' on two arrows confirming you are right on course. The network is kept and maintained by the Cantonal Associations whose members help to finance the work, very necessary because even a pointer sign with a destination costs about CHF150 without site costs as erecting the signs is done by volunteers. There are regional leaders who know the ground and who spot changes such as: landslides; fallen trees; building works; etc. They attempt to guide walkers on to un-surfaced paths away from roads and traffic, and they look for trouble, like potential conflict situations with cyclists or equestrians.

Cantons Bern and Graubünden have the lion's share of the network, Bern with 10,100km and Graubünden with 10,340km. The Graubünden association spends CHF1m/year on upkeep. While Bern has 2,400 km of Berg-ways (mostly in the Bernese Oberland) Graubünden has 9,300km of these. The difference is important as a Berg-way is not always an obvious path; it can be steep, narrow or exposed; and streams may be forded. Sometimes it's a 2,000 year old historic pass or mule-track over the mountains. Users of these should be fit, have a good head for heights, no dizziness, and have proper equipment, especially boots, waterproofs and maps. They should have some knowledge of mountain lore and weather. With good sense it's a great day out, but there are accidents every year, usually to people who over-estimated their ability, and under-estimated the challenge. There is no litigation - you are up on the route at your own risk. Weather can change quickly, and thunderstorms are common on summer afternoons. A 100m-drop beside a path is not unusual. There may be a handrail or rope, but it may have disappeared last winter. The rewards,

however, can be breathtaking.

The yellow trails are not so demanding, although few Wanderwege/chemin pedestre will suffer fools lightly. You still should have boots (or good walking shoes); a rucksack with some basic refreshments; waterproofs; and a good map. The Swiss Topographical 1:25,000 series is excellent, and there are also 1:50,000 or 1:60,000 'Hiking Maps' produced by the SAW, or the Cantons, showing the trails. These are on sale at good bookshops and often at stations in holiday regions, along with some very entertaining and informative 'Wanderbücher' / 'Guides Pedestres' (Hiking Guides) packed with local knowledge, including gradient profiles of the routes. Local tourist offices will also help and advise.

Watch out too for a recent addition. The European-wide organisation 'Via Storica' (historic ways) is marking, signposting, and making accessible as Wanderwege/chemin pedestre, some of the oldest historic routes away from today's highways. On the Grimsel, the Simplon, the Susten the old tracks are being cleared. The St Jacob pilgrimage ways; the salt routes; Celtic and Roman roads, often up in the hills and forests, are also being revisited. Local enquiry will tell you if there is one near your holiday centre and there are good modern guides available. 



Top: A typical 'Wanderweg' sign post. Left: A yellow diamond on a wayside tree. Ettingen Wanderweg. Right: 'Wanderweg' sign at Goppenstein Bhf. Note the white plate with the location and altitude.

SwissTip Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.

Interested in technical operating procedures? If you know about signalling and train working you will be aware of the brake tests that are obligatory whenever the train is newly composed. Normally you can't always see what happens, but at Luzern, Meiringen and Interlaken Ost you can. There, the conductor makes the test when engines are changed, with his long yellow rod with which he prods the brake blocks to test the application and release by the driver. The explanation is that these trains are among the last with block brakes, working on the wheel treads, which must be tested in this way. All the disk-braked stock is tested less visibly. Catch it while you can, for new Zentralbahn Railcar trains will mean its disappearance. Someone on the platform at Luzern seeing this operation was heard to say that they had seen the 'wheel tappers' doing their rounds! 