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Autor: Evans, Mark
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THE PERILS OF ONLINE PLANNING

Mark Evans suggests that you should not always believe what the Internet tells you!

Gathering gloom of a November afternoon, 01/11/2012.

All photos: Mark Evans

The Internet has made life easier in so many ways. Booking hotels, flights, etc. can be done online, simply and with confidence – I still remember the first such booking I made in 1995 (for a rental car at Boston Airport) and being slightly surprised that it worked! Since then I have booked online extensively for my travel needs throughout Europe and the US with few failures. There is always that slight anticipation at a ticket machine far from home when entering the booking reference. Usually the ticket is produced and the adventure of the journey itself begins, assuming you have been able to research the timings! I've written previously in *Swiss Express* about travelling independently, eschewing the package trip to experience a series of linked journeys. Doing this means you can take advantage of discounts, even if some sectors may need to be booked at full fare to make sure you get the train you really want to use. So with a few days to spare in early November the plan was to fly from Heathrow to Milano - just £15 for a one-way flight with BA Avios points - returning from Paris using Eurostar points for a free trip. My itinerary therefore had to be Milano - Tirano - Chur - Zurich - Paris, with overnight stays in Milano, Chur and Paris (booked online of course!). Now for the research.

I wanted to book the Bernina Express first as it was to be the highlight of the trip. In winter this Alp Grim? Bernina Express at Alp Grum, 01/11/2012.

departs from Tirano at 14.33. After a couple of false starts I found that the RhB's website gave seat maps for the train, allowing you to choose your exact seat and to book a print-at-home ticket (although the travel ticket itself was issued by SBB for an entirely RhB journey). My out-of-date edition of Cook's European Rail Timetable (the 'Cookbook') showed a train from Milano Centrale at 10.20, arriving at Tirano at 12.50 – perfect timing for the connection and a spot of lunch. Given that this was a local train, I thought I ought to cross-check that its timings hadn't changed. This was



where the fun started... I used the DB website. This is usually very accurate and in theory includes local trains across Europe. However, searching for Milano Centrale to Tirano departing after 10.00 specifying local trains only, gave the following result:

Milano Centrale - Dep.11.25: *Milano Lambrate* - Arr.11.31:
Transfer - 85 min: *Milano Greco Pirelli* - Dep.1315:

Chiasso - Arr.1414: *Chiasso* - Dep. 14.33:

Bellinzona - Arr.15.30:

Walk to bus station: *Bellinzona Bus Station* - Dep.15.40
(Reservation obligatory):

Thusis - Arr.17.25: Walk to station: *Thusis* - Dep.17.30:

Samedan Arr.18.47: *Samedan* - Dep.18.49:

Pontresina - Arr.1856: *Pontresina* - Dep.19.04:

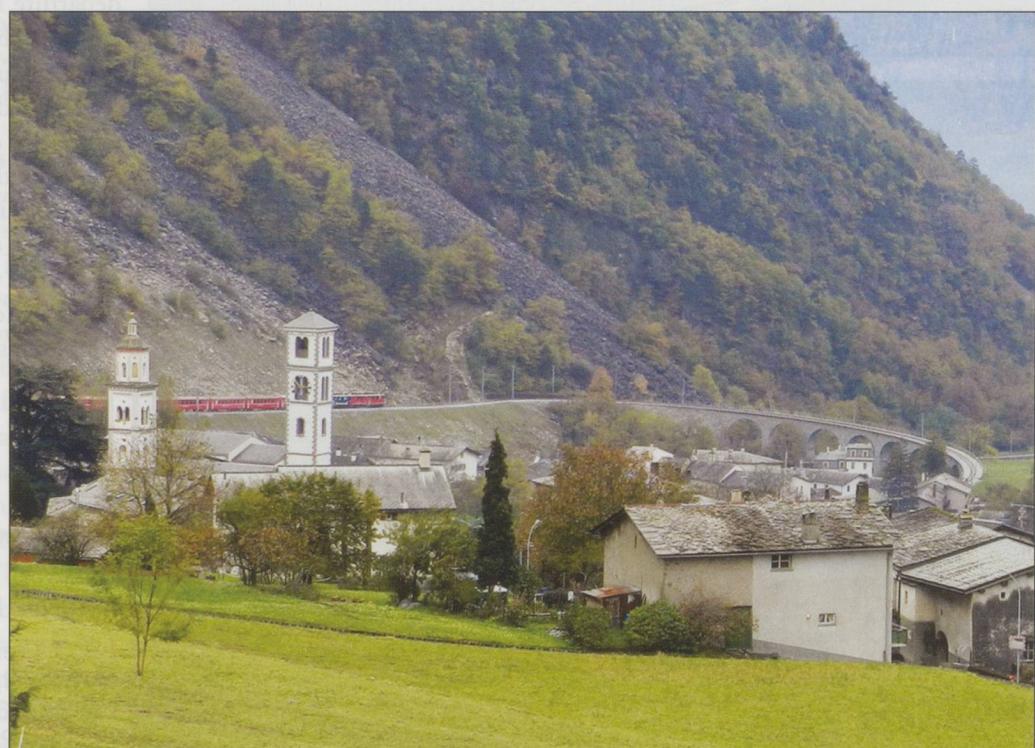
Poschiavo - Arr. 20.29: Transfer to bus:

Poschiavo - Dep. 20.32: *Tirano* - Arr. 21.00.

Next I did ascertain that if I left Milano Centrale at 09.20 and changed at Lambrate I could get to Tirano at 1912hrs... surely that could not be right? Next stop - Trenitalia's website. As the national rail operator it must list all the trains from Milano Centrale – wrong! Entering Milano Centrale to Tirano (both stations from drop-down menus, so they do exist in the system), gave a result of 'No travel solution found'. However, Mark Smith's excellent 'Man in Seat 61' website provided links to the Trenord site - the actual operator of the local services north from Milano. This confirmed the existence of the 10.20 train, and gave the fare €12.15, not bad for 163km. Amusingly the Trenord website suggested that there was a 09.20 train for my chosen date of travel (Thursday) although the 'Cookbook' listed this train as running on Sundays and Holidays only. Only on emerging from the hotel on the morning of 1st November, and finding the city strangely quiet, did I realise that it was All Saints Day, a holiday in Italy so the 09.20 did run - and Trenord was right!

What of the trip itself? It was raining in Milano but the morning trip on the elusive 10.20 ex Centrale was a delightful surprise. Lakes, mountains and vineyards, with snow at surprisingly low levels. Arrival in Tirano revealed an Allegra in the RhB station, but sustenance was required so a pizza and some vino rosso were essential. Returning to the station suitably replete the familiar panorama cars were in platform 3. My seat was in Car 6, one coach up from the buffer stops, but I thought I would walk up to see which Allegra was on the front. Surprise, surprise - two

Abe 4/4s! It may have been November but the prospect of window hanging until frost got at the extremities was too good to miss. After a while the conductor appeared, obviously somewhat puzzled as to why someone was hanging out of the window in the first coach when warm panorama cars were trailing behind. In German he explained that this coach did not go to Chur (the destination on my printed-at-home ticket), to which I managed to convey that I understood and would change at Pontresina. Satisfied that I wasn't (entirely) mad he left me to enjoy the fresh air. At Alp Grum a 15 minute stop was announced. Wet snow lay on the tracks and swirling mist added to the atmosphere. However, the appeal of the Bernina is the view and to see nothing would be disappointing. The two lakes (Lago Bianco and Lej Nair) could hardly be seen but then, miraculously, the mist lifted and the run down to Pontresina was wonderful in the



TOP: Abe 4/4 56 heading the Bernina Express at Tirano, 01/11/2012.

RIGHT: A southbound train on the Brusio spiral.



gathering twilight. The days are short in November, but this just adds to the appeal of the journey. Conductors had changed at Alp Grum and the English-speaking replacement came to check that I really did understand that I should change at Pontresina. His helpful suggestion was that I should alight and cross to platform 1, rather than try and walk back to the rear of the train on arrival. Seeing how smartly the rear coaches were detached and shunted across, this was good advice. Tacked onto the back of the push-pull set to Scuol-Tarasp, the trip to Samedan and subsequent shunting onto the back of the St Moritz to Chur service was as impressive an operation as ever.

The short day meant that the Albula line was traversed in the dark, but the Baby Crocodile could be seen adjacent to the new museum at Bergun, retrieved from its exile down the road. A very pleasant overnight stay in Chur was followed by an IC to Zurich with time for a wander around the city in the sunshine before catching the TGV to Paris. This had been booked via Rail Europe with 1st class little more than 2nd for the chosen train. An almost-new double deck unit was waiting in one of the high numbered platforms, posed alongside a Swiss Travel Service poster headed in English, duly captured on 'film'. The promise was of an at seat meal service – don't get too excited though, on the 13.34 from Zurich the 'meal' was a sandwich and a soft drink served after departure from Mulhouse at 14.55. I can confirm that it is possible to get a good meal in Paris, however...

What did I learn from all this? That I still really enjoy travelling on Swiss trains and that the whole process of enquiring and booking in advance has got much easier. Just don't get discouraged if you can't find what you're looking for first time on the Internet - it doesn't mean that it isn't accessible somewhere! 

TOP: Alternative "railway" transport at Tirano

MIDDLE: Italian stock at Tirano

LEFT: French TGV in Switzerland with an English slogan on the travel poster behind! 1334 Zurich – Paris waits at Zurich, 02/11/2012.