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RhB MOTOR COACH MISSION

Don Gatehouse recounts an RhB Berninabahn visit in 2009



RhB Berninabahn ABe4/4ⁱⁱ railcars No. 48 & 45 were the welcomed traction provided for the Tirano to Pontresina leg of Davos bound Bernina Express 960 recorded at Brusio.

All Photos: Don Gatehouse

With the knowledge that the first of the new dual-voltage RhB Allegra units would be arriving later that year, part of our June 2009 Swiss holiday included a brief visit to the southern section of the Berninabahn. As well as enjoying a few days in a very scenic and pleasant area of Graubünden, basing ourselves at Le Prese would enable me to hopefully seek out and photograph examples of the older ABe4/4' and ABe 4/4" motor coaches. Commencing with a few nights based in Luzern's Old Town we were able to enjoy a couple of relaxing cruises on the lake, although low cloud thwarted our plans to travel up the Rigi and Pilatus. A move to Interlaken enabled us, amongst other things, to cruise on Lakes Thun and Brienz and to enjoy the spectacular views from a very clear Niesen summit. For our final three nights we completed the rail journey from Interlaken to Le Prese via Zurich and Chur. Having visited Graubünden several times during the winter months, it was quite a contrast to travel through the Albula Valley, the Upper Engadine and over the Bernina enjoying the colours of mid-summer.

The two days that followed produced a complete contrast in terms of weather conditions, with Friday starting dull and overcast, so we headed south to Tirano after breakfast. A comfortable walk from the RhB terminus station enabled me to be in position for the required image, using the well known Tirano landmark of the Shrine of Madonna as an architectural feature.

Motor coaches Nos.43 and 46 with a single coach in tow provided the RhB component and I was off the mark with regard to the ABe 4/4" units on my list. The conditions did not improve as the day progressed and during the afternoon back at Le Prese, I took up position in the main street to hopefully capture an image of some typical street running. My reward was provided by ABe 4/4" pairing Nos.42 and 41 heading north. A later visit to Brusio did produce a sighting of ABe 4/4" No.44 but this was trailing behind Gem 4/4 No.802, which was suitably recorded, but at least I had established where the 'odd one' was being used. So, my first day ended with two pairs in the bag and two pairs, plus No.44, to go.

ABe4/4' motor coaches Nos. 30 and 34 pause at Le Prese en route south from Poschiavo to Tirano on a bright Sunday morning in June 2009.



Saturday was a total contrast with clear blue sky and full sun, so we took an early morning trip north to Poschiavo to tour the centre of this pretty little town before the sun took a firm hold. Back at the station, ABe 4/4' No 35 was parked adjacent to the platform, so it was suitably recorded on camera. I had previously seen and photographed Nos 31 and 32 on earlier visits, so to complete the ABe 4/4' 'red ones' was a bonus.

The Berninabahn was really busy and I decided to make a visit to Li Curt and later Brusio where Nos. 49 and 47 and Nos. 48 and 45 respectively were recorded with Bernina Express sets in tow. Once again, my only sighting of No. 44 during the day was trailing No. 802, so I remained one short of my full set of ABe 4/4" motor coaches. At Li Curt, I was also somewhat caught out when the yellow-liveried ABe 4/4' pair Nos 30 and 34 turned up on a northbound service train. With even the 'yellow pair' in service it was clear that virtually all the available Berninabahn motive power was in operation.

Sunday dawned and our homeward journey via Chur and Zurich was to be made. At breakfast, I could hear rail activity outside and had my camera at the ready. Two pairs of motor coaches had been worked south to collect stock at Tirano and it was not too long before I heard the sound of further activity. A quick climb of the main stairs and I was standing at an open first floor window. I could not believe my eyes when Nos 30 and 34 presented themselves at Le Prese station halt beneath the window. In the can and sorted, as they say! That left me just No 44 to complete the required set, but how and when, you may ask? At the appointed hour, we crossed the road from our hotel, boarded our train to Pontresina and settled in for our ride over the Bernina. At Poschiavo, we were due to pass a southbound working from St. Moritz and with the compartment window down, I peered up towards Privilasco. Dropping down the gradient I could see an ABe 4/4" leading a Gem 4/4 and a set of coaches. Could it be? The camera was primed and sure enough it rolled No. 44 leading No. 802; they had obviously been swapped around from my previous sightings, so my outstanding ABe 4/4" was duly recorded. My holiday mission was accomplished in the nick of time. I had my set of required images and we headed home in good time. Another splendid Swiss holiday with plenty to enjoy and a few bonus images along the way. Perfect!

RhB Berninabahn ABe 4/4" motor coach 44 had Gem 4/4 802 for company when it was recorded arriving at Poschiavo with R1617, the 08:45 St. Moritz to Tirano.



ABe4/4' No.35 was stabled at Poschiavo between duties on infrastructure trains.

My fears that 2009 would be the final full year in service for a number of the ABe4/4' and 4/4" motor coaches were not ill-founded. In the autumn of that year the first of the new 'Allegra' ABe 8/12 3-car units arrived from Stadler. As 2010 progressed more of the new units were delivered and although there were some initial 'teething' problems, as at the October diagram change, the new 'Allegras', supported by the ABe 4/4" motor coaches Nos. 51-56 were set to complete their take-over of the full range of Berninabahn passenger services. The withdrawal of the ABe 4/4" units Nos. 41-46 enabled the RhB to transfer Nos. 46-49 to the infrastructure sector, with the remaining early versions 41-45 going for scrap. That said, a pair of '40s' has been reported working on front line passenger duties on rare occasions since the end of 2010. The former infrastructure motor coaches Nos. 31 and 32 had also gone for scrap with No. 35 heading west into preservation on the Blonay-Chamby line. As for Nos. 30 and 34, they were to be used for special workings only, so any opportunity of seeing them again in regular service would be even more limited than previously. The end of an era, indeed. 

