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Return to an old stamping ground

Alan Jackson



The view of a road crossing between Montreux and Zweisimmen from the front of the 'Golden Pass Panoramic' train.

Photos: Alan Jackson

My affair with Swiss railways began at the age of thirteen, on a cycle tour with my father. Back in 1959 the best route to Switzerland with bicycles was to take the boat train to Paris Gare du Nord, a short ride to the Gare de l'Est, and thence by sleeper to Basel. In a little under a fortnight we rode more than 600 miles, nearly all of which seemed to be up hill. As we rode up the Furka pass road I saw for the first time a train of the Furka-Oberalp-Bahn and found myself wishing to be on it instead of looking at it! Father was a 'Victorian', however, and the only mechanical assistance on that tour was the steamer from Luzern to Brunnen.

I had to wait until 1986 to renew my acquaintance with

the wonderful mega train-set that is Switzerland. Almost every year from then until 2001 my wife and I spent our summer holidays there with our two daughters, and from 1989 onwards we usually based ourselves at the Hotel Terrasse-am-See in Vitznau. Next to the Vitznau-Rigi Bahn (VRB) terminus and the boat station, the hotel became a home from home. When the children left home we began to holiday further afield, but in 2012 we decided that the time had come to risk a return to our old haunt; and to do that, as on our early Swiss holidays, entirely by train. We took the journey to Vitznau in stages: Eurostar to Paris, the upper deck of a TGV Lyria to Geneva, and the next available InterRegio to Montreux, where we spent our first two nights at the Hotel Splendid – which has a splendid position facing the lake. We enjoyed a trip up the Rochers de Naye line for a short mountain walk with spectacular views of the mountains and lake; and we had time also for a trip on the lake to and from the Chateau de Chillon. The weather treated us well on that day, and indeed throughout the holiday.

We embarked from Montreux on the most beautiful section of our journey, aboard the GoldenPass Panoramic train to Zweisimmen. Thanks to early booking (five months in advance) we had two seats in the front row of the train, with an excellent view out of the front and sides. For anyone unfamiliar with the route, this

Trains pass at Caux station on the Rochers de Naye line in 2012.



is possible because the driver sits behind and above the front two rows of seats. The journey to Zweisimmen really is fantastic: one railway journey that everyone should do, sitting in these seats! The only minor drawback for photographers, at least on our 09:45 departure on a sunny day, was internal reflection on the windows. We reached Zweisimmen after about an hour and three quarters of breath taking scenery, and our connecting train stood ready on the adjacent platform for departure a few minutes later. After a break at Interlaken Ost for lunch we joined our Zentralbahn train along Brienzersee, over the Brünig pass and down past Lungernsee and Sarnersee to Luzern; thence by ship to Vitznau, the village looking much as it did when first we saw it twenty five years ago. There is however one significant change: back in 1989 the redevelopment of the railway depot was incomplete, and it retained some of its original buildings, now long gone.

Somewhat surprisingly management of the VRB had elected to carry out major work on the line, involving the rebuilding of the station at Kaltbad and some track work, during peak 2012 summer season. Consequently trains from Vitznau were running only as far as Romiti, and as a result the usual rush of a mass of visitors from each day time boat, to the train at Vitznau was absent. Our one trip up Rigi in 2012 was made on the cable car from Weggis.

Vitznau makes an excellent base from which to explore Lake Luzern and its surroundings, with both the VRB and the ship station on the doorstep. For those occasions when there just isn't a ship at a convenient time, there is a good bus service towards both Brunnen and Luzern, giving access to main line services. Rigi itself offers some wonderful walks: up to Rigi Kulm is a climb of almost four and a half thousand feet over a distance of about five miles; best started early in the morning, and allow at least four hours plus stops. The walk from Kaltbad along the Felsenweg, past Dossen to Rigi Scheidegg, then (via lunch at Gätterli) to Schwand and down on the Urmiberg cable car to Brunnen, is one of the great walks. In 2012 our only walk of any length was on the Seebodenalp, taking the cable car up from Küssnacht and walking back to Weggis on another lovely day.

Within easy reach by public transport are several rail excursions. The Pilatus Zahnradbahn, the world's steepest rack railway, is a very short

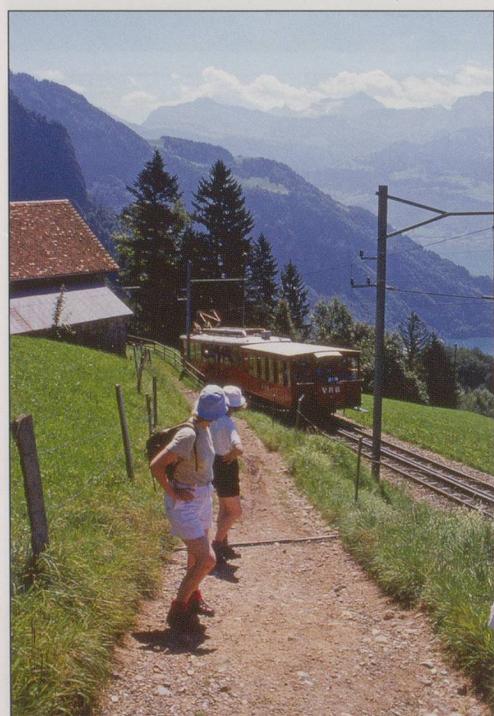
TOP: Rochers de Naye line at Hauts de Caux in 2012.

MIDDLE: Descending towards Sarnen from the Brünig pass in 2012.

RIGHT: Loading the wagons at Vitznau in 1989.



walk from Alpnachstad ship station; and Engelberg on the Zentralbahn (formerly the LSE, either directly from Luzern or from Stansstad with a change at Stans) makes an excellent outing. The cable railway from Beckenried to Klewenalp opens up more high level walks, as does the



Stanserhorn cable car from Stans. There are magnificent views from all of these places, not just from Rigi. A shorter trip across the lake brings you to Kehrsiten and the funicular up to Bürgenstock, and from there a beautiful walk along a cliff path and down to the ship station at Ennetbürgen. The longest day trip made entirely by public transport from Vitznau in years gone by was to Como; but for many rail excursions it certainly speeds things up to have a car to reach places like Chur, with its exciting Rhätische Bahn routes; and to Grindelwald and Lauterbrunnen for the Jungfrau railways. Our four days in Vitznau in 2012 flashed by, with a trip by steamer to Brunnen, the cable car ride up Rigi, a visit to friends in Meggen, our walk on the Seebodenalp, and a visit to the fascinating Vitznau Festung, a fortress tunnelled in the early 1940s into the cliff face above the village from which two 105mm cannon would have blocked Swiss transport infrastructure and protected the airfield across the lake in the event of invasion during World War Two, and potentially again if the Cold War had turned hot.

We left Vitznau as we had arrived, by ship to Luzern. From there on the InterRegio via Sursee, Zofingen, Bern and Romont to Lausanne, running down through the vineyards to the lake. Metro line 2 made the transfer from the station to our hotel in Ouchy easy. We arrived at the lakeside amidst the closing stages of a triathlon – for seven to ten year olds, some of them looking terrifyingly professional! After a comfortable night at the Hotel du Port we were up early to catch a double-deck inter-city train to Geneva. Thence once more on the TGV Lyria, this time a single-decker, through the southern Jura past the spectacular scenery around Nantua and back to Paris. We were glad of the on-board taxi booking service, as there was a long queue at the Gare de l'Est. Back to another old haunt for lunch, the Terminus Nord at the Gare du Nord, before departing for home on Eurostar. Trains, and especially Swiss trains, remain the best form of motorised transport! 

TOP: En route to Davos in 1992.

MIDDLE: LSE train waiting for descending traffic at Obermatt in 1991.

LEFT: Walking up Rigi in 1990 and being passed by a VRB train.

BELOW: VRB locomotive 16 at the old Vitznau depot in 1989.

RIGHT: SPB train approaching the Schynige Platte top station in 1995.

