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Gornergrat Bahn

All photos pages 35 and 36: Jason Sargerson

Jason Sargerson explores this spectacular line ...

The Gornergrat Bahn (GGB) is part of the Matterhorn Gornergrat Bahn (MGB) group and runs from Zermatt (1605m) to Gornergrat (3089m), climbing 1484m in a distance of 9.4km at a maximum gradient of 20% (1:5). This metre-gauge line uses the Abt rack system and is unusual in being electrified at 725V 50Hz three-phase, hence requiring two overhead wires. Its main depot is at Zermatt. The key equipment in use on the line is the SLM Bhe 4/8 units Nos.3051-4 delivered in 1993, and the Stadler-built Bhe 4/6 units Nos.3081-4 dating from 2006. The older, and in my eye, more attractive looking Bhe 4/8 units Nos.3041-4, also built by SLM that entered service between 1965 and 1967, are often in use at peak times. The livery is red, or red and black.

In Zermatt, the station for Gornergrat is to the left of the MGB station, the gateway for all visitors to this car-free resort. There is a large passenger hall for passengers to wait in before the dash onto the train to secure a good seat. To meet demand, trains often run in multiple. The line runs through the sprawl of Zermatt (now a town of some 6,000 people that can treble is population at peak times), crossing the Matter Vispa stream, gradually climbing above the hotels and apartments. Trains pass through woods and short tunnels, turning and climbing to Riffelalp. The resort hotel here is served by the 675m long, 800mm gauge, Riffelalp tram. Opened originally in 1899, closed in 1959 after a fire, it reopened in 2001 using two 12-seater Ce2/2 battery-electric vehicles. Above the tree line the train turns and appears to run directly toward the Matterhorn (4478m). Turning again the Gorner glacier is in view on the right with the dome of the Breithorn (4159m) beyond. On a double-track section just before the summit the huge white bulk of the Monte Rosa/Dufourspitz (4634m) comes into view. The relatively gentle ascent to the summit is useful in

ABOVE: Tourists of all nationalities mill around the top station at Gornergrat.

LEFT: Bhe 4/6 No. 3081 waits at Riffelalp Station.

TOP: GGB Bhe 4/6 No. 3081 waits at Gornergrat Station ready to return to Zermatt.

MIDDLE: A 4-car set waits for its returning passengers.

BOTTOM: The picturesque setting of Riffelalp station.

allowing acclimatisation to the great change in altitude.

The summit is Europe's highest open-air station, and the building a fine castle-like structure. The trains are stopped well short of the buffers, thus partly spoiling the balance of many an enthusiast's photographs. This appears to be to ensure that the alighting passengers go directly through the controlling turnstiles. On the descent it is a more relaxed journey, with fewer passengers in the winter (the railway is principally there to lift skiers to the start of numerous ski runs) giving the opportunity to take photographs on both sides of the train. On my train down even the driver took photographs!

The journey from Zermatt to Gornergrat takes 33 minutes and the service frequency is usually around every 24 minutes. There are good connections with the MGB at Zermatt. This is a magnificent mountain line, with the finest views in Switzerland at the summit. In the view of many it is a better mountain climbing experience that the more famous Jungfraubahn as the ascent is open for most of the way rather than being in an almost continuous tunnel.

... whilst Ron Smith observes other operations on the GGB

As Jason has noted Zermatt, and all the hotels, apartments and houses around it, are in a car-free zone. Normal road traffic can get only as far as Tasch. Here there is a large car and bus park, a separate terminal station, and frequent shuttles up to Zermatt. As all bar some specialist road freight vehicles had to stop at Tasch the railways, MGB and GGB (in association with Swiss company Planzer Transport AG) set up a new organisation Alpine Cargo AG to capture more freight to rail, hauling it all the way from Visp or Brig to Zermatt and on to Gornergrat. See P32 in *Swiss Express* 114. As everything, including rubbish and recyclables heading back down the valley, has to travel by rail (and by battery powered road vehicles in Zermatt itself) containers are shunted across the road between the two stations in Zermatt for onward transport up the mountain. On a visit to Gornergrat on 25th August this year, on arrival at the summit, a freight train was parked on the adjacent siding. The flat wagon had what looked like dustbins and rubbish bags on it awaiting removal down to Zermatt. The 1954 built power car Dhe2/4 No.3015 had been converted (in 2004) with three roller shutter doors along its sides for carrying perishables and other goods needing protection from the weather.

A fork-lift truck was roaring up and down the steep path with supplies for the summit hotel, including crates of drinks, that this GGB operation had brought up. As it was raining, the hotel was as far as we went, and after a good cup of tea, the return to the summit station revealed that the freight train had departed, and been replaced with a vintage coach propelled by single power car Bhe 4/4 No.3062 dating from 1981. As the coach was not originally a Gornergratbahn vehicle, the coupling is different and it was interesting to see the sprung cables and complicated adapter coupling between the two vehicles. The coach had been used for a charter party and propelled up to the summit.

TOP RIGHT: Passengers alight at Rifflealp.
MIDDLE RIGHT: The tram that runs to the hotel, seen at Riffelalp station.
MIDDLE LEFT: The vintage coach at the Summit Station.
All photos this page: Ron Smith

Works train at Rifflealp.

Dhe 2/4 and trailer with hotel supplies at Summit Staion.

SwissTip *Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.*

Want to watch freight workings? Take a train to Muttenz Station, use the subway to go to Platform 4 (few trains stop at it) and walk to the east end. From here you have an unrivalled view over the massive hump sorting yard, where there is almost always activity especially in the late afternoon. Apart from the constant movement on the four-track main line through the station, immediately behind, and slightly below the platform level, is the main freight avoiding line for the yard. The station building on Platform 1 has been converted to an 'Avec' store that has a café in it so there is food and drink available also.