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Mont Blanc Express restored

Jason Sargerson

Z850 at Montroc le Planet with the Aiguille Verte on the horizon, 30/6/2010.

All photos: Jason Sargerson

One of my favourite railways is the metre-gauge international Mont Blanc Express (formerly the Martigny-Châtellard [MC] operation of Transports de Martigny et regions [TMR]), from Martigny in the Valais through to the French resort of Chamonix at the foot of Mont Blanc. From Chamonix the SNCF continue with their own metre-gauge line for another 19km. to the main line at St-Gervais-les-bains. During visits to Switzerland over the last two years I have been disappointed to find the line through to

France closed. There have been good reasons for this, due to improvements to the line, the electrification system and modifications to the Col des Montets tunnel in France.

Unusually for a Swiss railway, on some sections of the route the 800V dc power supply came from a third-rail, but the length between Finhaut and Le Châtellard-Frontière has now been replaced with overhead catenary. Over the border in France, the track has been improved with heavy-duty rail, ensuring quieter running. The 1882m Tunnel des Montets, that links Le Buet with Montroc-Le Planet, has been modernised, with drainage improvements. This tunnel is used in emergencies, and in the winter, by road traffic, so safety standards have also been uprated. New rolling stock has been purchased for through running, with two new Stadler Beh 4/8 three-car units available since 2013. However, although these were running in 2013, I didn't see them in 2014. Unfortunately the Swiss and French authorities have not reached agreement on their use in France, although they are identical



On 6th July 2014, a BDeh 4/8 is at Le Châtellard Frontière with the Aiguille de Mesure in the background.

to the French Z850 units that have operated on the line since 2006. It is to be hoped that the through service is implemented soon, as there is currently a wait of up to 10 minutes at Vallorcine (the first French station) to change trains. Once this is eliminated, the line can offer a superb journey of only 90 minutes from Martigny to Chamonix.

I visited in July 2014 and was pleased to be able to travel through to Montroc-Le Planet in France. I always think about what flavour of ice cream I would like to have, as I view all the apricots on the trees on the run between Martigny and Vernayez. The climb using the Strub rack out of Vernayez is always guaranteed to bring gasps of appreciation for the view down the Rhone Valley from passengers new to the line. At Finhaut, the station looks out over the Aiguille de Mesure and back to the Glacier du Trient. If you stop off at Le Châtelard, try the steepest funicular in the world, up to the Emosson dam. In France at Montroc-Le Planet, after the Tunnel des Montets, the views of the Aiguille Verte and Aiguille Dru are spectacular and the Mont Blanc range beckons in the distance. This is a line that is certainly worth visiting. 



1 & 2. A Beh 4/8 at Le Chatelard Frontiere on 7th July 2013.

3. A BDeh 4/8 in the bay platform at Martigny, 6th July 2014.

4. A view at Montroc looking towards the tunnel, 6/6/2014.

5. Z850 at Montroc – 6/6/2014

