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St. Gingolf

Ron Smith



A train at the lakeside station at St. Gingolf.

LEFT: The end of the line at the frontier. Photos: Ron Smith

St. Gingolf was one of those corners of Switzerland that I had never managed to visit. So last summer being in Brig and having the luxury of some free time, and a 1st Class Swiss Pass, I could finally make it there. My train along the Rhône valley stopped at St. Maurice and disgorged a great many noisy schoolchildren, whom I joined to cross under the tracks to the platform where an NPZ set was waiting. It was full and standing, apart from the small 1st Class section, where there were just two men sitting in the other seating bay. Between it and the step down to the vestibule, there are two more seats at each side of the train, facing inwards to a small round table – this is maybe a good use of space but not at all comfortable. We set off and stopped at the first stop at Massongex, where quite a few of the children got off. Then, as we set off again, the two men got up and I saw that they were wearing "Region Alps" fleeces, with the same Logo as on the sides of the train. They were checking tickets – mine was OK, and so they stepped down to the vestibule and checked the children – consternation – six of them had no ticket. They started taking down details as we pulled into Monthey. One lassie started to cry, and another sobbed that they had to get off here – the two men were quite unmoved – they were all getting off, like it or not! They continued to take down details, on the platform, of the crest-fallen children. We continued on our way, with a noticeable silence in the coach now! The rest of the run was uneventful, the scenery not attractive until we rolled into Bouveret. Here yachts were moored outside the front doors of modern looking houses, and the narrow gauge railway – a local attraction – was spotted running round. This looked like a good place to visit, but I stayed on the train, by now the only person I could see in my coach, to St. Gingolf, just 4 minutes further.

The station is very clean and tidy. The neat station building, modern and square, has large tourist office signs on it, but looking in, it seems to be abandoned. Walking to the front end of the train, the platform dips down to a walk-way with steps down to go under a small stone bridge. The rails deteriorate to rust and on the bridge is a rusty sign "Frontière". After this the track becomes jungle – it's France. Returning along the platform a level crossing is just beyond

the train, and this leads down to the main street. I went along it, past the border post, which was manned with officers taking a great interest in an articulated HGV that they had pulled in to one side, while other officers were stopping and looking into each car. This was causing long tail-backs and pollution. Continuing along the French side, I was looking for something to eat, and saw a "Casino" sign – a well-known and good supermarket. It was closed, with a sign in the window directing you to the nearest one – in Evian, some 16km away! According to the timetable, you can catch ferries from St Gingolf, so I thought that maybe the lakeside had something to offer, but this was deserted, and unattractive as well. I returned swiftly to the main street and went into the "Maison de Press" where I bought a couple of French railway magazines. Then a little further a bakery still had some things on offer, so I bought two fruit tarts to take away. I cannot resist French tart-au-pomme, tart-au-poire, etc. Chatting to the lady behind the counter, while she elegantly packed up my treats, I asked if there was a "Centre Ville" or an old town to explore – "no", she said, "this is it" – there's not much at St. Gingolf. I bought a bottle of water as well, and continued back towards the border. There was a café/bar en-route, so I went in for a cup of tea but found that it cost more than red wine. So a glass of the local red went down well! I then made my way under the stone frontier railway bridge, avoiding the border post, and up to the platform. As the train was waiting I went back into the 1st Class section and sat at one of the inward facing seats, using the table for my take-away 'meal'. A man was sitting in the bay seat, legs stretched out, reading a paperback. Then, a "ding-ding-ding-ding" was heard – this was the level crossing barriers coming down – at which the man with the paperback jumped up in surprise, looked at his watch, stepped into the cab, and quickly started everything up and off we went. This train was going right through to Brig, so I stayed on it to my destination of Martigny. I know that there has been talk of rebuilding the line through to Evian – but talk only. If it did come about, that would be an interesting trip – but for now all I can say is that I have been to another small corner of Switzerland. 