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Switzerland with beginners

Tony Bagwell details how the most was made of a Swiss Travel Pass



After the climb to Jor and the Jaman Tunnel, the views ahead on the MOB are magnificent.

All photos: Tony Bagwell between May 10th-24th 2015

Following a trip to North Wales in 2014 to ride the narrow-gauge lines with two friends who were interested in railways, I mentioned Switzerland's amazing selection of railways and they immediately requested that I organise a holiday there. 'OK', I said 'but it will cost more!' So my planning started. An initial suggestion of about £2,000 (including £500 spending money) for 1 days seemed about right until January 15th when the Swiss Franc dropped from about CHF1.5 to CHF1.3 to the Pound. Call me psychic, or what, but I had collected our Swiss cash from the Post Office on the 13th and our Swiss Travel Passes, ordered through Diana at the STC, had arrived on the 14th. Phew!! So it was only our hotels that would cost us more. Using the superb SBB online timetable I started to plan the days out, wanting to give them as full a "Swiss Experience" as possible. To maximise the variety I decided on two hotels.

Week 1 at the Ambassador in Brig and Week 2 at the Filisur faithful – the Grishuna, whilst easyJet could fly us from Bristol to Genève at a bargain price, so a selection of days out was prepared.

Day 1 As our incoming flight saw us in Genève before 10am, a scenic route via Montreux, the MOB, BLS and over the top to Brig was taken, so ticking off several "must do" lines.

Day 2 saw us sunning ourselves on the top of Gornergrat (half price with a Pass), trying to avoid the usual tourists from Eastern Europe.

Day 3 was an oddity as I had arranged to meet our *Swiss News* editor Bryan Stone and his wife Hanna, who guided me on an enjoyable trip to Solothurn, Balsthal and St Urban, whilst I sent my friends off to do the three Aigle lines. On returning to Brig I discovered they had gone "off piste" and ended up in Montreux for the 18:05 to Brig. This arrived 20 minutes late at Montreux, then failed altogether at Aigle, and so they got back-to-base about an hour later.



ABOVE: Obviously a lot of locals cycle to Solothurn for an onward train journey.

LEFT: "Come in number 6" – work on the track at Riffelalp on the GGB.



Delivering the post at Spiez.

Day 4 saw us on the Rigi via Spiez, Interlaken, the Zentralbahn, ship from Luzern to Vitznau and the Rigibahnen. Back down via the Weggis cablecar (both train up and cable car free on a Pass) to a crowded Luzern and then train to Bern, 5 minutes late in and 10 minutes late out. At Spiez the second Re460 in two days failed so all out and into the next service to Brig.



The next train arrives at Zweilütschinen ready to split and panic the tourists.

Day 5 it was back to Interlaken Ost, BOB to Lauterbrunnen, bus to Stechelberg and two cable cars to Mürren. A pleasant walk back to the BLM station, a ride along to Gruteshalp, and back down the cablecar to Lauterbrunnen. (All these cable cars free on a Pass.) On the WAB to Wengen, as far as the Pass will go, back



to Zwiöltschinnen and up to Grindelwald. Then back to Interlaken West, boat to Spiez and the steep walk back to the station and home.

Day 6 was forecast to be wet and it was. So a day riding trains was in order. Through the Simplon to Domodossola, Centovalli to Locarno and then over the Gotthard to Erstfeld. What a surprise though at Göschenen to find everything white – snow in May! Back up from Erstfeld, up the Schölenen gorge to a very snowy Andermatt, with snow all the way back to Brig on the MGB.



Who'd be a shunter driver at Andermatt in May?



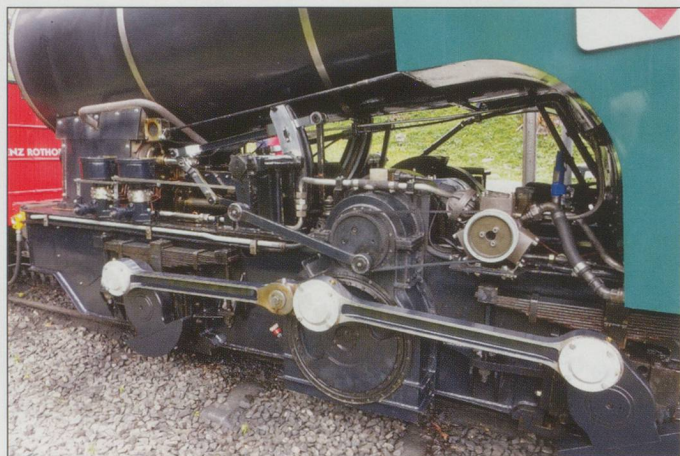
Snow on the Matterhorn-Gotthard-Bahn.



ABOVE: Is the train on-time? Who knows?

LEFT: The next easyJet service from Spiez.

Day 7 Luckily was dry again so we went to the open-air museum at Ballenberg (free on a Swiss Travel Pass), and spent a pleasant couple of hours looking inside the variety of Swiss buildings restored there. Back at Brienz we were surprised to see steam rising from the BRB station area and before we could get there, off chuffed the loco and 2 coaches. A quick check showed the only remaining return trip of the day was at 15:45 to Planalp (half price on a Pass), and the helpful gent in the BRB office gave us the times so we could ride Fitina to Innertkirchen and back on the MIB. By now the weather was clear and sunny so the views from the BRB were magnificent.



The mechanical wonders of a Brienz-Rotthorn-Bahn loco.

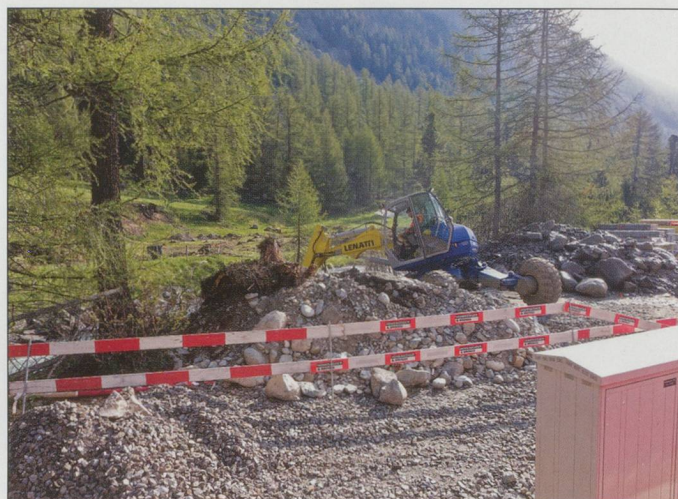
Day 8 was hotel change-over day and that entailed a full ride on the MGB and RhB from Brig to Filisur. Luckily Friday's snow was still around from Realp to the far side of Oberalp and the scenery looked at its best. Sadly the heavy case changeover at Reichenau resulted in me getting a very painful back that was eventually sorted by a very helpful pharmacist in Chur two days later. The forecast for Graubünden was not great for the coming week so as **Day 9** looked the best, it was up the Albula Valley and then over the Bernina line to Tirano. There was sun until we dropped down to Alp Grüm, but no rain. On the return the sun reappeared at Ospizio Bernina and a stop was made at St Moritz.



The only sunny morning at Filisur – our hotel in the background.

Day 10 was dull and partly wet so down to Chur, the obligatory present buying in the town and then up to

Arosa and back before completing the loop via Landquart, Klosters and Davos.



Preparation work for the new Albula tunnel at Spinass.

Day 11 was forecast as rain all day so a check on "tinterweb" showed we could get to the Verkehrshaus Museum in Luzern (half price with a Pass), via Chur and Thalwil and get a train back 2 hours later. The return was via the SOB to Pfaffikon and we were amazed at the number of passenger trains in and out in the 50 minutes we had to wait for our connection back to Chur.



ABOVE: The wonderful mechanical "toy" at the Verkehrshaus – not to be missed.

BELOW: The model railway layout at the Bergun museum.



Day 12 was dull so off via Davos to Klosters – but it was “shut”. After the skiing season and before the summer peak, some places seem to go into hibernation, so a quick coffee and on to Scuol Tarasp. The pass to Klosters had had snow but the Engadine Valley was also slightly white. As we retraced the valley back towards St Moritz the snow got more prominent, such that the lake-side resort had about 8”, but as usual all the roads and paths were cleared. As at Klosters, St Moritz was “shut” and on a personal note, I think both are very overrated. So back on the train, down the frozen Albula valley to the new railway museum at Bergün (free on a Pass). The superb model railway was being run and the upstairs displays were typically “Swiss”.




Part of the spectacular road-side ride from St Gallen to Appenzell.

As predicted, **Day 13** again did not hold out much promise of sun, so off to Appenzell via St Gallen and the AB. The ride out of St Gallen beside the switch-back road is one not to be missed and Appenzell itself is unique. Back in St Gallen a visit to the cathedral and library (free on a Pass), topped up the cultural content. The ride back from St Gallen as far as Sargans was unpleasant thanks to some very noisy school kids, and from Chur to Filisur was very full, but quiet and on-time.

Day 14 Our last full day continued the weather pattern so it was down to Reichenau-Tamins and up to Ilanz for a quick walk to the old part. Then a post bus to Laax through some very twisty villages and another bus back into Chur. Some last minute present shopping and then the bus over the top to Tiefencastel and train to Filisur.

Day 15 Typical - our going home day dawned sunny after the previous dull days, so we said our goodbyes to Anna and set off to Zürich, a lovely ride beside the lakes. Dumping our cases in the left luggage lockers it was up to Uetliberg (with half of Zürich joining us, it seemed) to take in the views, then a walk down through the old side of Zürich and back up the new, before a quick tram ride, just to say we’d done it. Then a leisurely ride to Genève airport for our late evening flight home.

So the 15-day Swiss Travel Pass at £278 (the price including SRS discount and before the CHF fluctuations),

seemed good value for 98 train rides, 3 boat trips, 4 cable cars, 6 buses, 2 trams and discount on 2 mountain rides (including one steam) and several museums most free. At a rough estimate we’d travelled over 3,000 km in 15 days. The trains were mostly on time, but quite a few were 2, 3 and up to 5 minutes late, many for no apparent reason. And two train failures – the Swiss must try harder - but are still far superior to those in the UK. 



Bryan and Johanna Stone make sure the photographer doesn't get left at the very end of the St Urban line.



Train spotting from the Rigi – looking down on Arth Goldau.

An airship over Zurich – is this a first for this form of travel in Swiss Express?

