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Graubunden 1990 – A Day Trip to Nostalgia

Michael Donovan



Green Ge6/6 II 703 "St Moritz" at Filisur with a rake of old and new livery stock.
Photo: David Stevenson

When my landlady in Arbon asked the inevitable question, "Where are you going today?", I responded, without thinking, "To the Rhätische Bahn – it's an old friend!" This must have been divine inspiration, for good weather is essential to enjoy this wonderful railway at its best, and the day had dawned as dull and unpromising as any of my Swiss holiday. Still, by the time we were rolling south along the Rhine valley, the clouds were breaking to reveal the mountains on either side and the snow on their peaks, and as we approached Landquart it was a glorious summer morning. Anticipation had grown as we passed the familiar stations at Buchs and Sargans. At Bad Ragaz, a new station was being built, and then I saw the heart-jerking familiar cleft in the mountains that was my introduction to the Rhätische Bahn on my first overseas holiday – twenty years ago, almost to the day. The train ran over the bridge and stopped at Landquart. These days, one uses a subway to cross the line, and the Rhätische Bahn is nearly all red instead of olive green, but I was instantly at home in its friendly little trains. Off we went over the river, swung viciously to the right, and headed for the hills. We wound through the cleft and up the Landquart valley between snow-crested mountains, and I remembered that the good road which parallels the line was but a rough track in process of being upgraded when I first came this way in 1970.

The Rhätische Bahn is a remarkable railway. It believes that you can take a train anywhere without resorting to rack-working, and goes to great lengths to prove it. At Klosters, the way ahead seems impassable, but the line swings to the right across the valley, dives into a tunnel, and emerges heading back down the valley. Having gained some height, it swings left into the hillside, and re-emerges having reverted to its original direction. Still climbing, it curves right into another tunnel as if to repeat the trick – but re-appears in a

hanging valley overlooking Klosters. A few miles further on, the valley opens-out, and I was looking again across the lake and down the hill to the mountain resort of Davos.

It is necessary to change trains at Davos if one is to continue to Filisur on the Rhätische Bahn's main line from Chur to St Moritz, and I took the opportunity to walk up the hill to the Hotel Alte Post, where I had stayed so long ago, and to which, a year later, I had brought my bride for our honeymoon. Frau Baschenis was old then, and probably passed away many years ago, but the hotel hadn't changed much. While I looked, the dear old cracked bell in the church next door struck twelve, and then, for ten minutes, the air reverberated as the whole carillon swung heedlessly to and fro. Other things in Davos have changed, but this was home.

I took the local train down the Landwasser valley, remembering, with a smile, the occasions in the past when it had paused at one of the wayside halts to detach a wagon or two. The engine's whistle screeched its urgent warning, and we came to a stand at a small passing station. Here, we waited in silence for the train in the opposite direction, and I became aware of the two sounds most associated with Switzerland. On the hillside, a herd of cows grazed peacefully, the bells round their necks clunking as they moved. From nearer at hand came the sound of running water from the river as it rushed on its way. Then the other train arrived, the station bells rang out to announce the departures, and we were on our way to the next loop – where, lo and behold - a man was waiting to guide us back into the siding to detach two wagons. I laughed with joy at finding something else unchanged despite the years! Then, it was away down the valley, over the waterfall in the twenty-foot gap between two tunnels, over the huge drop into the gorge at Wiesen, and so to the junction at Filisur to join an express.

In the next seat bay of the express lurked an American.

How anyone could be oblivious to all the beauty outside the windows I do not know, but there he was, slumped in his seat, hiding from the world behind his dark glasses, and drowning out its sounds with his idiot-phones! How could anyone behave so, with all those wonders around him? I was annoyed by the rattle of his ear-phones – but perhaps I should have felt pity instead.

The main line runs up the valley of the Albula, a tributary of the Rhine and, above Bergün, finds the gradient too steep, so it performs a similar trick to that of the Davos line above Klosters. However, as the valley closes in at its upper reaches, even this is no longer enough, and the line crosses and re-crosses the valley, running through three spiral tunnels before reaching the summit at Preda. The succeeding tunnel dives through Europe's watershed, and we emerged in the broad, sunny valley of the young Inn.

I had already decided not to visit St Moritz (a boring town!) and had no time to take the breath-taking Bernina line to Tirano, just over the Italian border, and so changed at Samedan, noting an ancient electric locomotive still hard at work as station pilot. It detached two coaches from the express, transferred one to the Tirano train and the other, full of school children, to my train to Scuol-Tarasp, and we were away, running quickly down the broad pastures of the valley, beside the smooth but swift-flowing waters of the river. On my previous visit, the train had been worked by one of the antique 'Crocodile' locomotives, but I had seen no sign of them on this occasion, and had assumed they had all gone for scrap. We swept past the final castle in the narrowing valley, and, as we stopped at the terminus, my joy was complete, for there, waiting to work away with a light freight, stood another old friend – 'Croc' No.414! I took a quick photograph, then went to check the bus timetable.

Quite why the Rhätische Bahn should have expired at Scuol-Tarasp escapes me, but the fact remains that, to continue into Austria, one needs to proceed by the occasional post-bus. I had an hour to wait, so bought an ice-cream, and sat in the afternoon sun, luxuriating in the heat, humming whatever appropriate songs came into my mind, and gazing up the peaceful valley at the castle and the snow-capped mountains beyond. This was bliss indeed!

Of the two-hour ride over twisting roads to Landeck there is little to be said, except that I was the only customer who travelled throughout. I emerged gratefully to join the Austrian Railways train up the Arlberg, past St Anton, where I once spent a happy holiday, through the watershed back into northern Europe, and down again into Switzerland at Buchs, where I boarded the train heading north down the Rhine valley in the late twilight. As we ran, the mountains towered against the ebbing light of the fading day, their silhouettes like those of famous men in their long last sleep, or the rollers of a mighty sea frozen into eternity. High on the ridge was a well-lit house, like a Noah's ark, or the ship of some flying Swiss doomed to sail forever on this petrified ocean. The last light slipped away to close a truly memorable day, one of those on which one tiptoes home through the silent streets, raises one's eyes to the night sky, and whispers quietly, "Thank-you".

Michael Donovan submitted this article to Swiss Express in 1990, although the then Editor chose not to publish it. Michael rediscovered his original manuscript last Christmas and wondered if it was too late to be used some 25-years on. I was pleased to accept it for publication. There is also a Postscript from the author - below.



A Ge6/6 'Baby Croc' hauls a mixed freight at Filisur, presumably the early morning un-timetabled train from Chur.

Photo: Glyn Jones

Nostalgia Revisited – 2015. A Postscript.

I return regularly to the Graubünden, and last October I retraced some of my steps from 25 years previously. Much has changed. I went and looked at the 'Alte Post' in Davos and, although it appears largely unchanged from the outside, it's now a steak bar – and the menu didn't look very appetising! Shame! I loved the restaurant, where old men came, read the newspapers (largely the 'Neue Züricher Zeitung') that had been threaded onto metre-long poles, and played cards with their friends as they enjoyed a glass of something. It was there in 1970 that I first read in that newspaper, struggling with the German, that a tunnel was planned so that trains could operate year-round over the Furka Oberalpbahn. That was built, along with the Vereina Tunnel that revolutionised the operations of the RhB and public transport to the Engadin valley. I now know that it was the breaking-out of WW1 that stopped the line down the Inn from going further than Scuol-Tarasp. Sadly the station bells no longer chime as trains arrive and depart, but that cracked bell in Davos still marks the hours. ☒

The 'Hotel Alte Post' in Davos that's now a steak bar.

Photo: Michael Donovan

