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The Belle Epoque

The 1890s in Kandersteg - or how the BLS took us back 120 - years in 3 1/2 hours

Bryan and Johanna Stone

Photos: From the authors



BLS Ae6/8 at Kandersteg.

On a Sunday morning in January it is dark and cold at 07.30 in Ettingen. Two figures, in 1890 dress, walk through the foggy village street, on their way to the BLT Line 10 tram. Three quarters of an hour later, after coffee and croissants in Basel SBB, these figures are, with others similarly clothed, on Platform 10 to join the BLS Historic Train, a gleaming Ae6/8, BLS Historic's No.205, with ten heavyweight cars - the 08.29 special for Kandersteg. Reserved seats, in Car 9, are soon found. Departure is a dignified affair, reminding us how these great engines eased their international trains out of stations in the past. We were held at Liestal while the regular Bern train, having taken the modern Adler Tunnel cut-off, overtook us, and then it was right-away for Olten, where the winter's fog had a firm hold. Now we became a real historic express, on the old line via Langenthal, stopping in early morning sunshine in Burgdorf for many more to join, and then rolling between the farm-houses to Wylerfeld and Bern. We left Bern at the west end, on the Gürbetal line through Belp, to Thun, avoiding reversal and track occupation in Bern HB, and allowing running on historic BLS trackage. Today this is a great exception but it was not inappropriate; there was in the early 1900s even a weekly Wagons-Lits sleeping car on this line from Calais, to cater for British guests taking the waters at Gürnig Bad.

From Thun we took the BLS main line to Spiez and Kandersteg, arriving at a crowded station at 11.55. The guests and population had turned out in huge numbers, many in period costume, to greet our special, so we graciously acknowledged their welcome and walked in a parade through the snow to our hotels. How fortunate that, as the excellent guide books of Murray and Baedeker advise, we had secured a manservant, in BLS Porter's smock and cap, who took our luggage.

Sunday afternoon started with a cortège, a procession of

the many hundreds of costumed guests, from the BLS station to the bob run. There followed afternoon tea in the historic train's restaurant car, where your correspondents were joined by James Evans, long with BR and Eurotunnel, and Martin Josi, former BLS Generaldirektor, with his wife. At 17.30 No. 205 together with its historic train and the day-guests left again for Basel. For us, there followed dinner at the Hotel Poste (full board cost CHF7 in 1913, but the normally cheerful Innkeeper was unusually uncooperative), and next day in a snow-clad 1890s village, visiting the museum before enjoying a horse-sledge ride along the Kander. All too soon, and still costumed, we were joining a very contemporary Lötschberger train set to descend to Spiez and Basel. Even then, our adventure continued; the connecting EC from Milano with 503 013 rolled into Bern on time, and we joined it in some relief. But it failed in the platform; we left it and took the next, by now overcrowded, Basel direct at 15.04, to learn on arrival in Basel that the EuroCity train had not moved again. We were clearly back in the 21st Century. The Ae6/7 would not have let us down.

The Belle Epoque week in Kandersteg was an idea of the Tourist Director, along with the BLS, to re-animate the village that had become very quiet after the fast trains all took the BLS Lötschberg Base Tunnel. It has become a great success; guests, village stores and services, banks, hotels and restaurants, and their staff, all join in and your correspondent and his wife, as respectable tourists, courteously greet those who come as historic families, retired officers, visiting clergy and dignitaries, alpinists and many more in the period style. There is a week's programme, with events, lectures, learning to ski (wooden skis, one stick), carriage rides and bobsleighs, and much more. Our author friend Diccon Bewes was there to read from his Historic Switzerland books everybody joins in as the Swiss love dressing up. 