

# Swiss contrasts

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2016)**

Heft 128

PDF erstellt am: **21.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854087>

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in the ultra-quiet village to explore, the sights in splendid isolation. Nothing stirred as I wandered round the "main" street, church, station and depot. Then the unthinkable happened. A, by definition noisy, hen-party arrived at the station. And it was clear they were going to catch my train! The service formed of two units duly appeared so I let the ladies board the front unit. I then

It is sometimes overlooked that Switzerland is not just about Alps and tourists, and that Interlaken is not the centre of the universe. There is so much of interest "off the beaten track" that highlights the contrasting sides of the country.

In June 2016 I spent a short break based in the large town/city of Biel/Bienne (it is Switzerland's only official bilingual city), where not a single obvious tourist is to be seen. It is a "working" town, in real everyday Switzerland. Sadly no trams - but lots of bendy trolleybuses, and the super Continental Hotel, a busy business-oriented hotel with magnificent buffet breakfasts, that is only a 5 min. walk from the station. The said station is a hub of services to Lake Geneva, Basel, Bern, Zürich and many local destinations. Its ten platforms see a steady procession of trains. There is also an underground Platform 11, opened in 1975, alongside the single track line of the 21km long metre-gauge route to Täuffelen and Ins. This operation was born as the BTI but now is part of the ASm (Aare Seeland mobil), a true commuter railway serving a vital role in the community 365 days a year and playing an important part in the daily lives of so many local people. Kursbuch Table 290 refers.

Having arrived in Biel on a sultry Saturday afternoon from Manchester via Genève Airport, I took a trip on the ASm as far as Täuffelen where the depot is. The twin two-car EMUs emptied steadily as we left Biel behind and dropped me

travelled in the rear one! In less than half-an-hour I was back in the 'big city' after enjoying a succession of pleasant views across the Bieler See.

On my booking form I had entered in the Special Requests box the word "Sonnenschein" (!) so when Monday dawned bright and clear I decided to re-join the tourists and make a farewell trip on the Gotthard Main Line, which had but a few months left to live in the guise we all love. Leaving Biel (where the 'Dispozug' was already out and about, pretending to be an ICN) at 07.45 for Olten, I changed there onto a Locarno-bound IR, whose Panoramawagen swept me to Göschenen via Luzern - a "proper" train with a loco at the front and no fewer than seven extra coaches for groups. The MGB (FO in old money) took me steeply up to Andermatt where I was to catch, on only its 3rd day of 2016 operation, the 11.40 PostAuto over the Gotthard Pass to Airolo. The senior driver (he had a trainee on board learning the route), gave a running commentary in Schwyzerdeutsch as we whizzed effortlessly up the pass along the modern main road. The bus had a 20 minutes scheduled stop for a cup of coffee at the summit so I got off to take photos. Breathtaking. Not just the views and the snowy landscape, but also the numbing icy gale. Never has hot coffee been so welcome! This was a reminder of the hostile changeable Alpine weather, and a Swiss contrast to the weather lower down. The half-hour

descent to Airolo is stunning with its hairpins built on pillars, panoramic views of the railway well below, and clear views of the old, original hairpin-infested Tremola road, that is still open for intrepid drivers to take. Airolo at 1142m was at least 20C hotter than the 2090m high Pass. The bus was off up the Nufenen Pass next, but I wanted to make my very last trip along the real Gotthard mainline for a nostalgic final view of Wassen (three times!), Gurtellen and the already much-reduced railway facilities at Erstfeld. The northbound train was late but it did not seem to matter as once through the old tunnel we descended to Flüelen in glorious sunshine. I suspect the views in the new Base Tunnel will not compare!

Inspired by the "tourist" bus ride over the Gotthard, the next day I decided, given more glorious hot sun as per my booking form, to ride a totally contrasting bus route, namely service 31.220 from Reichenbach to Griesalp. Publicity material describes this as "Das vertikale PostAuto-Sensation". It just had to be seen! A long 1 in 4 climb (28% to be precise) with hairpins. A crowded 'Lötschberger' unit bound for Brig via the old BLS line dropped me at little Reichenbach for the 09.27 bus to Griesalp. Or rather buses. Four of them! Two for Griesalp, one for Kiental - halfway point and end of the proper road - and a 4th for a school party to Kiental. The two Griesalp vehicles were Mercedes 'Varios' - special narrow versions with 2+1 seating and a manual gearbox (bottom gear essential!), both towing baggage trailers.. In an earlier life I drove 'Varios' when I worked for First Potteries, but we had the standard model with automatic gears and 2+2 seats - and no baggage trailers. Having left behind the other two buses in pretty Kiental, we set off along a single-track road, dodging oncoming traffic in passing places. Then, just past the Tschingelsee we began the steep climb up a sheer mountain face. First gear all the way, with driver commentary in Schwyzerdeutsch. Hairpin followed hairpin, the post horn blared as the bus squeezed round corners with just millimetres to spare, often at below walking pace. A bridge at an angle by a hairpin tested the skills of the driver to the limit. A halt to view a waterfall was memorable. Then followed a crawl between overhanging rocks. That the bus retained its wing mirrors says it all about the professionalism of PostAuto drivers. All too soon we crept into the remote settlement of Griesalp - which must surely be twinned with Paradise. At 1411m the setting is enchanting. A half-hour break for coffee and photos soon passed, before the descent in first gear at a snail's pace back down 483m towards Kiental. I do not like the word gobsmacked - but I was!

Using a Swiss Pass, all my contrasting trips were "free". Three days, three different aspects of Switzerland: the workaday world of Biel/Bienne; the main road and rail routes through the Alps; a wonderful rural meander. Switzerland had it all - not forgetting the Sonnenschein. ☑

**TOP PAGE 26:** Older stock outside the depot at Täuffelen.

**INSET PAGE 26:** Trolleybus in Biel.

1. ASm train in Täuffelen.
2. Bus for Airolo at Andermatt and, on reflection, MGB train.
3. Coffee break at top of Gotthard Pass.
4. Varios resting at Griesalp.
5. Idyllic setting of Griesalp.

Photos: Rob Morrey

