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TWO TAKE THE TRAIN

Mary and Keith Strickland

Beginning the descent from Oberalp Pass to Andermatt.

All photos: Keith Strickland except where shown

The traveller's tale

"Would you like to see Switzerland in the snow?" said my husband. Years ago we'd driven through the country in an old Morris Marina en route to a summer holiday in Austria. This would be different. For almost fifty years I have shared my husband with steam railways around the world. In the process I've visited some outlandish, fascinating places but never before by 1st Class train. Luxury indeed. Having met our fellow "Great Rail Journeys" travellers, we bade farewell to Sir John Betjeman at St. Pancras, boarded Eurostar and began a most interesting, comfortable and eye-opening rail journey. Paris to Strasbourg was in double-decker stock, a new, exciting experience for me – smooth, clean windows and an excellent

buffet service. Basel was the next change - very fortuitous as my husband was able to buy the 2017 Swiss railway timetable. He says it will be a collector's piece as it's the last printed edition. The only drawback was its size and weight, more like an old family bible. On via Bern to Kandersteg where the Hotel Bernerhof was our welcoming stay for four nights. Easy, comfortable, punctual and efficient best describe the next day's travels. I was amazed at the cleanliness of the trains, the lack of litter, the clarity of station and on-board announcements – in at least three languages. Another feature was the white, raised platform markings for visually impaired folk. One of our group was an elderly, independent gent who asked for assistance and was told: "Don't worry. I'll watch to see you get in the right part of the train."

Zermatt and the Gornergrat were the destinations for the first full day's outing. Sun, a cloudless sky and sparkling snow – another world. Clean windows which open – bliss for us photographers. Another day took us to Brienz alongside the lake on a glittering sunny morning, then to Murren via Lauterbrunnen and the cable car. Our final stop that day was Grindelwald. The Eiger was hidden in mist, just as it had been when we were last here in 1977.

After Kandersteg, we spent three nights in Chur. To get there, the group was booked on the 'Glacier Express'. Shock horror! We arrived at Brig station anticipating a magical trip to find that the train had been cancelled due to avalanche risk. What a shame – and the advertised lunch had looked so delicious. Not to worry. The much-consulted and lugged around timetable was eventually put to good use. My husband was able to plan a substitute trip of our own on our last day at Chur. By taking a normal service train to Disentis and another from there to Andermatt, we were able

En route to Zermatt – typical old wooden buildings.

Photo: Mary Strickland



to return to Chur on the '*Glacier Express*', with a cheese lunch washed down with lovely Swiss wine. A magical day! With few passengers, we each had an opening window on the service trains. Deep snow and blue skies made for unforgettable views. The steep descent from the Oberalp Pass to Andermatt was amazing with much skiing activity on the distant slopes.

Another memorable day was the '*Bernina Express*' from Chur to Poschiavo and back via St Moritz where the lake was frozen. Again, the scenery was entrancing – potential master shots at every twist and turn. At the top of the Bernina Pass we felt as if we were on another planet. There's no doubt that our week in Switzerland on Swiss trains has whetted our appetite for more. What's not to love? Reliability, magnificent scenery, clean trains, helpful staff, beautiful countryside and snow!

The enthusiast's tale

Given that the tour was billed as "1st Class '*Glacier Express*' in Winter", the cancellation of the Express was ironic. It was odd that the service train to Disentis left Brig five minutes after the booked departure time of the cancelled Express. Such are the mysterious ways of railway administrations the world over! Another surprise was that not all Swiss trains run on the dot. At one point, a seven minutes' connection became three, necessitating my running, as one of the younger members of the group, to ensure the connecting train did not leave without us. These two gripes aside, all that one reads and hears about the efficiency and cleanliness of Swiss trains was fully justified. Add the dramatic scenery (what is it that so appeals about mountains?) and the trip was First Class in every sense.

Off-piste (i.e. non-group) ventures included the RhB routes through Klosters and Davos, and the Centovalli railway – magnificent, though the delights of Locarno were difficult to see through the only rain we had in Switzerland. Incidentally, how did the name of this town become synonymous with English ballrooms? Does anyone know?

We also had a private visit to the workshops of the Brienz Rothorn Bahn. As this mountain railway doesn't run in winter, all of its steam locos were on shed, some in a stripped-down condition. Both of us – yes, both – enjoyed the visit. It was fascinating and educational. Will we return? Of course. The next trip will have to include steam action on the Brienz Rothorn, the Furka line, and one of the RhB's steam events.

TOP: Between Chur and Disentis – 'Edelweiss' logo on the side of the loco.

MIDDLE: Trun – we loved the chalet-style stations on the RhB.

BOTTOM: The village church at Kandersteg – could this be my 2017 Christmas card?





Oh, you want to know how the group got from Brig to Chur? An express to Zurich via the “new” base tunnel under the Lötschberg with reversal at Bern, thence to Chur. An additional 1st Class coach was provided specifically for the “bumped” ‘*Glacier Express*’ passengers – another example of Swiss efficiency. It would be remiss to end this article without expressing thanks to the tour manager from Great Rail Journeys, Helen, for her helpfulness and patience; to Mike from the Brienz Rothorn Bahn for arranging and guiding our private visit; and to this Journal’s photo editor, my long-time friend Tony, for his hints on what to see and where to go.

P.S. An overnight stop in Strasbourg gave time the following morning to ride the trams so that my wife, a Remainer, could have her photo taken at the building which houses the European Parliament. Such devotion! 🇨🇭



1. Approaching Filisur over the Landwasser Viaduct.

2. The view of the Matterhorn from the summit station at Gornergrat.

3. The scenery after overnight snow at Kandersteg.

Photo: Mary Strickland

4. Locos under repair at the BRB workshops.

5. “The enthusiast” has the use of compressed air in braking explained to him. Something to do with Boyle’s Law? The gent on the left is Michael Ellis, SRS member and frequent contributor to *Swiss Express*.

Photo: Mary Strickland

6. A triple-headed Crossrail freight heads for Spiez through Kandersteg. A car-transporter train is unloading in the background.