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Autor: Bagwell, Tony
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Introduction to Switzerland

Tony Bagwell

In 1997 all the trains between Spiez and Brig came "over the top" and thus there was a more frequent service from Kandersteg.

All photos: Tony Bagwell

Read David Hitchen's article about his early visit to Switzerland brought back my own memories. It all started back in 1996. I'd worked at Hinkley Point B Nuclear Power station since 1973 and religiously entered the competition every month in the company newspaper, regardless of what the prize that month might be. But I eventually got lucky and my prize was two British Midland Business Class air tickets to anywhere they flew to in Europe. My wife was not impressed, never having been at all keen on holidays anywhere. So what to do with them? I fancied seeing the trains in Switzerland and as Zürich was a BM destination, that seemed a good choice. But who to go with? Several names were considered but I then

mentioned it to my friend Norman Solomon. Now Norman has an unusual job; he builds model railway layouts for some rather affluent customers, one of whom had taken him to Switzerland a few years previously as this chap wanted a layout of the station at Brig. Norman liked the idea and left it to me to plan the trip.

Knowing little or nothing about Switzerland, and before easy access to the Internet was generally available, where did I start? By sheer coincidence, at a model railway exhibition in Bristol there was a helpful person selling videos he had made, several of which were of Swiss train journeys. He suggested staying in Kandersteg as it was a lovely village on the Lötschberg line and a good centre for various trips out. He even suggested that the Alfa Soleil hotel was a good place to stay.

An 8-day Swiss Pass seemed the easiest way to get around Switzerland, so after a hesitant phone call to the Swiss hotel, where luckily someone spoke English, two rooms were booked for a week in May 1996. All the other arrangements were made and so we were all set. Daughter Heidi (yes the one from "Where's Heidi?" – but more of that later) gave us a lift to Heathrow for a very comfortable flight to Zürich. It was then time for my first experience of Swiss railways, with the station



SBB BDe4/4 No.1631 of early 1950s vintage rests in the sun at Brig in 1997.

directly under the terminal – well there's a good idea. The train ran directly to Kandersteg with no changes, just reversal at Zürich and Berne. The countryside looked a bit different, the graffiti was a bit of a shock but very artistic, and the mountains were a welcome sight at the end of our trip. A phone call from outside the station got the hotel boss to pick us up and take us to the Alfa Soleil where we were made most welcome.

The informative man at the Bristol exhibition had sold me one of his videos that detailed three trips out from Kandersteg, but as a start we thought we'd try Zermatt. Boarding the early morning train we sat in a smart carriage opposite an elderly local lady. We went through the long Lötschberg tunnel and started our descent towards Brig. After a few more short tunnels there out of our window, was a superb view down into the Rhone valley. As Norman had the window seat I was straining to see the view, at which point the lady got out of her seat to give me the other window one so I too could admire the scenery. If this was the standard of friendliness of the Swiss then we were on to a good thing. Walking out of the station at Brig we found the narrow gauge train for Zermatt waiting in the station forecourt – definitely something you don't find in the UK. Finding an empty carriage so we could have the windows open, off we set along the valley floor initially, then turning left at Visp into the mountains. Well, what an initiation into Swiss mountain railways. The sky was blue, the mountains towering above us, and the track clinging to the valley side, occasionally resorting to a rack section to gain height. From then on there was no looking back.

During the week we tried all three trips from the video. Firstly down to Spiez, along the metre-gauge MOB to Montreux, a quick dash to Genève, then back down the Rhone valley to Brig and Kandersteg. The thing I particularly remember was on changing trains at Zweisimmen we entered

TOP: On a hot afternoon at Domodossola in 1997 the smart SBB loco has been removed and this scruffy Italian individual has replaced it ready to take the train on to Milan.

MIDDLE: A service on the scenic Bergbahn - Lauterbrunnen - Mürren.

BOTTOM: On a lovely summer's day the Centovalli train waits at St Maria Maggiore, a village well worth visiting.





TOP: In 1999 a train from Arth-Goldau comes out of the low cloud and approaches Rigi Kulm. I remember it well, as bending down to change the lens on my camera, I put my back out and I had a very uncomfortable ride back down.

ABOVE: A train in its colourful St Bernard livery pulls into Sembrancher – the junction station south of Martigny where the lines to Orsières and Le Châble split – in 1999.

RIGHT: SBB Bm6/6 18510 shunts some carriages at Brig in 1997.

a very old carriage that seemed to be decorated inside like a Swiss chalet – all dark wood panelling. That took us as far as Gstaad. Then on a particularly good day we went via Interlaken to Grindelwald, Kleine Scheidegg to Jungfraujoch, the highest station in Europe. This latter stage was through the long tunnel through the Eiger, stopping in two places en-route to get out and admire the views. At the top we got the lift to the Sphinx observatory for the views. Standing on the metal mesh platform I noticed Norman seemed uneasy and he admitted he didn't like heights. However he conquered that fear later in the week when we caught the cable car to the Schilthorn. Our trip back down included my first visit to Mürren on the cliffs opposite Wengen, probably now one of my favourite locations. The third video trip was via Brig and then the Furka-Oberalp line (now the MGB) to Andermatt, down the steep line to Goschenen and back down the Gotthard main line to Arth Goldau. There we boarded a train of German compartment stock and I had the strangest feeling. It reminded me of all the old black and white escape films from WW2 and I envisaged that at any moment a Gestapo agent would ask to see our papers, but we reached Luzern and freedom!! From there it was the only SBB narrow gauge line via Brünig and Meiringen back to Interlaken and then Kandersteg again. We also sampled the delights of the Centovalli to Locarno and back on the Furka Oberalp, a trip to Bern and return visits to Zermatt and Domodossola. The thing that struck me at Domodossola was that they took off the smart, clean SBB loco and put on a scruffy Italian loco for the onward trip to Milan. Of course most evenings we would walk down to Kandersteg station and witness the procession of long freights, a delight no longer possible.

It was certainly a memorable introduction to "The Land of the Giant Train Set". Good hotel, great weather and fantastic scenery. We both thought we must do this again sometime. In fact I had 2 more visits with Norman until in 2008 I took our daughter (on her condition we could also visit the home of Ferrari at Maranello). She was so taken with Switzerland that she now tries to go with her husband at least once a year. Taunton now has an informal Swiss museum, their house being filled with every conceivable Swiss souvenir or memorabilia, all purchased from car boots, charity shops or second-hand emporiums either here or in Switzerland. ■

