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To Switzerland – by Bendy bus!

Rob Morrey



Bendy bus on Line 61 at Cornavin station in advertising livery.

All photos: Rob Morrey

Having travelled to Switzerland every summer since 1984 I now look for "variations on a theme" as I happily explore that lovely country. The cunning plan for June 2017 was to buy a 'Lac Léman Pass' and stay in France (!) in the town of Annemasse. I then intended to use tpg (Transports publics genevois) Route 61 to access Genève each day to start using the pass. I therefore would arrive at CFF/SBB Cornavin station by bendy bus - should the word be hyphenated, or even articulated? Route 61 is no ordinary route. It is not even operated by tpg vehicles, as all the vehicles I saw were French-registered, TAC (Transports annemassiens collectifs) operated bendy buses, normally in a plain white livery. The journey takes approx. 40/45mins from Annemasse Gare SNCF to Genève Cornavin, the standard service interval is every 15-minutes, and it is heavily used. Fares can be paid in either CHF or Euros.

Currently the railway from Genève to Annemasse is being totally rebuilt as part of the CEVA scheme. So no trains. The Genève tram Line 12 from the border at Moillesulaz is being extended on French soil to Annemasse with massive road works and diversions. So no trams. So, for now, the bendy bus it is. The final piece of my jigsaw was to book a hotel in Annemasse. I chose the 'Campanile' - perhaps the name rings a bell! It was new, squeaky-clean, air-conditioned, central, provided a gargantuan buffet breakfast and a bar serving Affligem beer (of which I only have a hazy memory). Perfect - and much cheaper than Genève. So on my first morning I caught the 07.15 bus for Genève. It said "Express" on the blind, but this was wishful thinking as we wound our way through all sorts of narrow side streets to avoid the tramway earthworks. At Moillesulaz we passed through the redundant customs post before pretending to be

a tram and speeding up a little. Then it was back to ordinary roads, but bus lanes helped us go faster than the queues of cars, many of whose drivers were using mobile phones! I reached Cornavin, the main station, in good time to observe the steady flow of SBB trains (and one SNCF local), before I validated my Pass for the day and boarded the Brig-bound 08.30 IR service.

The journey to Aigle in sunshine was as magical as ever, especially the Lausanne to The now closed customs post at Moillesulaz.





TOP: Place de la Gare in Aigle.
 MIDDLE: ASD I at Aigle.
 BOTTOM: An AL set at Aigle.

Vevey lakeside run. However, on this train and my return journey there were multi-lingual warnings about pickpockets as we approached Montreux. Blazing sunshine greeted me in Aigle as I proceeded to take the obligatory pictures of the three narrow-gauge lines and their TPC (Transports Publics du Chablais) stock. I am not an admirer of the snazzy new livery, so was pleased to see an AL (Aigle-Leysin) unit in the majestic brown and cream of old. Also sunbathing nearby was vintage ASD (Aigle-Sépey-Diablerets) railcar No.1 in its traditional colours.

My destination was Champéry so I boarded modern unit No.546 for the 10.33 service along the erstwhile AOMC (Aigle-Ollon-Monthey- Champéry). Having passed the new depot outside Aigle and crossed the Rhône valley, the train reversed at Monthey Ville to take me ever upward, sometimes with rack assistance, towards the terminus. I love this valley, in particular the approach to Troistorrens and the setting of Val-d'Illicz. Breathtaking. Champéry's new terminus was reached on time so I had 35 minutes before the train set off back. I watched a cable-car depart to Croix de Culet then slowly walked through the picturesque village to its other station Champéry-Village that is roughly where the old terminus used to be. This is just a bare platform under a modern road. No.546 returned, I put my arm out, it stopped - simple.

Back in Aigle SBB's IR connection arrived simultaneously with my train so it was a quick sprint to catch it - but this was Switzerland so the connection worked. I headed westbound to Morges to see the MBC (or the Bière-Apples-Morges in old money) and then stroll through this delightful old town. I idly wondered why so few tourists pause here - the centre is charming and the promenade with the lake and its background of

the French Alps is a setting second to none. All too soon it was time to catch another IR back to Genève. This service ran to time but for no obvious reason was terminated at Cornavin instead of continuing to Genève-Aéroport. In fact timekeeping in the area was not up to the legendary Swiss standard. Indeed on a later date my IR train expired at Lausanne and the promised replacement train never did show up - are SBB's pips beginning to squeak? My bendy bus behaved impeccably and dropped me off at the hotel door at the end of a quite beautiful day out, and in good time for a meal in a brasserie. Chicken supreme since you ask.

I do heartily recommend the 'Lac Léman Pass' for its scope and value for money - and perhaps you may consider Annemasse as a base. I used SNCF to take me to Annecy (not on the Pass of course) plus also travelling to Bulle, Montbovon and Nyon on one day, and on the paddle-steamer 'Simplon' from Genève to Morges on another - in biblical rain. The options are endless! 



TOP: The view from Champéry Village halt looking towards the terminus.

MIDDLE: TAC local bus in Rue de la Gare, Annemasse.

BOTTOM LEFT: Line 61 bus at Annemasse station.

BOTTOM RIGHT: SNCF trains at Annemasse.

