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Discovering Swiss Happiness – Almost!

John Yellowlees sets out to explore a different part of Switzerland

Lichtensteig, with the view down the Toggenburg and a passing '*Voralpen Express*'. *Photos:* John Yellowlees

Armed with copies of recent issues of *Swiss Express*, in September a friend and I enjoyed a whirlwind visit to the railways around St Gallen. A revelation to someone steeped in British railway practice, even when used to the more pro-active operational practices of my former employer ScotRail and an encouraging Scottish Government.

Enjoying connections, some as tight as two minutes, the lines through Romanshorn and Kreuzlingen provided a dizzying network of awesome efficiency, weaving their way through a landscape of satisfying productivity, which in a lesser country would have been a nervous border-zone. Freight, which in Britain might be an afterthought, here seems everywhere to the fore. And on inter-city trains cafes provided refreshments on even quite short legs of our travels. With the on-going integration of the Appenzell and Trogen routes, St Gallen station exemplifies Swiss tram-train fusion, as does the delightful roadside Frauenfeld-Wil line. In Britain this small operation, had it survived into the 21stC, might be banished to an anonymous platform but it is announced at Wil by a proud 'goalpost' sign adjacent to the main station.

Gais with a pleasant bar overlooking a junction on the Appenzeller Bahnen system surely is the narrow-gauge drinker's nirvana. British train operators could learn from the practice on the Altstatten branch, of propelling a wagon for the conveyance of bicycles rather than restricting their number and requiring pre-booking on some services. And awesome Lichtensteig. This is an unusual station with its converging routes served by a 'V-shaped' layout with one platform face serving each line, and the station buildings located in the gap between the two. Lines converge, one from Wil with its SBB/Thurbo service to Wattwil, and the SOB from St Gallen, via the 3.5km Wassenfluh Tunnel, with trains to Rapperswil and Nesslau-Neu St Johann along with SBB/Thurbo local services. In total 10-trains/hour with their mixture of stopping and fast trains on mainly single track approaches must be an ultimate in busy rural railway operations, all set in the romantic landscape of the Toggenburg. Being Switzerland there were meticulous PostAuto connections as well. Switzerland is favoured with many historic small towns such as Lichtensteig, that positively reek of being self-contained, self-assured and proud of their heritage. Sadly our busy schedule left us insufficient time to fully explore this charming place, with its historic centre based around the original hilltop town founded in the 1200s and now on the Swiss register of Historic Places.

However, I subsequently learned that Kägi Chocolate Wafers – "Switzerland's No.1" according to the company - are made in this community. Thus, unfortunately, we missed their "Happiness Shop", and learned only afterwards that Kägi remains a family-owned company (although not the original family) still based where it always has been, and a key part of the local economy since Otto Kägi founded the business in 1934. Not only does it provide many jobs making the delicacy, but also it uses milk and other agricultural products from farms in the area, providing more local employment in that way. Kägi is one of many well-known Swiss businesses that have remained loyal to the small communities that they developed in. Sadly, in the UK a company such as this would probably now be in the hands of a major multi-national, located in a serviced shed on an industrial estate many miles from its former local base, and happy to use the most cost-effective ingredients available. Mind you in this case that multi-national might possibly be Swiss…Nestle! Thank you so much for encouraging my interest in Swiss railways - although I missed out on the wafers.

An AB cycle wagon on a Gais train at Altstätten Stadt.