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First Impressions. Switzerland 20-years-ago

David and Elizabeth Carpenter recall their first visit.



A view of Neuchâtel from the lake.

All photos: David Carpenter

Recent 'nostalgic' articles in *Swiss Express* prompted us to look-back at our first visit – a guided tour arranged by Ffestiniog Travel. Travelling by Eurostar from London (Waterloo Station then), with the inevitable struggle across Paris from Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon for the Lausanne-bound TGV, we finally entered Switzerland late in the day after having to change at Frasné on to the Swiss ex-TEE multi-voltage unit that delivered us to our destination - Neuchâtel. Simply needing sleep we just happily took our room keys and crashed-out, discovering in the morning that we had a room with a splendid view over the lake.



Following breakfast we made our way down to the lakeside to see what boat trips were on offer. With a choice of departures to places we had never heard of we settled for a round-the-lake cruise. Considering whether to use my rather poor French to ask if our Swiss Passes were valid I simply chose to tentatively show the passes to the man at the gangway who responded with "Swiss Pass - OK". Leaving the city we Chaumont funicular.

noticed a little green and yellow train running alongside the lake and vowed to do this, the TN line to Boudry, later. Returning to Neuchâtel we rode the trolleybus to La Coudre and the funicular to Chaumont (see SE No.131). Back then it was a conventional counterbalanced operation with two-cars, unlike today's single-car system, and it was at the top that we first heard cowbells! From Neuchâtel we took a trip to Lausanne where we rode the Metro one-stop up to Flon. All has now changed with the introduction of the modern M2 automatic Metro system, but at the time the line ran in a double-track tunnel that in fact housed two single lines. One was for the unit that shuttled between the Gare CFF and Flon, and the other for the loco plus two coaches that provided the service on the rack line down to the lakeside at Ouchy. Our final Neuchâtel day saw us on the boat across to Murten - we knew where this was by now! – and took an enjoyable look around the old walled town.



Lausanne Metro train arriving at Ouchy - now all changed!

Moving on to Kandersteg we stayed in the Hotel Alfa Soleil, which Tony Bagwell had enjoyed a year earlier (also in SE No.131). We travelled to Kandersteg via Lausanne, Brig and the south ramp of the Lötschberg route and it was whilst changing at Brig that we encountered our first late-running train. Commenting on this to another member of the Ffestiniog party they observed, "It's come from Italy, what do you expect?" - a good point! We enjoyed Kandersteg with its abundance of chalets, mountain scenery and glacial fed rivers,

finding it more like our imagined Switzerland than Neuchâtel. Following our tradition of not going too far on the first day at a location, we took the old chair lift up to Oeschinensee. It was a relaxing experience to be



Old Oeschinensee chairlift at the top station.

transported sideways up the mountain on the little wooden seats with a canopy over your head. Sadly the system has now been replaced by a Gondel-bahn, but that is progress. On this our first Swiss trip we had two aims both of which we accomplished at Kandersteg. One was to buy a cuckoo clock, which we still have, and the other was to go to the Jungfrauoch. Other members of the group warned us "It costs mega-bucks to go up there, so only do it if the weather is fine". We decided to do it anyway and were not disappointed. If we still needed any confirmation that the Swiss spoke good English, it came at Interlaken Ost.



A BLS Lötschberg tunnel shuttle train at Kandersteg.

Wanting to make sure we travelled in the correct portion of the train, I approached an official, pointed at a carriage and said "Grindelwald?" In perfect English, the reply was "Down the back, there is more room". At Lüttschental on the way up to Grindelwald the train slowed and there was an ominous grating sound from underneath the coach. This was our first introduction to travelling on rack sections and we soon learned that the start was indicated by lineside 'A', and the finish by 'E', boards. Reaching the Jungfrauoch the view from the top was crystal clear with fewer clouds in the sky than on the postcards!

Our next venue was Chur; back through the Lötschberg Tunnel to Brig where we joined the *Glacier Express*. Once on board seasoned members of our group explained how the best part of the journey had been by-passed by the Furka Base Tunnel, however we found that there was still plenty of good



scenery for us to enjoy en-route. The main purpose of staying in Chur was to do the *Bernina Express* to Tirano. The rolling stock in those days allowed us to lower the windows so we were able to obtain shots in this manner of both the Landwasser viaduct, seen in photographs and marvelled-at, and the circular viaduct at Brusio. Tirano was our first taste of Italy and was not particularly impressive, with the whole town looking as though it had seen better days. Although local



Brusio circular viaduct.


restaurateurs were out on the streets offering lunch to arriving passengers from the train - "We serve you very quick!" - we settled for ice cream from a stall in the square. On our last day we took the train, at the time comprised of motor cars and trailers, to Arosa that then started in the street outside the as-yet-to-be-rebuilt Chur station. To our surprise at a station part-way up we stopped to detach a wagon, which had been coupled on the rear of the service train. At Arosa we took the cable car up the Weisshorn for a final mountain top view of Switzerland. So much has changed on the Arosa branch since then with renewal of the electrical system, services now worked by Allegra EMUs, and a reconstructed Arosa station.

Our journey home was a little more relaxed than the outward trip, with an overnight stay at Mulhouse in France. We arrived here in the early afternoon, so most of the group took

the bus to the 'Museum Chemin de Fer'. Having looked round this the feeling was that it was a poor relation to York's NRM. I understand there have been some improvements since then, including it being served by the new tram system that operates at 20-minute



WAB trains descending from Kleine Scheidegg.

intervals instead of an hourly bus. The following morning we travelled from Mulhouse to Paris Est taking 5 hours on a rather slow train hauled by two SNCF diesel locos and surprisingly comprised of Swiss rolling-stock. Mulhouse now has its direct TGV line to the capital. Transferring luggage over the short distance from the Gare de L'Est to the Gare du Nord was a little easier than the RER transfer on the way out. We thoroughly enjoyed this, our first taste of Switzerland, and have returned almost every year since. We have found many enjoyable walks to do between stations, some of which have been included in our "Station to Station Walking" articles. Looking back it is amazing how much the railway system has changed in 20 years. Fortunately the rest of Switzerland, its scenery and its friendly people, are as good as our first impressions. 

Crossing the Landwasser viaduct approaching Filisur.