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Alps and Lakes Extravaganza

The second part of Robert H. Foster's description of his meticulously planned annual excursion to Lake Como in Italy



An earlier photograph of an Re 6/6 on level 1 at Wassen, heading south.

Photos: Robert H. Foster

The return journey from Bellagio on Lake Como is not so rigid as the outbound journey in the sense that there are several alternatives, usually ending with a flight at about 21.45 pm from Genève to Manchester. The options are varied; bus or hydrofoil to Como itself - for the station, or ferry to Menaggio on the opposite side of the lake, followed by bus to Lugano. Then rail over the Gotthard pass, after which the alternatives are the MGB Furka line from Göschenen to Brig then on down the Rhône valley, or SBB to Luzern then direct - or via the ZB Brünig pass to Interlaken, then via Bern to Genève. An alternative is via the charming Centovalli line to Domodossola (although this is better in the opposite direction), then Brig and the original 1913 Lötschberg high route and Spiez-Bern-Genève.

When on occasions I have required to get home quickly by train, I have achieved Bellagio (leaving once by bus to Como at 07.05, and once by ferry at 07.40 to Menaggio) to Skipton (arr. 23.35) the same day, with approx. 15 minutes in Zürich, 30min. in Paris and 25min. in London, but with minimum luggage and no co-travellers. That is not now possible since Zürich-Paris trains have been re-diverted to Gare de Lyon, in my view a retrograde step, but something has to use the white elephant Rhine-Rhône LGV. An LGV (Pasilly)- Montbard-Dijon (gare)-Dôle would have been of greater benefit, and would have cut almost 30-minutes off Paris-Lausanne, thus making the Simplon route from Paris to Milano (used until 1982 by the TEE Cisalpin) competitive again with the Mont Cenis route via Chambéry-Modane currently used. Here a new base tunnel is projected for three

trains daily each way. Politicians and railways do not mix well, as we know.

I digress. This time we opted to cross the lake on the ferry to Menaggio where a taxi collected us at the pier and took us to Lugano. The irregular bus on Line C12 we had planned to take from Menaggio to Lugano requires an earlier start, and oddly terminates in a car park away from the centre, from where it is necessary to take another bus to the station. Integrated Swiss transport seems not to extend to this part of Ticino. At Lugano we took the almost deserted 10.11 9-coach train behind a Re 4/4 II to Bellinzona, changing there for the 10.51 EMU over the Gotthard summit route. Digressing again, in 1982 I travelled south on this route in a Re6/6 locomotive of a train from Basel, which from Arth-Goldau ran just 3-minutes behind one from Zürich. My host was Samuel Stähli, architect of the Swiss Taktfahrplan, the connectional and regular-interval principles of which apply exactly as on introduction in 1982. It was a strange sensation to see the train from Zürich twice at Wassen on the level above, travelling in the opposite direction. The sensation was repeated downhill on the Biaschina double spiral, but this time the train from Zürich was travelling in the same direction. That is the difference between loops and spirals.

Discounting one "en ventre ma mère", my first journey over this wonderful route in 1973 was in an 18-coach train from Zürich with sleeping and couchette cars to Lecce. It was so long that from the rear coach I could never see the locomotive beyond the red restaurant car - in which I was too impecunious to eat - until it ran back at Chiasso. Sadly

this working is long gone, although oddly that Lecce train (as a seasonal Motorail) was the final Gotthard overnight train to succumb, marginally outlasting the Frankfurt-Milano EN train, which was the last remnant of the multi-portioned 'Italia Express'. Interestingly electrification of the Gotthard line was begun immediately after World War 1, during which scarce coal supplies to power the four steam locomotives required for most trains on the long 1 in 37¾ uphill climb on either side caused operational problems.

This year's journey was muted – with no restaurant car – and the only other train seen being a southbound FLIRT in the tunnel. The long freights were below us in the base tunnel, the world's longest opened to traffic in December 2016. At Erstfeld we remained in the terminating EMU, which then returned us to Göschenen. We thus passed the Catholic Church at Wassen six times in 40 minutes! Conveniently we had drawn into the northbound platform at Göschenen, so it was only a short walk across the forecourt to the 3-coach loco-propelled train which lifted us by rack from Göschenen to Andermatt. Here we consumed our picnic lunch before taking the train through the Furka tunnel, then down the upper Rhône Valley to Brig. The Furka Bergbahn as it is now known was only open in the summer months, and was replaced by the tunnel in 1989. Even the catenary was dismantled in winter. Unfortunately the glacier, from which the tourist trains take their name, has retreated significantly in the past 30 years. We emerged from the tunnel near to where James Bond's Aston Martin DB5 used its tyre-cutters to good effect on Jill Masterton's Ford Mustang in 'Goldfinger'.

By Fiesch we had traversed 11 of the 12 spirals on the Swiss railway system, the other being that between Iselle and the southern portal of the Simplon tunnel. However, I will happily be corrected if a reader can amend that statistic. At Brig we had the option of a Rhône Valley train, or an EMU over the Lötschberg, another wonderful line shorn of much of its traffic by the base tunnel opened 10 years earlier. However, the Lötschberg is much better traversed in the opposite southbound direction, and as the weather had deteriorated we opted for the former as far as Lausanne. Here we had an excellent dinner at Les Trois Rois restaurant on Rue de Simplon, almost outside the station's south exit, before joining a St Gallen-Genève Aeroport train comprising 12 double-deck and 3 conventional coaches with an Re460 at each end. Apparently the rear loco is required as banker from the new deep level platforms 32/33 at Zürich Hbf., and so superficially it is odd that it remains attached throughout. We had 70 minutes at Genève before our flight, and with no hold luggage this was more than ample at that time of day given that in the past I have boarded flights here just some 15 and 6 (yes!) minutes after arrival at the airport station, having been delayed on trains from France and Italy respectively. Being a duty-free airport (as at Basel and Zürich), we recouped the airfare of just CHF29. Paradoxically, having left England on an 'e320', we returned on an 'A320'. Our taxi took us the 60

TOP: Ostend/Hamburg-Brig descending from the Lötschberg in 1982. We forsook this for the Rhône Valley route,

BOTTOM: Almost journey's end: Re460 at Gèneve, (2017).

miles from Manchester Airport to Skipton, where we arrived at 23.55.

The 2018 version, already planned and booked, will have fifteen participants. While departure from and return to Yorkshire will be the same, we shall travel outbound via Dijon and the Jura Massive to Cossonay, located between Vallorbe and Lausanne, and the following morning take an ICN via Neuchâtel to Zürich. Here the itinerary will coincide exactly with that of 2017 – lunch in the restaurant car climbing up to the Albula tunnel and then over the Bernina. On the return, we shall traverse the Gotthard line as far as Flüelen, where we shall board a paddlesteamer to Luzern – on which we shall have lunch – and then the 17.00 Luzern-Genève Aeroport. Some of us may decant at Bern in order to have dinner in the (upper deck) restaurant car of the following train (from St. Gallen). We do sometimes change our travel routine, but our annual 'Alps and Lakes Extravaganza' is a well-honed fixture in the diaries of myself, and my group of travelling companions.

Part 1 appeared in the December 2017 edition of *Swiss Express*. 

