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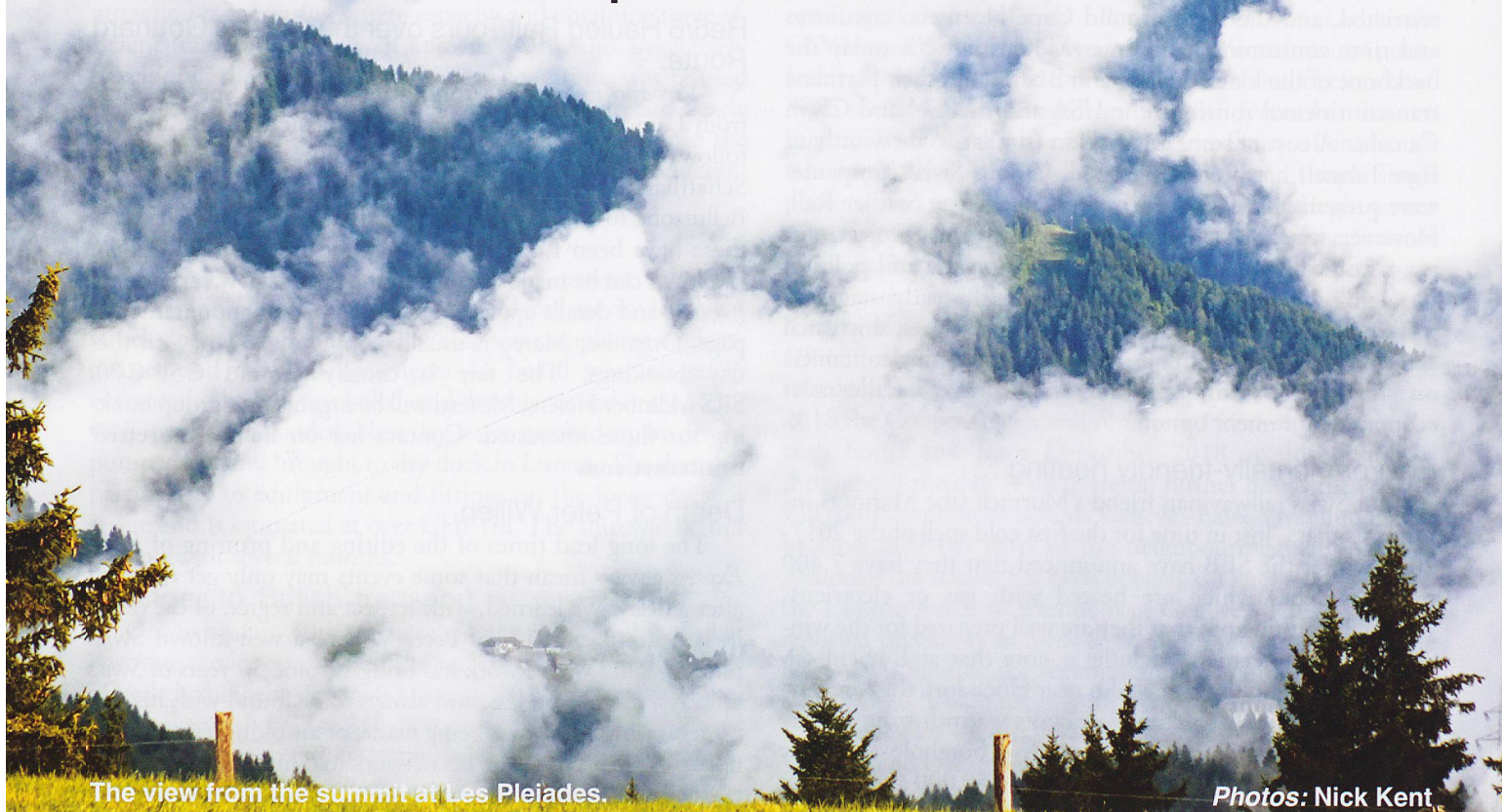
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There is a view

Nick Kent's mountaintop frustrations



The view from the summit at Les Pleiades.

Photos: Nick Kent

Startled by a sudden downpour that landed 10 feet away, but without a single drop falling on me, I bit rather hard on a cherry tomato. The pips flew out like miniature bullets and I reflexively said "sorry!" I chuckled straight away; there was no one to see or hear me. Despite cold feet, the damp chill under my bottom and the squashed cheese sandwich in my hand, I was happy. It wasn't exactly Everest, being just 1,361m, and I had arrived at the summit of Les Pléiades by train, but I had achieved my ambition of having a picnic on the top of a mountain on this holiday.

My plan, at the start of August, had been to use the regional 'Lake Geneva Alps Pass' to explore the railways and mountains of the area covered. I had begun this day in Genève when a 06.30 check of the summit web cams all showed them surrounded by the sort of mist and murk more appropriate to autumn than August. Optimistically I travelled to Bex, a small Vaudois town in the Rhône valley. My plan had been to take the Transports Publics Chablais (TPC) train from the forecourt of Bex CFF/SBB station up to the mountain village of Villars-sur-Ollon and then take the bus across to Les Diablerets. From there another TPC train line leads back to Aigle. There was certainly nothing to do on a wet day in Bex (even the church was locked!), so I caught the 11.15 service to Villars. The metre-gauge Chemin de Fer Bex-Villars-Bretaye first opened in 1898 and is now part of TPC (see p28/29 in *Swiss Express* No.129). Running through the streets of Bex, stopping first in the market place, we then passed a roaring river, foaming and brown as we headed into a gorge and the station at Bevioux. Here, at the railway's depot, the rack section begins with a noisy, grinding sound

and a revving of the train motor. The trees were packed tight either side as we headed up the valley. At Fontannaz-Seulaz, a woman with a baby appeared suddenly, an apparition in the mist, whilst a party of walkers dismounted from our train and quickly disappeared. The mist had now enveloped the entire valley and the train.

The value of the railways in this environment was immediately apparent. Road vehicles would find this level of visibility near impossible to manage.

At Gryon, a major skiing resort in the winter months, there was much activity despite the rain. An older train, with a row of ski-carrying trailers in front of it, was in a siding. The stunning views down the valley, promised by guidebooks, were something we could only imagine as the train resumed the climb between the Scots pines. The odd scuttle and scuffle among the undergrowth indicated that birds and animals were out there, somewhere.

Villars-sur-Ollon was simply soaking. A mass of umbrellas and waterproofs as visitors gloomily contemplated their



A TPC train threads its way through the streets of Bex, 10.08.17

dashed hopes for a day out in the mountains. The hardy ones were setting off anyway, all bonhomie and bravery. A little bit of rain! Nothing to worry about they said, folding their maps and putting them into plastic folders for the trip. Slightly ashamed because the walkers were all older than me, I crept back to the station and caught the train back down to Bex. There was no point, I told myself, spending a day in wet clothes, unable to take photographs. So much more sensible to go on to Aigle and try my luck there.

Aigle was as empty as Bex as I looked for a hot lunch, given that it was too cold to eat my packed lunch outdoors, so it was off to the Restaurant du Marché, which offered a French-style formule menu that I opted for. The meal made me feel as if I had eaten in a French provincial town. The town's main attraction is its ancient chateau on its outskirts, but as the rain had stopped I decided to risk a trip to Leysin. This is the shortest of the three narrow gauge railways run by TPC and it starts from the eastern side of Aigle station. As at Bex, the metre-gauge trains run through the streets, startling unwary visitors, and then at the depot on the edge of the town they pause while the driver changes ends and it sets off up the mountain using the Abt rack system. Moving with surprising speed, the train swung up the hill, giving marvellous views of the old chateau surrounded by vineyards, the effect slightly spoiled as we climbed higher by industrial chimneys in the distance beyond. Alas, as the train shifted direction once again and the landscape became more wooded, the dreaded mist began to descend like a theatre safety curtain, obliterating all the excitements behind it. By the time I got out at Leysin-Feydeau, the penultimate stop, where TPC has an information office and from where the post bus to Le Sépey leaves, visibility was down to a few yards.

I walked upwards, following signs, to where the once-renowned Grand Hotel sits majestically (according to the guides), but I couldn't find or even see it in the fog. Apart from the odd car, appearing from the gloom with only side-lights showing, the place appeared deserted, like everywhere else in this part of Vaud it seemed, but from somewhere in the gloom a church clock chimed the half-hour. I detected a building above me. It was the Catholic Church for Feydeau. It was bigger than I would have imagined, presumably catering for visitors as much as residents, with early 20thC wall paintings inside that were rather good. A strange find near the top of a mountain.

Further on I met other visitors, equally confused by the fog, convinced that the hotel was yards away but it was totally invisible to us. Other passengers on my train had walked downhill, towards Leysin village with its station - perhaps a better option!

Returning to Aigle I headed to Montreux in the late afternoon and as on other days the sun had finally appeared at this time, and the mountains around the eastern end of the lake looked clear of mist, at least to the north. This prompted me to make a last mountain journey that day. Catching the 17.21 to Vevey I arrived



with time to sit with a cup of tea in - at last - warm sunshine waiting for the MVR train to Les Pléiades. The 17.49 service up the mountain was busy with plenty of people when it left Vevey, but I was the only remaining passenger when it reached the summit station. The muddy ground around that station was not just the result of the dreadful, pelting rain of earlier in the day, it was also a consequence of works to create an extra bay platform at the terminus so that two trains can wait there side by side. Leaving the station (mostly occupied by a Ski School) I encountered a man and a boy struggling to manoeuvre two trolleys along the broken ground towards the train. One forgets that all supplies must be brought up mountains like Les Pléiades by train if there are no roads. The eerie absence of others was soon apparent; the café had closed at 17.30! Walking up the steps to the concave grassed area of the summit I set off to take some pictures before the mist caught up with me once again. It was swirling around other peaks and in some of the valleys below wisps of cloud were being gently buffeted around by a lazy breeze. Having completed my brief circuit through the wet grass I went over to the picnic table set by a communal barbecue. Once I had sat down on carefully arranged plastic bags and put on my waterproof, I rescued the mangled remains of my intended lunch from the bottom of my bag and began to eat. I was still determined to make it to Les Diablerets, but that would have wait for another day. ☝



TOP: The Castle at Aigle.

RIGHT: Repair works at Les Pleiades station, 10.08.2017.