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A Weekend on the Rails - Part 1

Carol Cotton describes a very busy Swiss visit



ARB trains wait at Arth-Goldau.

All photos: John Cotton

Back in December 2017 John, my husband, had seen Switzerland Travel Centre's (STC) advert in *Swiss Express* for a four-day trip, which included a journey on the *Glacier Express* and an excursion with a 100-year old steam-driven snow blower along part of the Bernina Pass. Having visited Switzerland for many years, but never the south-east, and never in the depths of winter, it did not take long to decide that this would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So, we booked. Four days, eleven trains, two hotels ... quite a weekend!

Excited, but a bit apprehensive about what was to come, we landed at Zürich airport late morning on Friday 16th February. We had received a detailed itinerary and travel documents from STC, which I had spent a few happy hours looking through. Naturally, ignoring the suggested connection from the airport to Zürich Hauptbahnhof, we jumped on an earlier train - just in case because "you never know" - which

arrived ten minutes later on Platform 33 deep down in the spacious spic-and-span bowels of the HB. Up the escalators to Platform 8, and a welcome breath of cold and damp fresh air whilst we awaited our connection. Our train No.2 was the very comfortable 13.09 'Eurocity' towards Milan. Leaving HB to the second, we arrived in Arth-Goldau just over 30 minutes later to be greeted by drizzle. Tempting, of course, to stay on the train and continue to a no-doubt sunny Milan (but not half as tempting as being in Milan Central on the way to the airport and having to resist the temptation to jump on the EC to Switzerland!) An easy change at Arth-Goldau onto our train No.3, the waiting IR26 to Erstfeld, just gave John a chance to take photos of the distinctive blue and white Arth-Rigi Bahn units. Unfortunately, no high or distant views as we travelled south alongside the Urnersee, although accumulations of snow from Brunnen onwards offered a foretaste of what was to come. After all, winter 2017/18 had broken snowfall records in many parts of Switzerland.

Arriving at Erstfeld at 14.24 in sleet, we changed to train No.4 - the Regional Express to Milan. SRS members will have known Erstfeld for its locomotive depot on the old Gotthard route, prior to the opening of the Base Tunnel route that diverges to the north. Climbing from 475m to 1,111m in 29km, the line goes through one spiral tunnel, the Pfaffensprung, and two horseshoe loops at Wassen followed by the 1.5km long Naxberg Tunnel. Whilst distant views remained shrouded in low cloud, the frozen waterfalls close to the tracks were spectacular. Just a 13-minute ride to Göschenen where it was obvious that the temperature had dropped considerably. At this point, the STC's itinerary had caused some consternation. Although we were travelling light - just a small bag each - we had only a two-minute change at Göschenen from Platform 1 to 11. Interesting theory when you are used to connections in the UK! Well, really, what

Some of the frozen waterfalls visible from the train.





A wet scene at Goschenen.

is the problem? The RE pulled into Göschenen on time (15.02) where we found Platform 1 was next to Platform 11 allowing oodles of time to get on the 15.04 MGB rack-unit to Andermatt. Train No.5. Ten minutes later, after travelling through the narrow Schöllenen Gorge alongside the River Reuss and passing the famous Teufelbrücke, we pulled into Andermatt - cold and dry with over one metre of lying snow. Our first real taste of Switzerland in winter.



The severity of the winter snows is obvious by the depth on the roofs at Andermatt.

One of the advantages of being retired is that I'd had chance to wonder what we were going to do with our 'spare time' - in other words, when we weren't on a train. Our hotel was at the bottom of the Oberalp Pass road, which is closed to traffic in winter to become a skiing, tobogganing and hiking route. Being keen walkers, we quickly checked-in and set off up the road to Nätschen where we could catch a train down. You might be thinking, why didn't



Some skiers and their dog enjoy the conditions at Oberalp pass.

they take the train up the 400m climb and walk down? Waiting for the train would have lost us a precious 30-minutes of daylight. The 6km route up to Natschen closely follows the railway line and, although we were soon walking through low cloud, we did get fleeting glimpses of village and mountain and of course, passing trains. Nätschen is a request stop so I pressed the button accordingly, then a train appeared right on time but didn't slow down! "Are you sure you pressed the button?" As it passed we saw it was the Oberalp pass car transporter taking vehicles between Sedrun and Andermatt. Checking that the request button was still active a couple of anxious minutes passed before our train (No.6) arrived; neither of us fancied an hour's walk back down the mountain in the dark. Day One over. One plane, one walk - and six trains!



MGB Deh 4/4 No.24 crossing Oberalp Pass at Falken.



A Glacier Express about to enter the tunnel at Untere Rufenen.

The highlight of our second day was a ride on the *Glacier Express* to St Moritz. This was scheduled for just before noon so there was time for an hour's walk in the snow alongside the River Reuss. A glorious morning; sunny; clear air; blue skies; sparkling snow - but a freezing cold wind blowing down the valley towards us. We boarded our train No.7, the *Glacier Express*, and arrived at St Moritz five hours later. A long journey on the slowest express in the world (average speed 36kph) but what a route - a winter wonderland and a journey we won't forget in a hurry. We listened to the on-board commentary at every opportunity not wishing to miss anything of interest, although our eyes stayed glued to the incredible scenery for the whole journey - apart, of course, when we were eating lunch! Leaving Andermatt the route snakes its way up four half-spirals, three of which are in tunnels before reaching Nätschen then climbs to the top of the Oberalp Pass at 2,033m. From the pass, the train descends, still on the



Regio 856 leaves Natschen.

rack, to the first village on the Rhine, Tschamut-Salva, continuing down to Disentis and along the unspoilt Rhine Gorge (Switzerland's "Grand Canyon") to Chur. Next, the train retraces its steps for a few miles before turning south towards St Moritz. The journey from Chur was incredible with views of distant castles and, way below, the Schyn ravine and turbulent Albula river. Soon after Tiefencastel the famous 90m high Landwasser Viaduct, with its six arches, came into view. Cameras had been at the ready well before the approach; in fact, they had been at the ready for the entire journey - just a shame about the reflections from the panoramic windows.



An older and more leisurely form of transport at Andermatt.


Onwards, passing Filisur and climbing up through a single spiral tunnel to Bergün (with its railway museum - "make a note to visit here one day"), then on to Preda and the Albula Tunnel. To reach the tunnel without the need for a rack, the track ascends a series of loops and spiral tunnels, which climb the 416m from Bergün in some 12.5km. More than once we had the feeling we were going round in circles! The route is a



UNESCO World Heritage Site and is described, quite rightly, as one of the railway engineering wonders of the world. Finally, on past Samedan before reaching St Moritz where we boarded the regional train (our No.8) for the ten-minute ride to Pontresina and our hotel. It started to snow quite heavily in the evening. *"All the better for tomorrow's excursion on the snow blower!"* Day Two over. One walk, but only two trains!

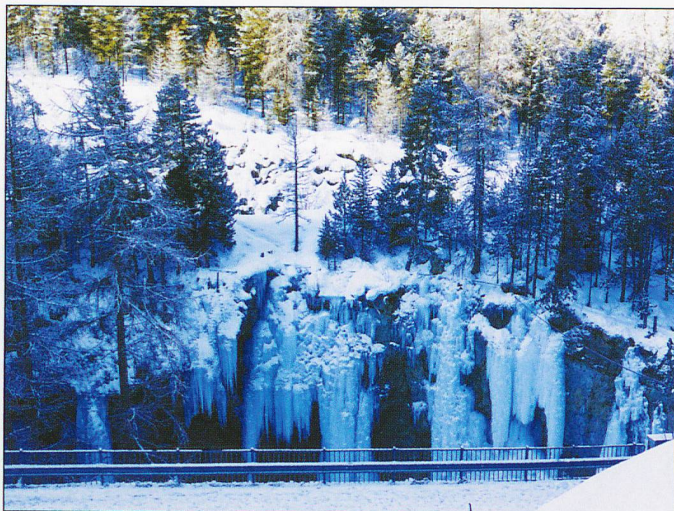


Our Glacier Express arrives on time at Andermatt.

In Part 2 I will describe the snow blower excursion, but if you are tempted by the idea of seeing the 100-year-old steam-driven snow blower in action, we can thoroughly recommend you take a look at what STC is offering for early 2019. We do not have any connection with STC - although Ivan at the AGM did bribe me with a chocolate! 



The very snowy River Reuss walk.



ABOVE: A frozen waterfall at Pontresina.

LEFT: Sadly - not our train.