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A Weekend on the Rails – Part 2



Carol Cotton continues her description of a busy Swiss visit

The "Extrazug" with plough 9132 at Pontresina.

All photos: John Cotton

In last June's *Swiss Express* I described our two-day, eight-train, journey from Zürich Airport to Pontresina, including a spectacular ride on the *Glacier Express*. Now day three - Sunday 18th February - and the main reason for our visit: an excursion with the RhB's unique 100 year old steam-powered snow blower over the Bernina Pass, the highest rail crossing of the Alps. We couldn't believe our luck. Despite a poor weather forecast, Sunday turned out a glorious day. Snow clad mountains, blue skies, crisp clear air and sunshine - at 9 am! As we walked towards Pontresina station, grey smoke was rising

in the distance - the snow blower was getting its steam up. Excitement mounted. Husband John quickened his pace.

At the station a few people, cameras at the ready, had gathered expectantly. Suddenly, the engine shed doors opened and the snow blower emerged - smoke and steam everywhere - to pull-up behind a fairly ancient Extrazug, consisting of RhB's Abe 4/4¹¹ Nos. 46 and 47 in which the passengers were to travel. There's nothing quite like a living, breathing steam train for attracting crowds. People were soon swarming all over the tracks heedless of any danger, taking photos of 1910 built

Dampfschneeschleuder Xrot No.9213. Acquired by the Rhätische Bahn a year or two later, the 50t veteran was going out to play - and we were going with it! As No.9213 was being coupled to emergency-power electro-diesel Gem 4/4 No.802 'Murmeltier', our guide explained what to expect: "During the next seven hours you are going to travel in the Extrazug to the best photo points along the Bernina line. The Dampfschneeschleuder will follow and you'll be able to get out and take photos of it in action. English-speaking people go into the Extrazug's first carriage, German-speakers the second." John and I quickly found seats in 1st Class and settled down in great anticipation with our fellow passengers. This was our train No.9.

In brilliant sunshine, Xrot 9213 emerges from shed at Pontresina.



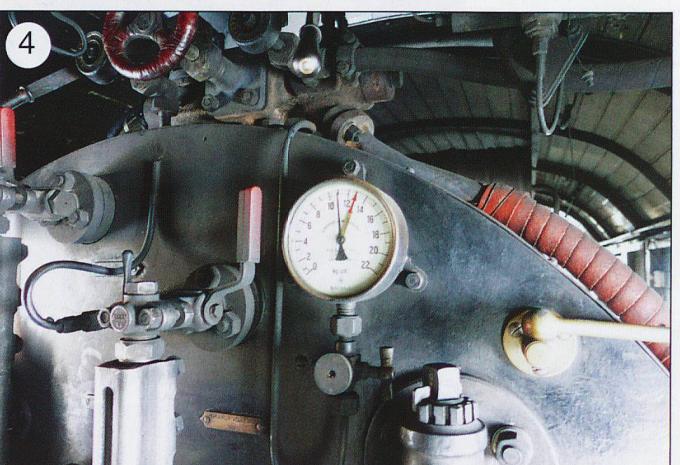
The little convoy set off precisely at 09.14: Xrot No.9213 and No.802 following our Extrazug. Ten minutes later we stopped at Runtunas. Everyone got out to clamber over a knee-deep snowdrift to watch the snow blower as it travelled a short distance past us and then reversed, not blowing snow at this point but giving our 50 passengers (and astonished passing cross-country skiers) a chance to take photos. Soon we were on our way again passing through larch and pine forests, many passengers hanging out of the open windows trying to get that unique shot, on our 20 minute trip to the next photo stop at Wildwestbrücke. Going first the Extrazug had been carving snow onto the tracks by means of a rear-mounted "contraption". Xrot No. 9213 followed a few minutes later, giving us enough time to jump down into the "well-over-the-knee" snow to take up the perfect photographic position as it cleared snow and came gracefully to a halt on the bridge. Then on to Ospizio Bernina on the frozen shores of Lago Bianco. Here, at the highest station of the RhB (2,253m), we pulled alongside Bernina Crocodile Ge4/4 No.182, which since 2001 has been subject to restoration by "Club 1889" in Poschiavo/Colgna. Whilst some visited the station café, others swarmed over the snow blower, or simply enjoyed the sunshine and the view down Val Poschiavo. In the circumstances it was easy to forget that we were at a railway station also hosting timetabled services, however the staff were continually alert ensuring that we kept clear of the operating tracks.

Recommencing our journey we descended towards Italy through two tunnels to Alp Grüm for lunch where we had a terrific view of the Palü Glacier – and the food was good too! Alp Grüm was the turning point of our excursion - the descent to Poschiavo with its many tunnels and tight curves must wait for another day - returning to Ospizio Bernina which, incidentally, was built in 1910 the same year as the snow blower. Here Xrot No.9213 was coupled up to the Bernina Crocodile, to be taken a little further alongside frozen Lago Bianco. Following in the Extrazug we were given our final opportunity to jump out into the snow to watch both locomotives as they rounded curves clearing snow and throwing it many metres to the right and, at one point, showering the assembled photographers. Then back to Ospizio Bernina for our last photo opportunity - this time to see the workings beneath the wooden housing of the Dampfschneeschleuder, before returning to Pontresina to part company with an incredible machine. Having some 'spare' time we decided to walk down to St Moritz but on emerging from the forest alongside the St Moritzersee, we had less than fifteen minutes to reach the station; some fast walking saw us (breathless) on the 17.48 regional service back to Pontresina with just one minute to spare - our 10th train. Day three over: two trains, one walk (and a bit of a run).

Monday dawned bright and clear for the homeward journey, but first a quick walk along the bitterly cold (-9°C)

1. The lucky passengers disembark from the 'Extrazug'.
2. Plough 9132 waits at Alp Grüm.
3. The Tender of Xrot 9213.
4. The impeller of Xrot 9213.
5. Ge 4/4/ No. 182 at Alp Grüm.





yet beautiful Val Roseg before taking the 11.02 service to Sameden (Train No.11), where we changed to Train No.12 the 11.16 to Chur. The journey down to Chur was just as incredible "in reverse", as it had been on the '*Glacier Express*' two days earlier. In fact, it was better because, without so many reflections from the panoramic windows, we could take clearer photos; secondly, we knew what to expect and thirdly, the sun was shining for the whole journey. We overheard a fellow passenger say that although he had been travelling on the line for 50 years, the scenery was the best ever. It was "Shock! Horror!" as we arrived a few minutes late in Chur, but a simple change from platform 10 to 9 ensured that we had no difficulty in catching our Train No. 13, the 13.09 IC to Zürich HB and then our final train for a 12 minute ride to the airport. Day Four: four trains, one walk. And the whole weekend on the rails? Fourteen trains, four walks and two hotels - magic! The moral of the story? If your train-mad partner's suggestion of a weekend on the rails fills you with fear and dread - fear not; plan your spare time; travel light, and enjoy.

A little about the Xrot 9213

At the turn of the 20thC, snow blowers were pushed by locomotives. However, for the metre-gauge Bernina line, having to work on gradients of 7%, and on curves of 45m radius, it was necessary to combine a snow blower and locomotive into a single flexible unit. Xrot 9213 consists of three parts: a long frame made from two strong C-irons, on which the mechanism and the boiler are mounted, and two independent bogies, each of which is designed as a three-axle locomotive. The initial idea of powering the unit electrically was soon dropped. Firstly, some 1,000hp is required to drive the machine and clear snow but the catenary doesn't allow such a large amount of energy to be drawn. Secondly, the power supply is likely to be interrupted when there is heavy snowfall, just when the machine is to be used! So, from the outset, the snow blower was designed to be coal-fired and steam-operated. The whole unit is covered by a wooden housing affording the crew some protection from the weather. The impeller, attached to the front of the unit, is driven by two additional cylinders via a crankshaft and bevel gears mounted in front of the boiler. The central cone and blades break up the snow and guide it into the impeller. The impeller flaps are fixed onto a cast steel disc 2.5m in diameter, which rotates at 160rpm and is surrounded by a funnel-shaped housing which feeds snow into it. Side-mounted adjustable wings allow excavation of snow up to a width of 3.5m. There is an opening at the top of the impeller housing through which snow is ejected to the right or left, depending on the rotational direction of the impeller, by the centrifugal force of the metal flaps. A duct that can be adjusted to the left or right blasts the snow away quite spectacularly - often into the faces of unsuspecting photographers! 

1. Plough 9132 in action.
2. The complex valve gear on Xrot 9213.
3. The crew give out some TLC to Xrot 9213.
4. The boiler from front cab of Xrot 9213.
5. Just to show the scale of Xrot 9213.

Definitely not recommended when in action!!