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Les Chemins de Fer à Voie Étroite de la Suisse Occidentale.



Richard Jones tours the metre-gauge lines of the Suisse Romande

A Villars train waits at Bex.

All photos: Richard Jones

Over the years I have become very familiar with, but never tired of, the metre-gauge lines of German and Romansch speaking Switzerland. Inspired by recent articles in *Swiss Express* I thought it was time to sample the narrow gauge operations in the French-speaking cantons. As usual we flew into Genève Aéroport and were soon on a Neuchâtel-bound train stopping only at Genève Cornavin and Yverdon-les-Bains. Staying at the excellent Hotel Alpes et Lac, across the road from the station, was both comfortable and convenient. The funicular to the lakeside and main part of the town was not quite in our basement, but as near as made no difference!

Solid cloud cover, and with snow obviously falling at around 1,000m and above, ruled out any mountain routes so we explored the town and then took the light railway from Place Pury to Boudry. After a couple of hundred metres the main depot for the trains and the trolley buses can be seen on the left with some rather complex overhead wiring. Before entering Boudry and again on the left there is a tram museum run by L'Association Neuchâteloise des Amis du Tramway, who organise a limited number of running days (www.anat.ch). In Boudry station there is another small depot that seemed to house some older trams. Old Boudry was an interesting, but exceptionally quiet, one-street town of ancient buildings and a castle housing a wine and vine museum. We retreated to the nearby, attractive and partially walled, town of Colombier for lunch in the only Auberge open. Following this, and to avoid the sleet, we chose to take a warm train on the SBB/TransN (Transports Publics Neuchâteloise) secondary line from Neuchâtel out to Buttes through pleasant scenery that would offer attractive summer walks.

The following day we took the train to the mediaeval walled town of Murten changing en route at the railway crossroads of Kerzers where there was the unexpected pleasure of an old signal box (now unused) dominating the junction. Murten was as good as its write up, perhaps even better for being devoid of tourists.

The signal box at Kerzers.





An Ins train arriving at Biel.

In pleasant sunshine we explored the walls and the old town before enjoying an excellent lunch. The weather then closed in so we returned to the comfort of the trains. Back to Ins and onto the Aare Seeland AG metre gauge to Biel. This passes the company's very modern and quite extensive depot at Tauffelen and ends in a dreadfully bleak concrete bunker beneath Biel station. We dashed through the busy main station onto a train towards Delle. Finding it did not stop at Tavannes (as planned) we rode to Glovelier. This rural junction may be charming on a warm summer's day but with a cold biting wind in March it has little to offer. There was an excellent tearoom, but with little time to enjoy the ambience we chose some portable patisserie for our onward journey.



The metre gauge line of the Chemin de Fer du Jura (CJ) climbs from Glovelier to the very isolated station of Combe-Tabeil, that only exists for the train to reverse as it zigzags up the steep valley side. Once out of the woods it travels through

LEFT: A Les Ponts de Martel train at La Chaux-de-Fonds.
BELOW: A La Chaux de Fonds train at Glovelier.



attractive open country with each halt offering a veritable Christmas tree of yellow footpath signs to satisfy any level of walking. At Le Noirmont another CJ line cuts back to Tavannes while the 'mainline' goes on to La Chaux de Fonds with its standard and metre-gauge sides. Arriving alongside a TransN single railcar it was tempting to take the 18km metre-gauge line to Les Ponts-de-Martel, but it was getting late. On the mainline return to Neuchâtel we experienced our second reversing station of the day at Chambrelieu, a rarity on a standard-gauge line but necessary for the ascent and descent of the most southerly ridge of the Jura.

The next day we travelled to Montreux, the second centre of our self-planned holiday. Wanting to travel the scenic route via Bern, Spiez and Zweisimmen to Montreux, the ticket office supplied a printout of a schedule. All ran to the minute throughout, including the 11 minute bus transfer between Chateau D'Oex and Montbovon, where (until June) major work on the track was in progress. Montreux station must be fairly rare in railway terms as it serves trains on three different gauges. Our first venture was on the 800mm rack line to the Rochers de Naye,

(1,970m) joining the train as it emerges from a steep tunnel at Les Planches, the first halt. A cheerful young driver shook hands as he welcomed us on-board to join the two other passengers – workers at the terminal building. "Did we really want to go to the very top?" To my response "Of course" he just grinned. After Caux there was much more snow and by Jaman (1,742m) we caught up with the snowplough! Unfortunately in the murk, plus the clouds of powdered snow it sent up, it was impossible to get a decent photo!



A train approaching Les Planches the disused loop in the foreground.


At the top the snowplough stopped in the station so we were just outside. Our cheerful driver said he would wait five minutes, "Long enough I think!" he added as I stepped out into -15C and a gale to take a photograph. Long enough. indeed. Returning through Glion, the HQ of the line, we noted its operational buildings, served by a traverser that makes the most of the limited space available. In the afternoon we ascended the MVR (Montreux-Vevy-Riviera) line from Vevey to Les Pléiades (1,348m). After the morning's excursion the altitude was lower, the sun was shining and the wind had abated, but descending other than by train required snowshoes. We returned to the



TOP & MIDDLE: Rochers-de-Naye trains in the snow.
 ABOVE: Rochers-de-Naye snow plough at Glion.
 BELOW: The Glion traversing system.



request halt of Bois de Chexbres, which is on such a steep gradient that it is a testament to the wonders of rack railways how ascending trains move off so smoothly from such an incredible "hill start". From there we had a pleasant walk to Blonay, one terminus of the Blonay-Chamby Museum Railway that operates at weekends between May and October. See www.blonay-chamby.ch

The following day we visited Bex and the line to Villars: experiencing once again a railway in the highway, and the screaming flanges as we went over the last sinuous kilometres following the road into Villars. The Swiss Rail Pass does not cover the final stage of the line to Col de Bretaye, but after all the time spent in rather overheated trains it was nice just to walk in the snow, with magnificent views of Les Diablerets and the Dents du Midi set against that wonderful deep blue sky that we all imagine when our thoughts stray to these areas. Villars station was a busy nodal point with several bus connections and, as we watched, a small "goods train" prepared for the ascent to the top of the line. Our final full day was planned for Aigle and after the joy of mountain walking at Villars we hoped to repeat the experience at Les Diablerets. The line is most attractive with the wonderful contrast of the castle and extensive vineyards of the Rhone valley, followed by deep chasms and then the Alpine uplands. Again we had to transfer to a bus connection as a landslip had blocked the line above Le Sépey, where the train normally reverses. A couple of trains had obviously been isolated at the Les Diablerets end of the line and were operating a limited shuttle service along part of the length. Walking in pristine snow in clear alpine air was a fitting culmination to the trip. The next day we set off on our homeward journey finally leaving the efficient civility of the rail system at the heaving 'cattle market' of Genève Aéroport. We never did make it to the Ste Croix and Champéry so, I guess we will just have to go back – soon I hope! 

Looking down on Villars Station as the 'goods train' departs.

