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Too Much Snow – The Avalanche Winter

David & Elizabeth Carpenter recall the severe winter of 1999.



A very snowy Luzern at night.

All photos: David Carpenter

We had been to Switzerland once before but had not managed to visit the Transport Museum (VHS) in Luzern. We also wanted to experience Switzerland in the snow. So a trip to a local travel agent saw us book a four-night stay in Luzern in February 1999. It was grey and damp on landing at Zürich, so it was only when climbing out of Thalwil on the Gotthard line that we first saw some lying snow. It didn't seem particularly deep, but everywhere was white. On arrival at Luzern the roads and pavements were clear as we made our way through the Old Town to the hotel.

After spending our first day at the VHS we awoke the following morning to a covering of snow. The plan was to take a boat to Brunnen, train to Arth Goldau and then go up the Rigi. On the boat trip it was snowing so we didn't see very much before we joined the train for the short journey to

Arth Goldau where we found the Rigi Bahn terminus on the bridge and climbed aboard the train. Before it had gone very far it started snowing heavily and it became increasingly difficult to see what was outside. At Rigi Kulm we alighted from the train into an absolute 'white-out' and several inches of snow, which came well over our boots. Through the blizzard we could just make out the summit building and went inside for a most welcome cup of hot chocolate. On the return journey the conductor soon came through the train and started talking to us. After a short while he went away and came back with a glossy book about the Rigi Bahnen and gave it to us as a gift. It had some wonderful photographs and it didn't matter that the text was in German - we were delighted with it.

For the last day of our holiday we had planned to go on the Brünig line to Interlaken and have a look round the town. Again we woke to a covering of snow but it didn't seem that heavy and the route to the station was clear. At the platform for the Interlaken train there was a printed notice in German, mentioning a couple of place names we hadn't heard of. It did not mean anything to us, but the departure board and platform indicator both said the train was going to Interlaken so we climbed aboard. Shortly the conductor came through and asked where we were going. When we said Interlaken, he told us there had been "a snow slide", that the train was only going to Giswil from where we would have to get



Two trains wait at Rigi Kulm in the "white out"!

a bus to Meiringen. "What happens then?" we asked. "There might be a train, I am not sure", was the reply! We decided to continue with our journey and at Giswil there was a coach waiting with snow chains round the wheels. We set off at speed up the mountain road with the snow chains clattering somewhat alarmingly beneath us. At the Brünig summit it was obvious why the train service was suspended - the snow was up to the level of the overhead wires! We descended to Meiringen where the coach left us at the station and disappeared off into the distance. We went into the station and found just the rails of the platform track were visible, with all other tracks covered by deep snow. We found

a notice pinned up giving details of the emergency arrangements. There was indeed a train service from there, but to Brienz from where a special boat service would take us on to Interlaken. With the coach gone the only option was to continue our journey. Whilst discussing this we were joined by a local girl who told us she lived in the mountains and was also making her way to Interlaken.

Before long the train came in. It was three coaches with a loco at each end. The Swiss girl sat with us on the train and told us the Berner Oberland had been particularly badly hit with many places cut off. A helicopter service was provided to Grindelwald for essential journeys. On arrival at Brienz, there was about an hour to wait for the boat, so we suggested she join us for a coffee. We found a café just across the road from the station, and were pleased to stay in there in the warmth until it was time for the boat. She spoke very good English and asked us a lot about Tony Blair and his government - it seemed she knew more about this than we did!

We went outside and stood on the pier in the blizzard. Eventually the boat appeared through the gloom and we climbed aboard. While initially excited about being on a boat on Brienzensee when they didn't normally run, the novelty soon wore off as the boat shuttled from side to side along the lake, providing a service to every available landing stage. It took ages, and for some reason, which escaped us, only went to Bönigen from where there was a bus to Interlaken. Fortunately buses were waiting and we were soon on our way. By now it was mid-afternoon so we decided to abandon our look around. Interlaken and make our way back by train using another route. We didn't have any timetables with us, so on arrival at Interlaken Ost we went to the enquiry desk and asked for the next train to Bern. "Track five, in one minute" was the reply. We rushed down the subway not really expecting to make it, but as we came up the steps a member of staff was looking at us - perhaps the man in the enquiry

Luzern from Vierwaldstättersee.



A Rigi Bahn train waits on the overhead bridge station at Arth Goldau.

office had radioed the platform to say two more were on their way. We boarded the train and made our way back to Luzern via Bern and the cross-country route through Langnau without any problem. That evening we took a last walk across the Kappelbrücke where one of the stallholders told us there had been too much snow and the ski resorts were unhappy as they had had to close all the runs. She also told us she couldn't get to see her boyfriend in Grindelwald because, sensibly, she had decided it was a non-essential journey.

We woke the following morning to hear a clock chiming. "Was that seven?" asked Elizabeth. It was. Following the traumas of the previous day we had forgotten to set our alarm clocks. This gave us just over an hour to get up, have breakfast, check out of the hotel and make our way to the station for the 08.10 to the airport. We made it, due in part to the efficiency of the hotel staff. We had expected to see Switzerland in the snow, but became a bit overwhelmed by it all. We later learned it was the worst winter since 1951 and had been dubbed "*The Avalanche Winter*". Ten lives were lost and over CHF600m worth of damage caused. We haven't been back to Switzerland in the winter since! 

