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Autumn on the Rhätische Bahn

Michael Donovan



ABe44^{III} Nos.51 and 52 working 'Bernina Express' approaching Ospizio Bernina.

All photos: Michael Donovan

As I was not able to stay in Tarasp this autumn for my annual walking holiday, I took the opportunity to cast around for somewhere completely different, finding accommodation in Pontresina, still just in the Engadin, but at the entrance to the Bernina Pass, and offering many new walks.

RhB Infrastructure.

It's been several years since I last travelled over the Albula, but that was the obvious route from arriving at Chur to Pontresina. An extra bridge has been constructed west of Reichenau/Tamins, providing double track from the station over the Hinterrhein to the point at which the Albula splits from the line to Disentis/Mustér. A new loop was being constructed just south of Thusis, which seems strange given that double-track was provided from the station for one signal section only a few years ago. I was amazed at the amount of

equipment (and temporary accommodation) at Preda and Spinas for the construction of the replacement tunnel.

Arriving at Samedan, where there is a cross-platform interchange between the Chur-St Moritz expresses and the Scuol/Tarasp-Pontresina shuttles, the track through Platform 3 had been severed at the north end. This meant that the interchanges were taking place on platforms 4 and 5 instead of 2 and 3. It was only a few days later, when I was returning by train from a walk, that I realised the solum (the track bed) between Bever, where the line over the Albula joins the line along the Engadin, and Samedan was being widened, apparently to accommodate a second track. That would certainly ease a bottleneck – the effect of which was demonstrated when I was on my way home, when two southbound trains, one from the Landeck to St Moritz via the Engadin, the second from Chur to Tirano, were immediately succeeded by two northbound trains – the Pontresina to Scuol/Tarasp and the St Moritz to Chur services. There was a notice announcing several days of 'bustitution' of early and late trains, presumably because of work in connection with the remodelling. On this occasion, Ge4/4^{II} No.629, adorned with 'Neubau Albula Tunnel' on its side, was stabled in platform 3.

After six days of walking, I decided to rest my feet, and took a train over the glorious Bernina Pass to Tirano, just over the border into Italy. A long new section of double track has been constructed north of Poschiavo, and a short new loop to the south. This was because the infrastructure through the station had been reduced to single track, with a temporary platform, to make way for the construction of new



ABe44^{III} No.55 and 56 await their next duty, Tirano.

holding sidings at the north end, east side. Space was always limited here, and provision of three-car Allegra sets instead of Triebwagen (motor coaches, usually operating in pairs), which are maintained at Poschiavo, has made the situation extremely difficult.

RhB Operations.

The newer, dual-voltage Allegra units now seem to have a monopoly on the Chur-St Moritz services, although still not in push-pull mode (the driving trailer vehicles are still stored at Landquart, although two had been moved to Chur and a third to Samedan during my stay). There may be a problem for those trains that incorporate a dining car. Because of their dual-voltage capability, they also work the Chur-Tirano and Davos Platz-Tirano services. Otherwise, these Allegras work indiscriminately, alongside the six ABe4/4iii Triebwagen over the Bernina. The Triebwagen usually operate in pairs, but I noted several instances of one working a train on its own, including on one occasion on a pair of Tirano-St Moritz '*Bernina Express*' services. I could see the line from my window and, as an example of the usage, I observed the following on the 18.48 St Moritz to Poschiavo: 2 Triebwagen plus 4-wheel wagon; Allegra plus 4-wheel wagon; Allegra plus three bogies of logs; 1 Triebwagen plus one coach; Allegra with no trailing load.

I got into the habit of using Surovas station as it was nearer (both horizontally and vertically!) than Pontresina station, which is two minutes away by train. This, ignoring the difference between working and advertised times - clearly not just a British phenomenon! Arriving there one morning, I found Triebwagen No.46, no longer in passenger service, standing in the loop. It was attached to one 4-wheel wagon on which was mounted a grab (and which was provided with extendable props to prevent overturning), and a second wagon onto which logs were being loaded. I don't know where they were unloaded, but it must have been further south, as I subsequently saw the same train between Morteratsch and Surovas, heading back for another load. A few days later, the same formation was observed stabled at Pontresina. Walking through the local woods one day, I found myself at one of the numerous open level crossings. Nothing was due, but I heard a train approaching. It was one of the two RhB electro-diesels, GemNo.802, hauling a single freight bogie. I hadn't seen either locomotive for some years, and someone had told me - obviously incorrectly - that they had been withdrawn.

On my last day, I visited Pontresina station, and was surprised to see the 11.48 St Moritz to Tirano, formed of Triebwagen No.56 with five coaches, hadn't left at its booked time. The driver was peering distractingly back along the platform. A couple of minutes later, a four-car push-pull set, powered by Triebwagen No.516, arrived from the direction of Samedan, unusually crossing the

layout to provide a cross-platform interchange with the train to Tirano. (Incidentally, that will have required some electrical switching, as platform 2 is usually only used by the Bernina line services, and this Triebwagen is single-voltage). The train to Tirano was soon on its way, about ten minutes late, and the other train departed empty towards Samedan. My guess is that the Chur to St Moritz service had been running late and, rather than destroy the Engadin service by holding the connection (it's on a short turnaround at both ends), a special had been laid on for passengers changing at Samedan for Pontresina and the Bernina. 



TOP: A Beⁱⁱ No.46 at Surovas.

MIDDLE: Gem No.802 leaves Surovas heading north.

BOTTOM: PA020914 Ge66ⁱⁱ No.705 arrives at Pontresina with freight from Samedan.