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Berlin to the 'Beer Barrels'

John Yellowlees



The top station of the Stoos Funicular.

Photo: John Yellowlees

Although living in Edinburgh this leg of my Swiss trip commenced in Berlin, as I was interested in sampling the recently introduced ÖBB's *'Nightjet'* sleeper service between the German Capital and Zürich.


Helpful staff and a comfortable bed on the *'Nightjet'* journey brought me to Zürich in a good frame of mind to get my head round the local rail geography – but even then I started to get confused when Dietikon led to Dottikon-Dintikon! From Dietikon we enjoyed the 'up-hill-down-dale' ride on the metre-gauge Bremgarten-Dietikon-Bahn whose tramway origins were apparent. En-route we came face-to-face with a pair of very large squirrels, not a regular occurrence on the East Coast Main Line near my home. After Bremgarten the change to a former standard-gauge alignment was very apparent.

Reverting to the standard gauge from Wohlen through Dottikon-Dintikon, we continued via Lenzburg to Oberentfelden where an enchanting transfer through the streets led us to the metre-gauge Wynental- und Suhrentalbahn, here retaining a surviving on-street section which soon crossed the standard-gauge on the level (thinking of the ECML should this community be twinned with Newark?) before climbing to the terminus and depot at Schöftland. A first class compartment with a TV news channel was an unexpected feature of this journey on what in most countries would have been the equivalent of a local tram trip!

Arriving at Zofingen I was delighted to recognise the wooden SBB logo featured in the September *Swiss Express*. Unfortunately there was no sign of Heidi!

Changing trains again at Luzern, our destination now was the world's steepest funicular opened in December 2017, the incomparable Stoosbahn. I understand that some Swiss have irreverently dubbed its unique rolling stock 'The Beer Barrels'. We forgave the Swiss railway-builders for not providing a direct line from Schwyz when the bus-driver accepted our rail tickets. The smooth magnificence of the climb in the rotating 'barrel' sections (or cans?) through the three tunnels

to the Alpine meadow gave the 743m climb an almost understated magnificence. It occurred to me that having swum uphill like an upright seahorse, the train turned into a horizontal caterpillar, as it seemed to forage across the Alpine meadow heading to the top station. Our hotel at Stoos specialised in conferences and *'wellbeing'* (which some might think incompatible!), and the tinkling of cowbells provided a welcome distraction from contemplation of what we might be missing. Returning down to normality, after a wonderful night of fine dining (my kind of 'wellbeing'), we caught sight of the abandoned predecessor Schwyz-Stoos funicular that commenced operation in 1933, and wondered whether it is to be removed, or perhaps left as a relic of older technology.

The beer theme re-appeared as changing trains on our return we sampled some of the products on offer at a beer festival on Zürich Hbf. – it would have been rude not to! This put us in a mellow mood for the autumn colours that would become evident on our return journey towards Germany. However, Switzerland offered a final dramatic scenic flourish with the sight from the train of Europe's largest waterfall on the Rhine at Schaffhausen. 

The railway passes right beside the Rhine Falls at Schaffhausen.

Photo: Bremgarten

