

Visiting Swiss Railways, 2017 : our Swiss news editor takes a personal journey through today's railway scene

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Visiting Swiss Railways, 2017

Bryan Stone

Our Swiss News Editor takes a personal journey through today's railway scene



Another 460 hauled train leaves the Bözberg tunnel.

All photos: Bryan Stone except where shown

This is not a travel guide! My object is to describe something of what to expect, when the long-anticipated visit to Switzerland begins; for it is yet again changing rapidly, the network and the trains, with old friends now sadly missing, and former familiar standards now demoted to lower-grade duties. Naturally we all think of the exciting railways in our holiday regions, in Vaud or Graubünden, Berner Oberland or Appenzell, but of course Swiss railways have an everyday task first, mostly admirably executed, of sustaining national economy, mobility and coherence. For most Swiss, railways mean suburban trains and mainline expresses, and the BOB, the AB, and the TPC are far away.

Wherever your visit begins, Zürich, Basel or Genève, by air or rail, you will be in at the deep-end at once, with many trains on many routes, most of them busy. On the basic network, connecting these places, and on the Gotthard

and Lötschberg lines, there is an hourly, even half-hourly, pattern, both of local and of fast trains. That must not mean monotony, but rather the reverse, as rolling stock is at present tightly stretched and surprises are always turning up. Basic main line services can be double-deck Inter-City stock; EW-IV standard InterCity cars (nearly 40 years old, but still many passengers' favourites); the 500 Class tilting trains originally built for service on the lines at the foot of the Jura, but now also on the Gotthard and other lines. All of these are good, but down the scale you can find a suburban 511 set pressed into a long-distance haul, and at the worst (as on the Zürich Airport-Basel 'Flugzug', on a bad day), a FLIRT local set. Interspersed are TGV trains to Paris and Euro-City trains to Milano, German ICEs and OeBB Railjets on their specific routes, integrated as far as possible into the Takt regular interval pattern.



There is also heavy freight traffic, first of all international, with over 60% of the transalpine freight on rail (the law requires more still), taking either the Gotthard or the Lötschberg routes. These routes include the two new base tunnels, the Gotthard being 57km long. Capacity is still a problem; there are very many trains. They share routes with passenger traffic, on congested approach lines. The number of freight trains, many of them intermodal block loads, both to and from northern ports, but also inner-European intermodal, can only be appreciated by spending some hours at Muttensz, Spiez, Bellinzona or Arth-Goldau. These trains are very diverse; open access in the EU means

Intercity double deck stock is seen all over Switzerland, as here at Luzern.

that several international private train operators are involved, as well as Cargo divisions of SBB, BLS and DB. Two hours at Spiez some months ago showed me trains of twelve different operators, not only containers but also block loads of new automobiles, oils and chemicals, even china clay; and the normal passenger services are also intense. Some international freight works through Buchs for the Arlberg. Standing at Basel Badischer Bhf or MuttENZ you see almost all north-south freight, before flows to Lötschberg and Gotthard divide south of Basel. A key route is the Bözberg line through Frick to Brugg. This line filters off north-south Gotthard freight, which takes a route through Muri and Rotkreuz to Arth-Goldau. Meanwhile, Lötschberg transit freight takes the route Liestal – Olten – Burgdorf – Bern to reach Spiez.

Substantial Swiss internal freight traffic connects western Switzerland, the Basel region and the North-east. This is today concentrated on the line through Neuchâtel and Biel at the foot of the Jura, including block oil and fuels, chemicals and container trains, these last for SwissPost, which has concentration depots at Frauenfeld, Härkingen and Daillens. A further concentration is in the region Olten – Zürich – Winterthur and beyond. It is always surprising, when the dense commuter services around Brugg or Lenzburg are interrupted several times hourly by heavy freight trains for domestic industries and distribution. By the way, the Swiss Army still generates some block trains of AFVs and artillery; Bure (near Porrentruy) and Bière (on the TPC) are important centres, the latter involving interchange at Morges to metre gauge transporter trucks. Some main lines have today very little freight, as main flows are channelled as described; and wagon-load business at small stations is no longer an issue. That means that the fascinating rail tractors of the past are today rare, as are station yards and goods sheds.

Local passenger services take two forms, the first being as part of regional tariff and traffic bodies. This is encouraged by the laws of regional and national subsidies; national policy is to minimise private transport in cities, reduce congestion and climate damage, and support general mobility. Around the big cities the regional rail services are coordinated, integrated and offered as a system, in which each route plays a part. Such network systems are usually marketed as S-services, and are dense and frequent, with politically fixed tariffs. They may also embrace some very local lines and narrow gauge railways and tramways. They are usually at a high technical standard, and demand increases regularly.

The other form of local trains is the remaining stopping trains, purely local services, some run by SBB, BLS or others, and some representing that variety to which many of our beloved 'private' railways belong. Some, as in the mountains, have



TOP: The unusual can still be found, like the street running here at Montbovon.

MIDDLE: An hour at Spiez is always worthwhile for the variety of trains passing through, not just hauled by Swiss locos.

BOTTOM: 500 011 leans into a curve near Grellingen.



TOP: A suburban 511 set at Basel.

MIDDLE: A modern BLS 485 017 heads a train of new cars through Weil am Rhein.

BOTTOM: SOB 526 051 stops at Pfäffikon.

primarily a leisure or tourist vacation. Only they are not private in the literal sense, but non Federal; they may well be owned by Cantons though some still have a handful of shareholders in the villages en route. Increasingly, mergers have reduced variety, and increased efficiency; and all have more or less subsidised lives. Many have been closed in the past, but those active today (and they are many) lead a new life. They vary between the 4km Oensingen-Balsthal, and extensive networks such as the TPF based on Fribourg. And there are a few truly independent, and very attractive, lines such as the MOB, between Zweisimmen and Montreux and branches.


The reproach of monotony might apply more on today's local lines, where Swiss manufacturer Stadler has delivered, to SBB, BLS, SOB and more, hundreds of new FLIRT sets, and many similar on the metre-gauge, banishing the last idiosyncratic collections of ancient vehicles to be found only a few years ago. Proper financing, laws on access for the handicapped, and creative marketing, have also taken over, and most passengers, whose number keeps increasing, are happy even if 'railfans' are not always.

Another major change concerns stations. Swiss signalling tradition required a manned station, which was also the block post with locking frame and signals. Even the simplest had their office, ticket window, geraniums, timetables, toilets, baggage and post trolleys, etc. The days of milk churns and post sacks were not long past. Passengers walked across at rail level to their arriving train, supervised by the stationmaster. You could send off your luggage or skis in advance. Today this is all gone. Centralised train control (with a handful of dispatching centres, one of them at Zürich Airport) mean that local stations, including quite big ones, are now unstaffed halts. Concrete has sometimes been heavily, if thoughtfully, applied where once a chalet and upstairs apartment stood. Most passengers have seasons, or pay on-line, or use a ticket machine. There is no one around. I think I miss this most.

So, in all this, after nearly 50 years, where do I go? Our journeys radiate from Basel, starting on an urban tramway, which was once a very rustic local line and now has a frequency of eight services an hour. We often take the hourly trains to Interlaken, to then be in holiday mood on steamer, BOB, WAB or MIB; and we always enjoy Luzern and the Zentralbahn, which still offers a great cross-section of Switzerland as I know it, when that is sometimes a two-edged observation. The CJ in the Jura is always a joy, as are the MOB and Tpf lines. We meet friends in Brugg, or enjoy the line to Neuchâtel; and now and again we go to Chur and take the RhB to Bergün or the Engadin.

And that must be my conclusion, for I always

loved the Rhätische Bahn, like nothing else I know. That's not just because of the scenery, the spiral tunnels and the UNESCO Heritage. It's because at Chur you enter a different world of travel; the staff; the frequent trains; the operating; the places and the feel. It can have appalling weather, be capricious (also in timekeeping) and yet still enchants every time. But it's a long way from our Basel home; it cannot be what we understand by our everyday Swiss railway. But now you, dear reader, will excuse me for omitting your favourite, and will go off to find more.

Bryan Stone was moved to Switzerland in 1968 by his then employer, British Rail – he never came home! 



ABOVE: A Euro-city train reaches its destination in Milan.

BELOW LEFT: 523 031 at Yverdon in 2012.

BELOW RIGHT: When we talk of "tank trains" this is probably not what we envisage. Re430 356 hauls a rake of military vehicles near Cressier . Photo Marion Stephani



Where's Heidi?

Maybe the staff from this short works train have nipped over to McDonalds for lunch. But at what station are they working?

Answer on page 46.

Having had several offers of images from other members purporting to be Heidi, the editor would like to point out that, unlike the star of Johanna Spyri's books, this Heidi does exist and is the wife of an SRS member. She has actually been to the various locations used in these photos.

Now if you happen to be called William Tell, or even Betty Bossi, there may be an opening for you in the magazine !! 