

Alps and lakes extravaganza : the first part of Robert H. Foster's description of his meticulously planned annual excursion to Italy

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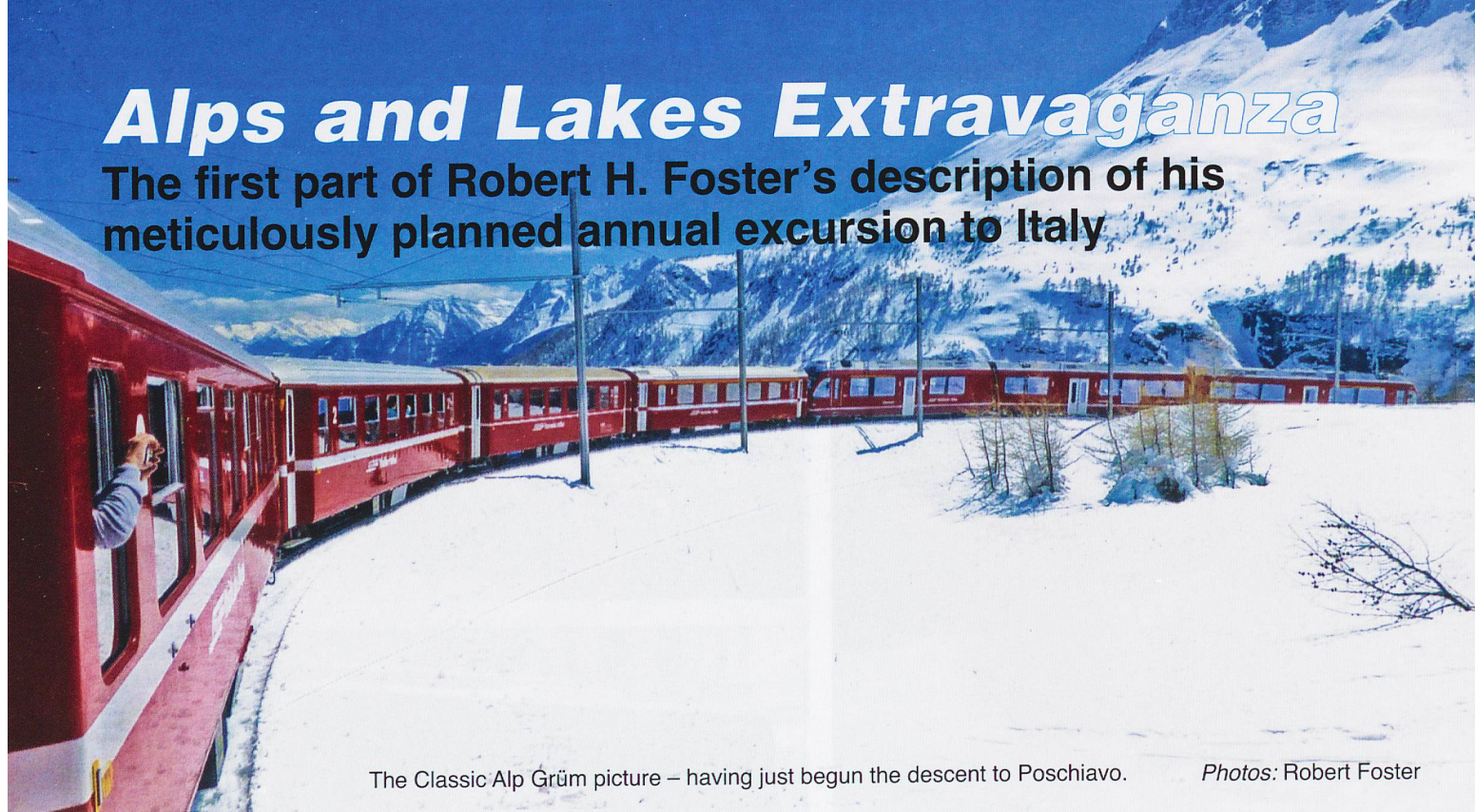
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Alps and Lakes Extravaganza

The first part of Robert H. Foster's description of his meticulously planned annual excursion to Italy



The Classic Alp Grüm picture – having just begun the descent to Poschiavo.

Photos: Robert Foster

There is surely no better railway round-trip available than one that encompasses the Albula, Bernina, Gotthard and Lötschberg Pass lines. I have got into the mode of undertaking such a round-trip journey every April/May, travelling with a regular group of friends. Multiple variations of route are possible, but the one non-negotiable element is

lunch in the restaurant car attached as the rear coach of the RhB 11.58 Chur-St. Moritz service as far as Samedan, then to Pontresina and over the Bernina Pass, arriving Tirano at 16.20. The southbound journey concludes with an Italian train to Varenna on Lake Como, and ferry to Bellagio, where the family of one of our group owns two of the hotels.

Although sometimes we fly to Switzerland, this year (despite at least twice the time and cost) we travelled overland leaving Skipton in North Yorkshire at 06.55 on the through 'East Coast' train to King's Cross on which breakfast is included in First Class. This gave a generous 95 minutes at St. Pancras in which, before check-in, to buy our lunch, as we travelled Standard Class to Paris where arrival at Gare du Nord was 14.47 (despite the ticket saying 14.59). Booking into one of the front coaches - not an easy task - we were soon out of the station and reached Gare de l'Est on foot 10-minutes later, in time to board the 15.20 ICE 3, destination Frankfurt. That is tight timing, but if the Eurostar had been late, there were back-up trains - provided we had our tickets stamped by the train manager - 35 and 95 minutes later, although these would have jeopardised our evening meal.

I had booked us from Paris through to Schaffhausen, at €69 each, with a 13-hour "stop-over" at Villingen on the edge of the Black Forest. The DB website (www.bahn.de), which now opens for bookings six-months before travel, permits this but the exercise is only possible with patience, route knowledge and the detail provided by the European Rail Timetable, my railway bible for over 40 years. (Before my intervention www.bahn.de had chosen a route via Karlsruhe to Villingen taking an hour longer, then on via

ALPS AND LAKES EXTRAVAGANZA

28 APRIL TO 02 MAY 2017

Day 1 Friday 28th April

			Formation
0655	Skipton-King's X: Coach L	0957	E+10
1131	St. Pancras-Paris Nord: Voiture 13, places 71/2/5/6/83	1447	e320
1520	Paris Est-Strasbourg [to Frankfurt]: Wagen 26, plätze 32-6	1708	ICE 3
1722	Strasbourg-Offenburg 1752/59-Black Forest-Villingen	1905	dmu/E+5t
Overnight at Hotel Ketterer, Villingen, 200m from station			

Day 2 Saturday 29th April

0809	Villingen-Singen 0852/0902-Schaffhausen - see notes (b)(e)	0914	E+4t/dmu
0947	Schaffhausen-Zürich HB - see note (c)	1025	E+7
1037	Zürich HB-Landquart-Chur [IC from Basel SBB]	1152	E+9
1158	Chur-Albula Pass-Samedan (1345/48)-Pontresina (m)	1355	E+10
1408	Pontresina-Bernina Pass (7432')-Poschiavo-Tirano (m)	1620	emu+3
1708	Tirano (FS)-Varenna [to Milano C.]	1835	E+9
1910	Ferry Varenna-Bellagio	1925	

Day 3 Sunday 30th April and Day 4 Monday 1st May

Static in Bellagio, Lake Como, staying at Hotel Bellagio
Salita Grande 6, 22021 Como Tel. 0039 031 952 202

Day 5 Tuesday 2nd May

0805	Ferry Bellagio-Menaggio	0820	
0832	Bus C12 Menaggio-Lugano; linea 2 to Paradiso via station	c.0945	
1011	Lugano-Mont Ceneri tunnel-Bellinzona	1038	E+9
1051	Bellinzona-Gotthard pass/high tunnel-Erstfeld-Göschenen	1255	emu
1259/1311	Göschenen-Andermatt (m) (r)	1309/1321	E+3
1337/1354*	Andermatt-Furka tunnel-Brig (m) (part r)	1533/1540*	E+3/7*
1636	Brig-Lötschberg pass/high tunnel-Spiez-Bern (see note (d))	1820	emu
1834	Bern-Lausanne (1942)-Genève Aeroport [IC from St. Gallen]	2027	2E+15t
or 1558/1628	Brig-Sion-Montreux-Lausanne - then as above	1743/1810	E+10
2140	GVA-MAN	2230	A320

= restaurant car (antique on 1158 Chur-St. Moritz); m = metre gauge; r = rack; t = two tier

Notes

- (a) Paris Gare du Nord to Gare de l'Est is an 8-min walk; Varenna to Varenna Pier is 6-min.
- (b) During the wait at Schaffhausen, detour is possible to Schloss Laufen am Rhein to cross the Rhine falls. Timings are 0921 Schaffhausen-Schloss Laufen 0927/30-Schaffhausen 0937.
- (c) Platforms at limited time changes: Offenburg 2-4; Zürich 15-7; Chur, Samedan: x platform.
- (d) Alternative is Brig-Lausanne direct (quaere Metro to/from Ouchy), dinner at Les Trois Rois, Rue de Simplan 7, opp. station.
- (e) Villingen trains are Karlsruhe-Konstanz.

* Second option is *Glacier Express* (sic).

Konstanz and St. Margrethen instead of Zürich.) First Class was barely worth the extra €29 as we were seated randomly in the other half of the buffet/restaurant area. After quick changes at Strasbourg and Offenburg, we joined a 5-coach double-deck Konstanz-bound train through the Black Forest to our overnight stop at Villingen, reached at 19.06. We passed through the remarkable Triberg triple reverse loop with its near unbroken gradient of 1 in 40 - on paper similar to the Nordrampe of the Lötschberg - but we saw little scenery, mostly trees interspersed by no fewer than 36 tunnels.

We assembled next morning at 07.45 for the 200m walk to the station where we purchased breakfast - coffee and pastries - from the excellent station buffet. Another double-decker took us from this Danube source country at 08.07 to Singen, there changing to an elderly DMU bound for Basel Bad, as far as Schaffhausen. Here the real fun began. We had time for a quick dash to Schloss Laufen, and back to Schaffhausen to join an IR train to Zürich. Thus we saw the spectacular Rhein Falls from both east and west sides - the latter three times - and crossed over them twice! We couldn't miss the train back at Schloss Laufen just 3 minutes after our arrival, as the line there is single-track, but I would not risk these tight changes other than in Switzerland and knowing the infrastructure. By design we were in the front coach on arrival at Zürich HB so giving us a short walk round the buffers for the 10.37 to Chur, on which we occupied the rear First Class coach. This conveniently draws up at 11.52 opposite the restaurant car of the 11.58 to St. Moritz. Of interest was the 10.40 Zürich-Budapest (Keleti) Railjet on the adjacent platform at Zürich which followed closely, again coming alongside at Sargans.

An additional Pullman open coach had been added for us at Chur, making an 11-vehicle formation, hauled not by the usual locomotive but by a white 'Allegra' three-car EMU. Lunch was as splendid as ever with three-courses, coffee, and schnapps poured from on-high. There is little spare time but some did take the classic photograph of the Landwasser viaduct approaching Filisur and the remarkable multi-spiral climb from Bergun to Preda on a ruling gradient of 3.5% (1 in 28.6). The previous year, the 3-minute connection at Samedan had to wait until I had paid the bill for lunch - the manual 'Gourmino' credit card machine is limited to CHF200 per transaction, so requiring payment in instalments. (I act as banker on these journeys). In the Albula tunnel we had crossed beneath the watershed of the Rhein and were back to that of the Danube, at Samedan crossing its tributary the Inn that is incidentally longer and rises much higher than its parent.

The 18-minute interchange at Pontresina allowed the first proper leg stretch for several hours before we boarded the Bernina line train over this extraordinary route - the steepest adhesion (1 in 14) and at 2,253m (7,392 feet) the highest rail crossing of the Alps - opened in 1910 and electrified from inception. Although built as a tourist railway it does carry some freight, mainly timber. Note that we avoid the antiseptic atmosphere of the Glacier Express and Bernina Express (sic) trains: we are travellers, not tourists, and on our trains the windows opened!

The best temperature recorded in Zürich earlier that week had been 5°C with rain. So we knew to expect snow. Indeed

the rotary plough had been out, but we passed over this moonscape landscape in glorious sunshine. The cable car at Diavolezza was operational and one of our party suggested that, if we had set off earlier, we could have managed a few round trips downhill on skis. The helicopter-style descent from Alp Grüm to Poschiavo was stunning as ever - much longer than the descents into Andermatt and Martigny (and without rack) - the views not obscured by trees as at this height they were barely in leaf. Here the water, hitherto draining to the North and Black Seas, drains to the Adriatic. After the exotic Brusio spiral viaduct, the last kilometre is down the street, an intriguing phenomenon slowly being eliminated elsewhere. I first traversed this route as a student in 1974, en-route from Amsterdam to Milan. At Campocologno, Italian border guards removed me from the train on suspicion that by taking such an indirect route I was carrying drugs. I was soon released and allowed on the next train an hour later, but suffered the penalty of seeing my intended overnight train pull out of Milano Centrale just as my train arrived 20-minutes late.

After the customary ice cream in the square at Tirano, we took the 17.08 FS train, a 9-coach loco-propelled formation to Milano, as far as Varenna. Run-down stations and the unkempt exterior and interior of the train were a complete contrast to what we had left in Switzerland. Two dead stands, also crossing an opposing train at the wrong place, got us to Varenna 14 minutes late, sadly par for the course in Italy, the only one of our trains that was not within a minute or two of time. After a short downhill walk in the evening sun to the pier we boarded the ferry for the 15-minute sailing to Bellagio, arriving at 19.25, after one of the most spectacular railway experiences available anywhere. +

*Part 2 covering Robert and friends well-drilled return journey to Skipton will be in the next **Swiss Express**.*

TOP: Zurich HB - two minutes around the buffer stops to change trains - but we had eleven to play with.

BOTTOM: Leaving Varenna on Lake Como - almost at journeys end.

