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STEAM NOSTALGIA. BERNESE OBERLAND

By Maureen G. Cooling

How the nostalgia of steam clings to our memories! I still remember arriving at Enfield station and trying to hurry my mother off the platform and out of the station before the letting off of steam started: often unsuccessfully. Getting the occasional piece of grit in the eye was accepted, and the invasive smell of steam travel can be quickly recalled by the nose.

Now, I find myself among the current steam enthusiasts. But, I have to admit to this being more by accident than design. On the whole memories are happy, and they are happy circumstances that bring me close to steam travel again.

The circumstances have been looking at the many various mountain travel systems in the Bernese Oberland, having wondered who could have been mad enough to contemplate erecting a railway/cableway/funicular/chairlift to carry the ever keen enthusiast and traveller into the heart of the mountains for that magical closeness which can be so thrilling: especially in the Oberland.

I was therefore delighted to have an opportunity to join 2 nostalgic steam train trips ("Nostalgiezug"/"Dampf-Nostalgie") in 1985.

The first trip was at the very beginning of June [with Dampflokom G3/4 No. 11. (Built 1902), allenfalls Elektrolokom HGe 3/3 (Built 1914)], and was fairly short in comparison with my second trip. The journey was from Interlaken Öst to Lütschental and back. We also had the added attraction of the old Kaiserwagen (Emperor's car.) being included with the old coaches. It was explained to me that this had been specially built for the use of the Kaiser during his intended visit (which had been cancelled). I and my friends were successful in the bid to find seats in the Kaiserwagen with the additional benefit of this car having a bar from which refreshments were served. It was also prettily decorated with red and white check curtains.

The route to Lütschental is also the beginning of the route to the incomparably beautiful large mountain village of Grindelwald, a very popular resort in summer and winter. Grindelwald is also on one of the two main train routes to the Jungfrauoch (11,333ft.) by Jungfrau Express which travels inside the Eiger and the Mönch Mountains. Further attractions are the 4 section chairlifts to First (the longest Swiss chairlift system), the cablecar to Pfingstegg, the longer cableway system from Grindelwald Grund to Männlichen, and the opportunity of visiting the famous Lower and Upper Glaciers which dip down into Grindelwald.

During the trip there was a reasonable stopping period at Lütschental for photographs to be taken, with a longer stop on the return journey at Zweilütschinen. At Zweilütschinen we were able to go into the depot work station and gain some insight into the daily maintenance of the modern Swiss trains. The depot was spotlessly clean which also made it a welcome place to accept the hospitality of the refreshments that were freely available.

The second round trip in September (my search for engine details has alas been in vain) was a longer one of over a hour going up and less than an hour on the return, from Wilderswil to Schynige Platte. The climb of 4,537 feet to an altitude of 6,454 feet with a

rail length of 4.5 miles, has a ruling gradient of 25% on an 80cm track. Any journey on this route is a memorable one, but by steam even more so. Without the eye of the technical enthusiast but from the photographic point of view the B.O.B. (Berner Oberland Bahn) engine was aesthetically a delight to the eye, being mostly bright green and red. There was plenty of time (over an hour) at Schynige Platte to enjoy the superb view of the Eiger, Mönch and the Jungfrau range of mountains on the other side of the valley, to visit the alpine garden to be found at one end of the station and refresh yourself at the large restaurant at the other end. An earlier opportunity for the photographer on the climb up is the stop to take on water at Alp Breitlauener.

These special steam trips, and the opportunity of chartering, are just a whetting of the appetite in preparation for a steam journey up to the Röthorn via the regular steam (along with diesel choice) service from the lakeside village of Brienz (famous for it's woodcarving). This is another 80cm gauge track with a climb of 5,505ft. to an altitude of 7,362ft., with a rail length of 4.75 miles and a maximum gradient of 25%. This incomparable steam train journey takes an hour, with marvellous views en route and at the top. Again there is the facility of an excellent restaurant at the top, and nearby is the top station of the Sörenberg - Brienz - Röthorn cableway taking you down to the adjacent valley on the other side (both systems operate a seasonal service).

In addition to information being available at the Swiss National Tourist Office in London, details of the special steam train trips can also be obtained from Railways of the Jungfrau region. CH 3800. Interlaken.

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