

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Band: 4 (1994-1996)
Heft: 11

Artikel: Destination chocolate
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855101>

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Destination Chocolate by: Ron Smith

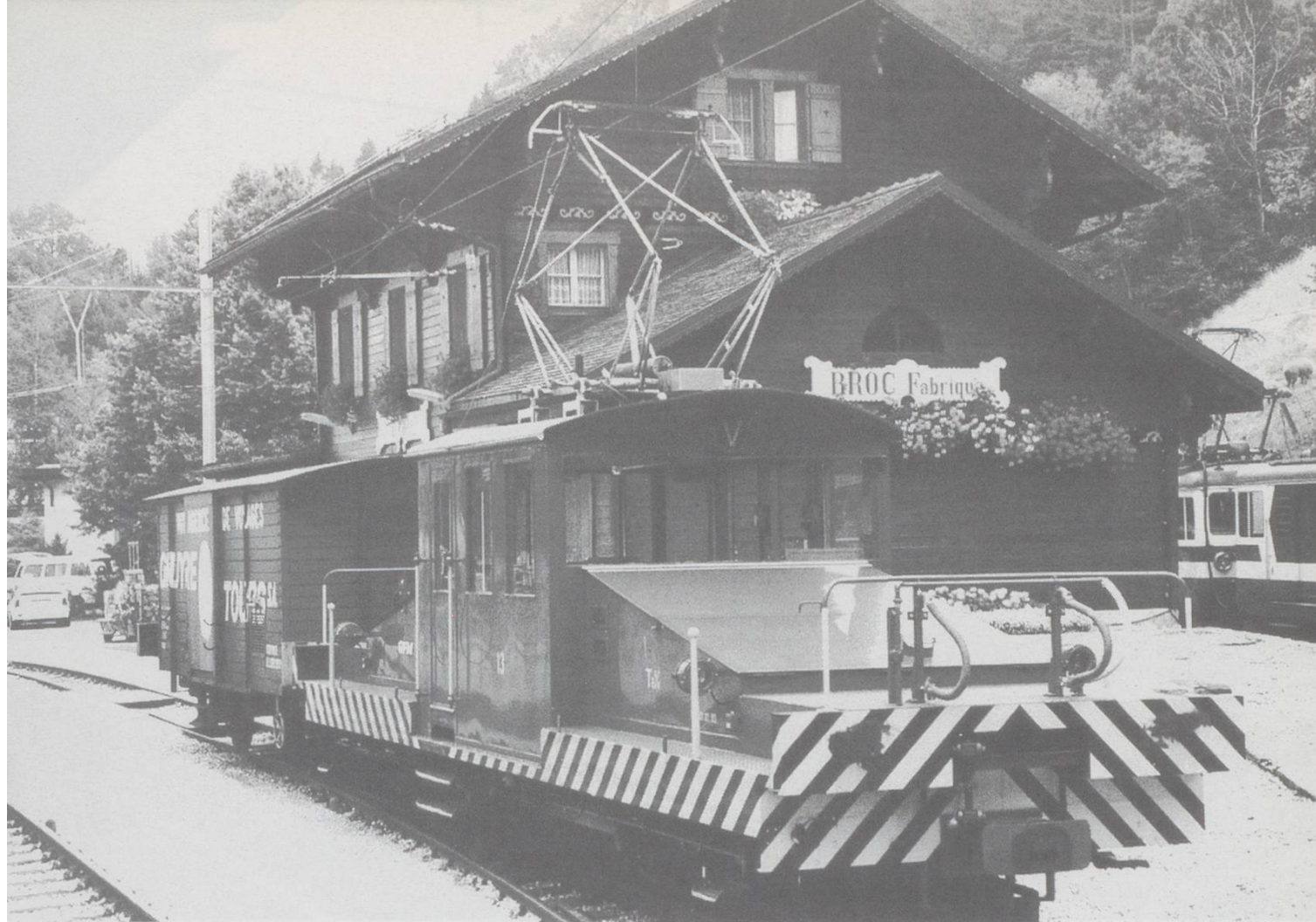
For some unaccountable reason, Mrs. Smith does not particularly like wandering all over Switzerland to ride on obscure railways, but careful study of the Kursbuch gave me the ideal excuse - a trip by train to a chocolate factory. Table 253 showed "Supertrain Du Chocolate", Wednesdays only, MOB Superpanoramic Express from Montreux via Gruyères and Bulle to Broc.

We always stay in Luzern, and it was simple to get on a Luzern to Genève airport train, and we cruised along to Bern and onward, alighting at Romont. Very few passengers alighted or joined here, and after the train had glided off, the place was deserted. We had just an hour to wait here, so we set off up the hill to explore a bit of the town.

Romont still has its ring of city walls, which stand out particularly on the Genève side, which is the sharp side of the scarp. We walked up the street and through the gate and into the old town centre. It is a pretty place and we wandered through the deserted streets. There was a definite "French" feel to the place, hot, dusty, and

firmly closed for lunch. We reached the castle which looked like a very interesting place to visit, but time was pressing so we retraced our steps to the station.

Romont has platform 1 at the station building, and 2 and 3 on an island platform. A swift glance at the yellow departure timetable board showed that our train was due to depart from number 3, so we hurried through the subway and climbed the stairs to a deserted platform. On platform 1 GFM RABDe 4/4 no. 173 single car emu was parked. This did not look right, so leaving Christine on platform 1 I nipped back to check the departure board. As I surfaced onto platform 1 a railwayman called to me, asking if I was going to Bulle. I joined him and confirmed that I was, and wasn't the train due on platform 3? He agreed, but said that today we were going from platform 1 and we were about to depart. I explained that I had abandoned my wife on the other platform and would go and collect her. "No problem - we'll wait" was the cheerful reply. When I returned again with Christine, the man checked our Swiss



Passes and graciously ushered us aboard. He followed, shut the door, walked through to the cab, and drove off!

We curved away from the SBB line and trundled sedately along the single track. At each small station, many of which consisted of a small, very attractive, wooden chalet, the driver came back through to check or sell tickets, and then returned to the cab. The unit was not really suitable for one man operation, but it kept the driver fit! The 26 kilometre journey with its 6 intermediate stops was unremarkable, and after 25 minutes we glided into Bulle station, our standard gauge tracks separated from the predominant metre gauge ones.

This modern station is quite large, and I was itching to explore. We went into the building and found a light, spacious booking hall. I checked the departure display to verify when the MOB special was departing and from which platform, and was amazed to see 19 platforms indicated, with myriad departures. As we had a little time, Christine decided to explore the town shops around the station, which I just had to explore 19 platforms. Of course, most of these are bus platforms, which is an impressive display of

integrated transport all under the GFM umbrella. There is a lesson to be learned here. Walking along a little way, I took some photographs of the depot, watched the shunting activity which used Be4/4 no. 131 of 1943 vintage as a tractor, and then went back to rendezvous with Christine - who had great news. She had spotted a pair of walking boots in a "sale" rack outside a nearby shoe shop - but there was no time - the MOB train was due at any minute. Bang on time the impressive, stately 'Superpanoramic' train swished into the station. Nobody got on or off. A railwayman descended and walked along the platform. I checked with him that we could join anywhere on the train. He stared at me severely. This was a special train with first class only and reservation was compulsory. Did I have these things? I confessed that I only had our Swiss Passes, but understood that I could purchase the "Extras" on board. He frowned even more and cautioned me that this would be expensive, the train came from Montreux and did not have far to go so it would not be value for money. I assured



him that it would be for us, and was quite happy to pay. He relaxed and negotiated a deal at 6 Francs each, and opened a door for us. He indicated the direction the train would take (reversing out of the station) and we found seats at the front with the fantastic panoramic views. Then we silently set off and rolled 7 kms to Broc Village then slowly descended the squealing curving tracks to Broc Fabrique. This station is a wonderfully ornate wooden chalet with a typical scrolled wooden nameboard on the end.

Slowly we drifted to a halt in a bay line and everyone alighted, including the railwaymen. A representative of the Nestlé factory guided us over the tracks and in to the adjacent factory. Christine was getting very interested now. We all trooped into a reception area, where guides ushered us through into a small cinema. Ladies asked which language we preferred, and ear phone sets were given out accordingly. Then disaster struck! An announcement was made that for health and safety reasons tours of the actual factory had been discontinued! Gasps of horror from Christine. However, we would have a film of production followed by a tasting back at reception. Resignedly we watched the film, which was very

good, then impatiently we all jammed the doorways to reception. Here ladies handed out sample bars of chocolate to take away and on tables were spread all the different types of chocolate to sample. Inevitably some people would not be feeling too well on the return journey as plates of chocolate disappeared in no time. Reluctantly, but sated, passengers drifted back towards the train. As we waited for departure time a DBE 4/4 no. 142 rolled in on a service train - yes, a service train to a chocolate factory!

All too soon we eased out of the siding and slowly squealed our way back up the hill and on to Bulle, taking just 12 minutes, where we departed. We stood on the deserted platform, like a couple of peasants, as the luxury train set off back to Montreux with its motley collection of Americans, Japanese and a few assorted other Europeans. We had a while before the GFM service to Romont so eagerly set off to the shoe shop. The boots were still on the display stand. They were the renowned Swiss made Raichle, in my size, albeit not my choice of colour (pale grey), and only 50 Sw. Francs. Fantastic! This was



unbelievable! They fitted perfectly and are the best, most comfortable boots I've ever had. Under the watchful eye of Christine the poor shop lassie was quizzed, why were the boots so cheap? Why only the one size and colour? The lassie explained that they were the very last pair in that range, the new ones being a different design. She produced the box to show the original price. Still hardly believing such a bargain, the boots were purchased and I am still totally impressed with them. We then explored Bulle, which, unlike Romont, was bustling and busy. Again we felt we did not have enough time to explore before we had to return to the station and on to the single car GFM unit for Romont. Other trains purposefully came and went and Bulle would be a good place to watch the trains: however we set off. This time the single coach was full and standing, and the driver did not bother checking tickets as passengers were getting off at every little station. With all the press of passengers we were several minutes late running into Romont. As we approached, the SBB orange and grey Genève Airport to Luzern train swept in ahead of us. We pulled up in platform 1 and we, together with a few other passengers, nipped smartly

through the underpass to the island platform and on to the SBB train which was quickly on its way to Luzern.

Altogether it was a very satisfactory day trip. I had my boots and Christine had enough chocolate to put the diet back a few months. We saw a previously unfamiliar corner of Switzerland and had seen a lot of interesting railway operations. We might just have to do it again this year but allow more time for exploring.

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