

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Band: 5 (1997-1999)
Heft: 7

Artikel: Night ferry to Switzerland
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854540>

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Night Ferry to Switzerland - by Giles Della Gana

The following article was prompted by a conversation at the Model Railway Club during the course of which I surprised the other participants by stating that there had once been a through passenger service from London to Switzerland! This service was also responsible, though in a very roundabout way, for my first encounter with Wagon-Lits.

In a box of memorabilia I have the souvenir programme (price 1/-) for the first railway 'open day' that I recall attending. This was held on 15th. July 1967 at Old Oak Common Diesel Depot. Several things impressed me, among them a 'Blue Pullman' unit, an experimental lounge car and a Type F, Night Ferry, Wagons-Lits car. This Wagons-Lits vehicle, number 3985, had ventured off its beaten track to advertise a forthcoming service between London (Victoria) and Basle attached to the established "Night Ferry" service to Paris and Brussels.

'Railway Magazine' for September 1967 noted that the new service had been announced a few weeks after the reduction in number of cars working to Brussels. The service ran for only two seasons, London/Basle 16/12/67-16/03/68 and 20/12/68-28/02/69 and Basle/London 17/12/67-17/03/68 and 21/12/68-01/03/69. Type F Wagons-Lits cars 3789, 3805 and 3985 were allocated to the initial service with 3985 and 3988 running during the second year.

The Basle sleeper was attached/detached to train 336 DB southbound and 335 DB northbound at Lille. Departure from Victoria was at 21.00 hrs. with an arrival at Basle at 14.12 hours the following day. The return journey commenced at 15.50 hours with arriving Victoria at 09.10 hours the next day. The route taken from Lille was via Valenciennes, Charleville-Mezieres, Metz, Strasbourg and Mulhouse. (these details are taken from the Winter 1967-8 timetable). The carriage-side route read a somewhat terse 'BALE - LONDON'.

However interesting for we students of railway

operation, the service was unattractive to its intended clientele - the winter-sports fraternity. There was no through service to any of the major Swiss resorts. With no through baggage cars, as was the case between London and Paris, there was little room for the stowage of skis, etc. The long journey time meant that half a day's holiday was lost each way when compared to air transport.

The success of this year's (1998) through winter sports services from Waterloo to the French Alps using a small batch of Eurostar units modified to work on 1500 volts DC has prompted the SNCF to adapt further sets. Who knows - with this spirit of enterprise we may again see some sort of through working to Basle?

Publications Consulted:

When I came to look for information on the service it was my turn to be surprised - there was so little to be found. The main enthusiast magazines of the day seem to almost ignore it completely. My main source of information has been the fascinating book 'Night Ferry' by George Behrand & Gary Buchanan. Other sources were:

Old Oak Common Diesel Depot Open Day
15/07/67 Programme

Railway Magazine - September 1967

Today's Railways - Issue 27, March 1998

**Please submit articles for the
December "Swiss Express"
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THANK YOU**