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Autor: Marriott, Peter
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Four days in Switzerland in April 1997

by Peter Marriott

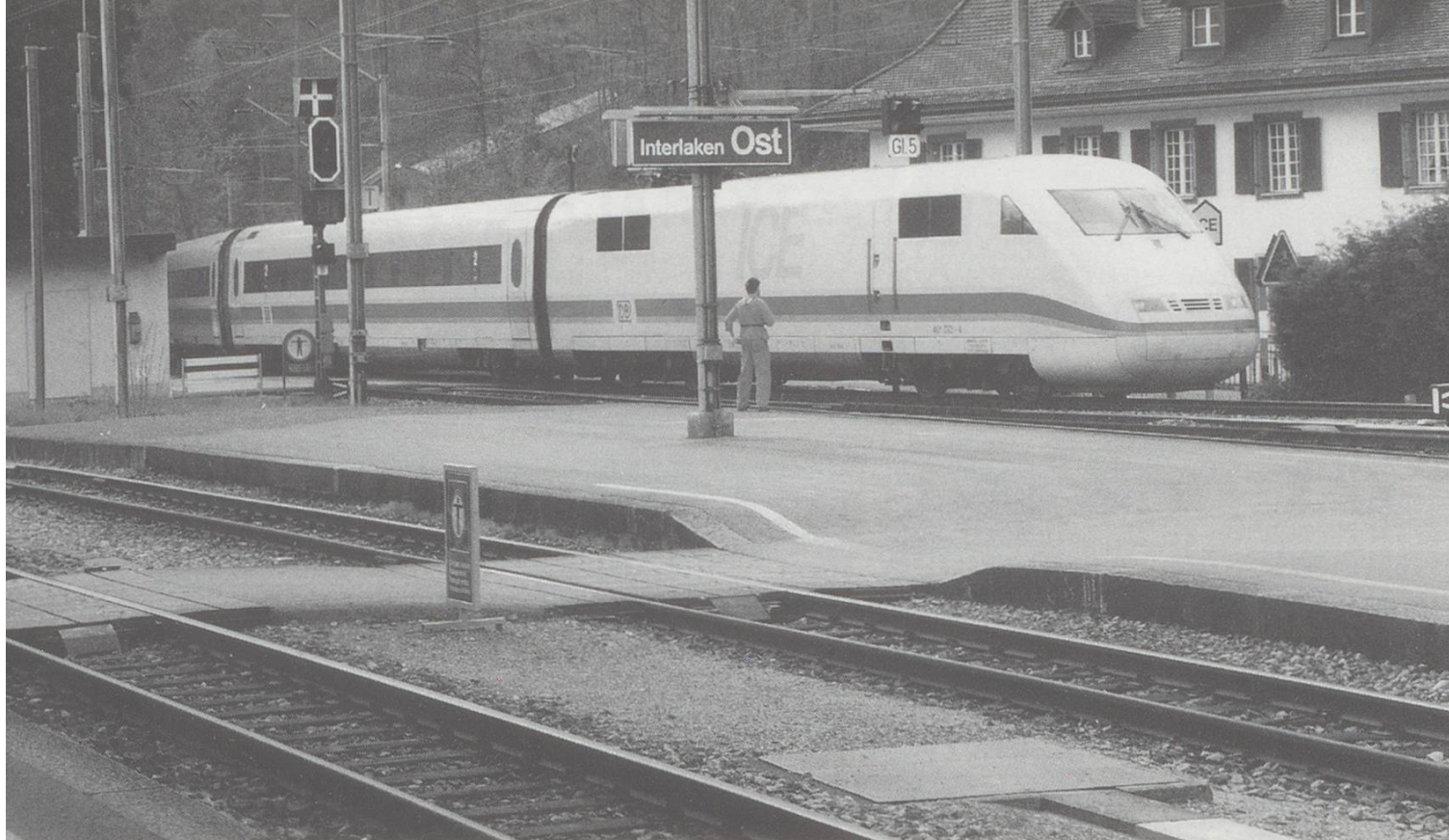
With a four day Swiss Pass in hand from April 3 to 6 a brief railway tour of the country was tackled with gusto by my travelling companion Geoff Crossland and myself. My wife had taken her mother away for a few days and the opportunity was taken to show Geoff some of Switzerland he has heard me talk about over the past two decades. We decided to base our stay in Interlaken to enable round trips including the Glacier Express, Cisalpino, the BLS, Brunig and MOB to be taken. Over the years I have noticed the advertisement of Hotel National in Swiss Express and three nights were booked. Coincidentally the hotel is opposite the Savoy Hotel which was my first introduction to Switzerland in 1971 but the National certainly offers better standards of comfort and hospitality than my recollection of the Savoy in the days when it appeared to be rather run down! The hotel's close proximity to Interlaken West station enabled the 08.45 EC Thunersee ICE service to Spiez/Bern/Basel to be caught several mornings after eating a substantial breakfast.

There is certainly a lot of station rebuilding taking place at this time. Interlaken Ost certainly looks a lot tidier now but Spiez, Zurich, Montreux are all still in the construction process. Railway

embankments were a plant lovers delight; primroses, daffodils and cowslips abounded. The weather was very mixed - days included snow, rain and sunshine within a matter of hours.

The timetable keeping of Swiss trains still impresses. As one who travels on North London Railways on a daily basis I have learned to distrust timetables but my trust in Swiss time-keeping still impresses apart from the Furka Oberalp Andermatt to Goschenen shuttle which whilst only being 10 minutes late could have meant the difference between catching the connecting service to Zurich Flughafen for the flight home or some very embarrassed passengers trying to explain to BA staff why they did not check in on time. Fortunately the SBB Goschenen to Zurich train was held but that is the second time in three years that I have suffered a poor connection between the FO and SBB. Having said that the remainder of the timekeeping was splendid, including that of the International EC services.

Whilst I have used the MOB route to Montreux and Brunig line to Luzern on other occasions I had not travelled in the Panoramic carriages on these lines before. They are worth every penny (sorry franc) for first class travel and supple-



ments. The wide windows to the sky do make a difference to travelling enjoyment.

Friday 4th April was intended to be the day we used the Cisalpino but our route plans needed to be amended at the last minute when we read the notice at Interlaken West station advising of a rail strike in Italy on that day. Whilst we were assured Brig/Milan and Milan/Zurich EC trains would run on quick consultation of the Thomas Cook's European Timetable it was decided to travel to Brig then return on the Lotschberg route 9 minutes later using the Milan - Bern Cisalpino service (if it ran). The train arrived at Brig on time and a 1 hour 28 minute journey to Bern was most enjoyable. The train was quite empty and when sampling a cappuccino in the restaurant car the tilt effect could be best seen over the Lotschberg line. Looking along the train it appeared to be like an aircraft during banking manoeuvres. Whilst seated it was comfortable but moving around in the carriages was not quite as easy. It is best not to attempt to carry drinks on the most winding sections of the journey! The first class compartments have four music channels available via armrest socket (earphones can be purchased from the bar at 3.50CHF). Additionally seat adjustment and window blind movement are both electrically controlled. Whilst the interior finish on the trains may not reach the standards set by the DB ICE carriages nevertheless it is a most enjoy-

Opposite page: Three Re460's awaiting service at Domodossala.

Above: DB ICE entering Interlaken Ost station having travelled from Berlin.

able way to travel along the Lotschberg, Gotthard and Rhone Valley routes.

On earlier holidays with my wife I have naughtily stopped at too many stations to "watch the trains". Fortunately Mary is long suffering but in her eyes (understandably) when you have seen one red Class 460 you have seen them all! I think I have found the solution for future holidays; within a day or so on arrival in Switzerland I shall sit on the end of platform 12/13 at Zurich HBF for two hours and shall probably have a sufficiency of locos for the duration of the trip! In one and a half hours spent there during this visit I saw 17 Class 460s including the Agfa, Ascom, HCB, Danzas versions.

In August 1996 the exchange rate stood at 1.68CHF = £1 but this April the 2.32CHF rate of exchange made an enormous difference to our visit to the country. On train catering seemed so much more affordable, Migros value looked even better, LOEB's 1998 calendars seemed almost too cheap at 4.90CHF and gifts were purchased that previously would not have even been considered.

If you want to go to Switzerland - GO NOW!