

A wanderer's return

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A Wanderer's return

by Paul Russenberger

Dreams of hot coffee and rolls with red cherry jam during a night in the Paris-Chur wagon-lit were punctuated by the noise and lights of station stops. One stop seemed to last a long time. Swinging round on the bed, I found a station sign: "Bale/Basel"; we were still on the SNCF but the conductors on the platform were Swiss. After five years I had returned and I knew I was not going back to sleep.

Eventually the Brussels train arrived, surreptitiously bringing another SRS member, and Ee3/3 16504 came to shunt it. A slight jolt announced the arrival of our shunter before we were pulled rapidly out of the station to be propelled into Switzerland. The vigour of Swiss shunting had not changed! An Re4/41 brought its train of Leichtstahlwagen coaches to an adjacent platform, Basel SBB echoed to announcements and whistles. In the early dawn we moved away towards Zurich. Muttenz yards were full of freights formed up behind Ae6/6s identifiable by their cantonal emblems - Zug, St. Gallen and one

of the Appenzells and not a 460 or even an Re4/411 to be seen.

Zurich Hauptbahnhof was as busy, angular and clean as ever with a breakfast that equalled the dreams of the previous night. For the first time the original train shed which had always been full of half-wanted clutter was clear. At Luzern, the Kapellebrücke and station have both now been rebuilt, the PTT have a new shunter and tourists throng the streets where my father once bought a real Rolex watch.

Apart from the new locomotives, the character of the Brunig has not really changed. The view from the Bellavista coach, with its extended windows, is clear as the sun shines on the Lungernsee and the woods around the descent to Meiringen. Why are those passengers with transatlantic accents playing cards all the way?

And so to Interlaken Ost and finally Spiez for eight glorious days.

Yes, a few things had altered.

On the railway, Spiez station is being



Above: The Mitropa restaurant car on the Brünig line, its interior has tables and chairs one end and a coffee bar the other.

Photo: Les Heath

modernised, but clearly benefitting from it. SBB 460s and BLS 465s abound so that there are fewer classic Re4/4s of any description or ownership. The new designs sit far more comfortably within the atmosphere of Swiss railways than I had dared hope, as does the significant increase in SBB push-pull working, the double deck stock and Mitropa symbols on the catering trolleys. The BOB has not changed in character either, double tracking in progress between Wilderswil and Zweilutschinen notwithstanding and the new WAB station at Lauterbrunnen will make things better for passengers in the rain and somehow photography there is easier. The Briener Rothorn Bahn has one less diesel, but circumstances enforce the ignominy of being propelled to the summit by one of them.

Away from the lineside few things had altered. Migros no longer sells Rivella and its own-brand "Mivella" is not quite so sweet. There were less French and German visitors, more Japanese and British. The library in the "Hotel des Alpes" in Spiez has many English books including "Switzerland's Amazing Railways" and Cecil J. Allen's autobiography, as befits a Hotel where two

SRS families find themselves at the same time and many of the English are holidaying there in Switzerland because one does. And a visit to the Ballenberg Museum from Spiez for a family of four still costs no more than one to the Heimwehfluh Model Railway from Interlaken West. The "Lotschberg" still plies on Lake Brienz and the "Blumlisalp" steams on the Thunersee once again.

Ae4/7s may go; 460s and new banknotes may come, but will the ambience of Switzerland ever really change? Not yet I hope.

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