

2001 - A Swiss odyssey : eat your heart out Kubrick

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It was a postcard of the Landwasser Viaduct that eventually did it. For many years I had tried to persuade John, a long-standing friend with an interest in railways, that it was about time he visited Switzerland for himself to see how railways really should be run. Despite receiving similar postcards from my previous Swiss trips, and expressing interest in my holiday photos of the scenic lines, there always seemed to be obstacles lack of time, imagined language problems, and above all lack of cash. And he didn't even have a passport.

Nevertheless that dramatic postcard view of the classic viaduct, sent from my 2000 trip, had been given pride of place on John's mantelpiece, so I raised the matter again, having already obtained a passport application form which I handed over. I told him that by using Eurostar and travelling out and back via Belgium and Germany, and by taking advantage of bargain tickets and staying overnight at international youth hostels to minimise cost, I reckoned we could cover most of the classic Swiss scenic routes in about a week, and some in Germany as well, for less than £500 all told. His initial disbelief soon evaporated and the response was "Well, in that case, O.K., let's talk about it". This was almost half the cost he had imagined, so the deal was clinched on the basis of a strictly budget trip seeing as much as possible of Switzerland, lasting no more than about ten days altogether, including travel out and

back, and if possible allowing time for some mountain walks as well.

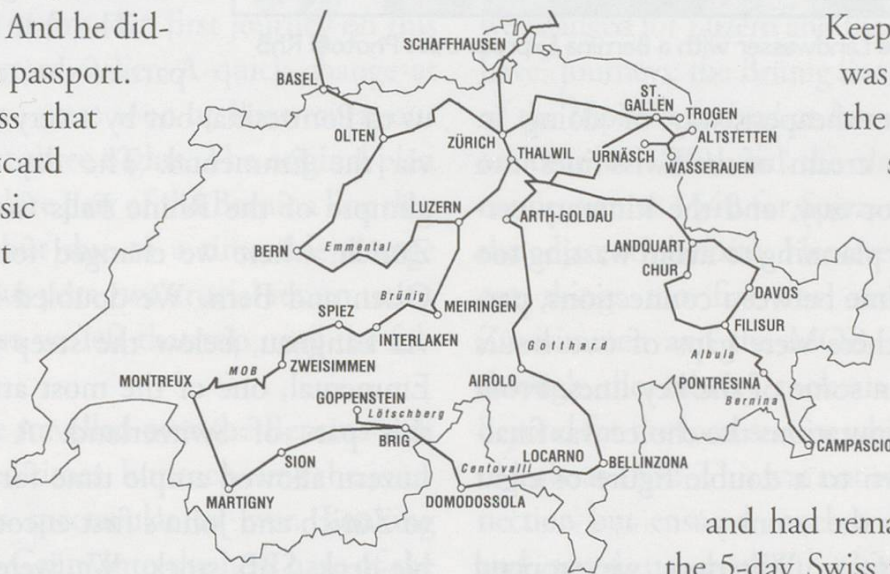
The challenge for me therefore was to draw up an itinerary covering the best scenic lines in Switzerland in about a week (lines which had taken me over ten years to explore), and to choose an interesting route to and from the Swiss border, all within the agreed budget ceiling of £500. What a challenge, and what an opportunity to show off Switzerland to a first-time visitor!

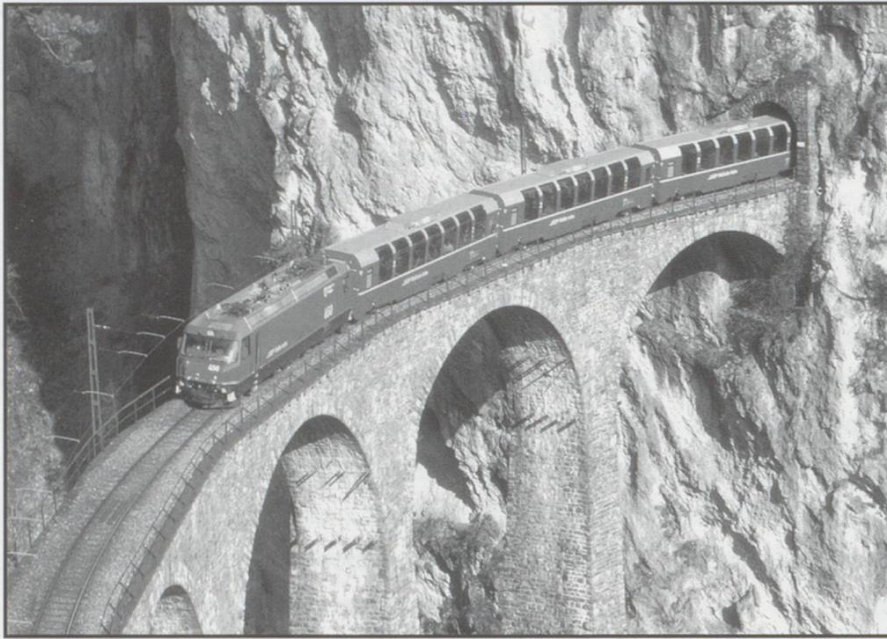
Keeping the cost down was very much part of the challenge, and several factors were in our favour. EuroDomino tickets had been reduced in price two years earlier,

and had remained unchanged, the 5-day Swiss ticket costing less than three-quarters of the price of a

Swiss Pass, and the German ticket giving 3 days' unlimited travel for little more than the price of an ordinary return fare to the Swiss border. So that would give the bonus of a "free" day's travel to explore some DB lines, as well as complete flexibility. We could cut travel costs further by using cheap Belgian fares and CFL's wonderfully cheap Oeko-billjee tickets - a real bargain at £2.50 for 24 hours' unlimited travel throughout Luxembourg. And thanks to that nice Mr Branson it was even possible to take advantage of a special discount fare to London available for a limited period during the summer.

There followed a highly enjoyable two months of intensive planning, thumbing through the DB and SBB timetables to see what was possible within the time scale, and





A Ge4/4^{II} crosses the Landwasser with a Bernina Express train. Photo© RhB

working out the cheapest way of doing it. Compressing the 'cream' of the Swiss lines into one week was not easy, and the itinerary certainly took some planning to avoid wasting too much precious time between connections, particularly where there were gaps of two hours between trains on some of the key lines. From over a dozen permutations the choice was finally narrowed down to a double figure of eight route right across the country.

Setting off from Waterloo, we stopped overnight in Lille before continuing across Belgium to Liège, where we changed for Köln. Booking to Welkenraedt, just short of the German border, enabled us to benefit from the cheap Belgian maximum fare of just £8.52. Beyond Aachen our German EuroDomino became valid, and we continued along the Rhine and through Karlsruhe to Basel for our second overnight stop. The bed and breakfast charge included a free "Mobility Ticket" giving two days' unlimited use of all public transport in Basel (TNW zones 10 and 11), a nice touch but unfortunately

there was only time to use it for a single tram journey to the DB station the following morning. This was a shame, as John was really impressed by the tram network. That day, our "free" day in Germany, we followed a zigzag route through the Black Forest exploring several rural branch lines, and after numerous changes eventually re-entered Switzerland at Schaffhausen for an overnight stop.

The first leg of the Swiss part of the tour was to take us to Pontresina, but by a very circuitous route via the Emmental. The day started with a glimpse of the Rhine Falls from the train to Zürich, where we changed for the express to Olten and Bern. We doubled back to Luzern via Langnau, below the steep pastures of the Emmental, one of the most attractive lines in this part of Switzerland. A connection in Luzern allowed ample time for the 1310 back to Zürich and John's first encounter with double-deck SBB stock. We were to experience more of this later on, but the novelty soon wore off and we both found the limited space rather claustrophobic.

Halt auf Verlangen. RhB train service 454 approaches Campascio with the 11:03 to Pontresina on 26 August. Note the nature reserve between the rails!



At Landquart we transferred to the RhB and the first metre-gauge train of the trip. We wanted to include both the Chur and Davos lines, and as there was more time today than on the return a few days later, we took the longer Davos route and changed at Filisur. The Wiesen gorge was as impressive as ever, then suddenly, just before reaching Filisur, a brief glimpse through the trees on the right gave a dramatic view steeply down onto the Landwasser Viaduct far below, where a train was crossing it at that very moment. On the Albula line the mountain scenery became even more spectacular at each turn, and the spiral tunnels at Bergün brought back memories of my own first journey on this line, over ten years earlier. A quick change at Samedan and we were soon at Pontresina, our base for the next three nights. The original plan had been to explore part of the Bernina line that same evening, but due to a timetable change since the previous year, two crucial return trains no longer ran, so we left that trip until the following day.

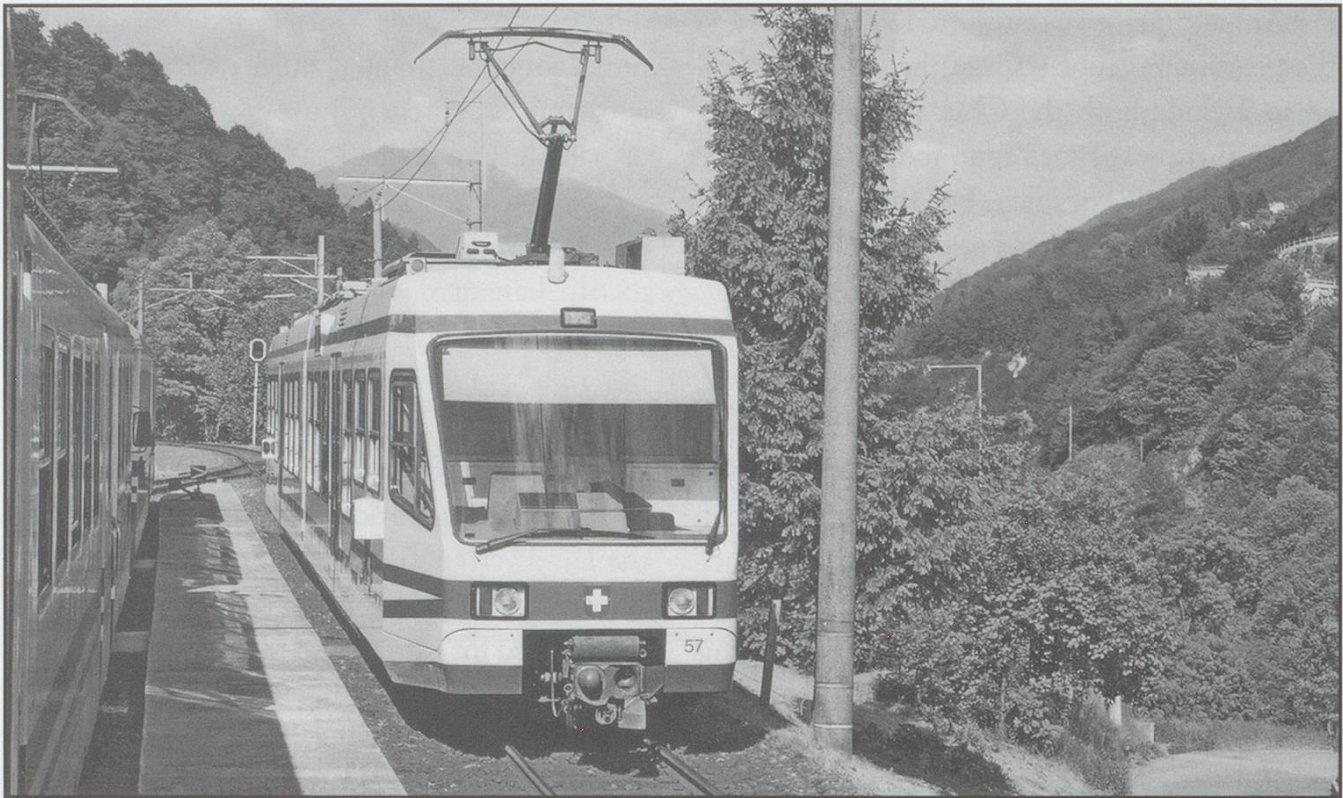
I must have travelled over the Bernina well over half a dozen times, but each time the journey remains as spectacular as ever. Looking down from Alp Grüm into the heat haze of the Poschiavo valley far below it seems unbelievable that the line could possibly drop so steeply, but it does. Quite by chance we discovered that RhB keeps all the train toilets locked during the 40-minute journey south of Poschiavo, where there are several street running sections, a point worth remembering for a future visit! To allow sufficient time for a walk on the return journey, we saved an hour by getting off at Campascio, just short of the Italian border, and flagged down the next return train seven minutes later. We missed the opportunity to set foot in Italy but at least we covered the major features of this amazing line, including the spiral viaduct at Brusio. On the return journey we alighted at Morteratsch and spent the rest of the afternoon on a walk up to the Boval Hut of the Swiss Alpine Club, which at 8186 feet gave a tremen-

dous view across the Morteratsch Glacier to the peaks on the Italian border. Returning to Morteratsch, a ten minute train journey took us back to Pontresina.

Next day was entirely rail-free, the only one of the trip, and was spent on a mountain walk to Alp Languard, overlooking Pontresina, and the following day we embarked on a long journey right across Switzerland into the Valais to Sion, our next overnight stop. This time we took the RhB "main" line to Chur which included a long-anticipated highlight: crossing the Landwasser Viaduct.

From Chur we continued to Thalwil, where we changed for Luzern and the next of our "must have" journeys: the Brünig line, the first rack line of the trip. We arrived at Interlaken Ost exactly on time at 1529, and the timetable showed a connection at 1540 for Spiez, already waiting at the adjacent platform. However this would have cut things too fine for our connection for Zweisimmen and the MOB, so deft footwork through the subway took us to the platform beyond for the local service which was just about to leave at 1532. This was not advertised as a connection but ensured much more time at Spiez and saved us an hour altogether. When I explained the plan to John beforehand, mindful of timings back at home he refused to believe we would ever make the three-minute connection, but to his amazement we did so, easily.

When we arrived at Zweisimmen, he also simply refused to believe that the MOB would allow us to travel on the magnificent Golden Pass Panoramic Express without a first class ticket or at least without paying a supplement. I can see his point, for in most other countries a train of such prestigious appearance would demand a hefty surcharge. But no, this was Switzerland, and with our EuroDomino tickets we were treated as VIPs, which is why I was anxious to include this two hour journey of sheer luxury in the itinerary. After the final steep zigzag descent between the vineyards to Lake Geneva, a quick change at Montreux led



A Centovalli ABe4/6 departs a passing loop on this wonderful and scenic line May 2001.

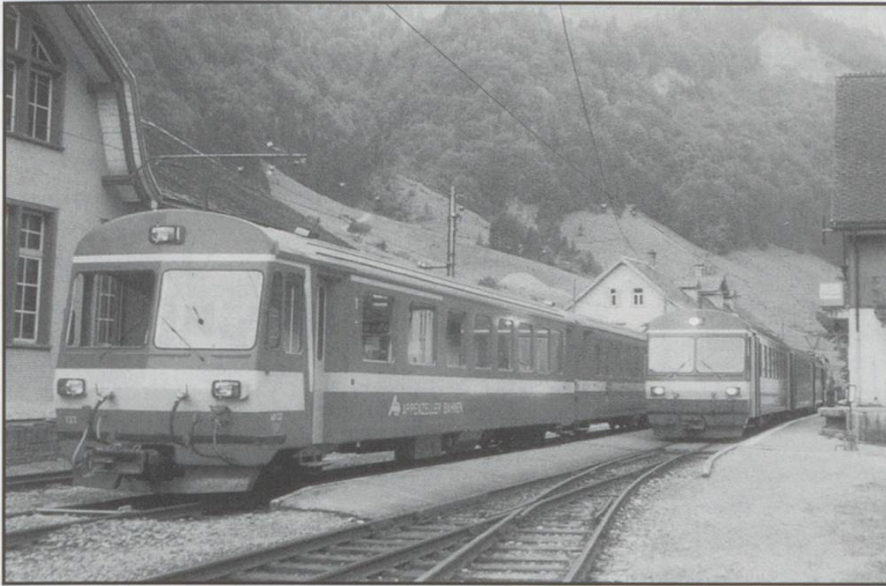
Photo: DS

to a speedy run along the Rhone Valley and on to our base at Sion. We arrived at 1945 and the one disappointment of the trip was our failure to find a reasonably priced eating place at that hour of the evening. Having recommended to John the excellence of SBB station buffets, the one at Sion let me down badly by having already stopped serving food half an hour earlier: very untypical, as I was at pains to point out,

Next morning we embarked on another circuitous route right across Switzerland again, finishing up at St Gallen. A fast run took us to Brig, then on the first and most exciting part of the BLS Lötschbergbahn, climbing up the steep mountainside above the Rhone Valley through Hohtenn. Time did not allow us to go beyond Goppenstein, so we detrained there and caught a two-car EMU local service back to Brig. Standing immediately behind the driving cab was an interesting experience, giving a driver's eye view of the numerous signals and crossovers between the tunnels and viaducts. The first time I travelled on this line it was single track, and the view from the front showed

how difficult it must have been to add a second track along such a steep mountainside.

A change at Brig and we were soon speeding through the Simplon Tunnel to emerge in Italy. The next leg, from Domodossola, was one of the highlights of the trip: over an hour and a half on the delightful Centovalli line. Travelling from west to east back into Switzerland meant the best bits of this line - its deep gorges, sharp curves and slender viaducts - were kept until the end, though finishing up underground at Locarno is rather an anticlimax. On to Bellinzona, then a two-hour haul up the Gotthard main line. Major engineering work was taking place on one of the tracks south of the Giornico spirals, but we simply crossed smoothly to the other track to bypass it. John rightly remarked that if this was Britain the line would be closed for a fortnight with buses laid on. A quick change at Arth-Goldau and onto the Voralpen Express, which also keeps its best bits towards the end: through the wonderful rolling hill country around Degersheim and then across the viaduct over the Sitter gorge. And so to St Gallen, our base for the next three nights.



End of the line. The AB's Wasserauen terminus on 30 August with the peaks of Alpstein beyond. Actually this is quite an unusual picture as there are rarely two trains here at one time. It's an extensive if somewhat deserted terminus for most of the time.

Next day was allocated for journeys on the Appenzeller Bahn, using an AB Tageskarte, half price thanks to EuroDomino. The AB's southern extremity at Wasserauen lies on the fringe of the Alpstein massif, so we took advantage of this by a mountain walk up to Seealpsee. This just left time for a journey to Urnäsch and back before savouring one of AB's best-kept secrets: the steep rack-assisted line from Gais with its panoramic views across to Austria before it plunges down to Altstätten Stadt. Back at St Gallen we took advantage of Thursday late opening for an excellent meal in the Migros supermarket restaurant.

The second full day based at St Gallen, our last in Switzerland, was rather less hectic. We simply took the Trogener Bahn tram to its terminus at Trogen and walked back to our base through pleasant rolling wooded countryside. Next morning we started our homeward journey, through Zürich and Basel and back through Germany to our overnight stop in Luxembourg, reaching London the following afternoon.

Finally, the reckoning. We had travelled on 66 separate trains altogether (from Waterloo and back to Waterloo) and only on three journeys in Germany were any of the trains late.

Total basic costs from London, including all travel, food and accommodation for 11 nights worked out at £485 each, well within the planned budget, with travel amounting to £288 of those costs. Our 5-day Swiss EuroDomino tickets at £79 each gave us the equivalent of £265 worth of rail travel at full prices, almost three and a half times what the tickets cost us. The accommodation at youth hostels offered excellent value: at Sion for example we had a comfortable

room to ourselves with our own key for just £10.70 a night for bed and breakfast. And with hostel evening meals of high class restaurant quality (at St Gallen and again at Pontresina an excellent five course dinner including coffee cost only £4.80 surely the myth that Switzerland is one of the most expensive places in Europe must be put to rest once and for all.

It was an interesting challenge to keep to a tight budget and also to compress scenic routes previously savoured over many different holidays into just one week, although at times this almost led to visual indigestion! And John's reaction, as a first time visitor to Switzerland? By his own admission he was overwhelmed at the sheer Swiss efficiency, the immaculate timekeeping and attention to operational detail, and was predictably impressed by the amazing engineering features, not least of course the Landwasser Viaduct, which above all had helped to sell the idea for this trip in the first place.

All pictures and diagrams by John Brightmore unless otherwise mentioned.

The Editor also has a question, did John like Switzerland enough to join the SRS?