

# Sisikon - Flüelen : the Gotthard from a different perspective

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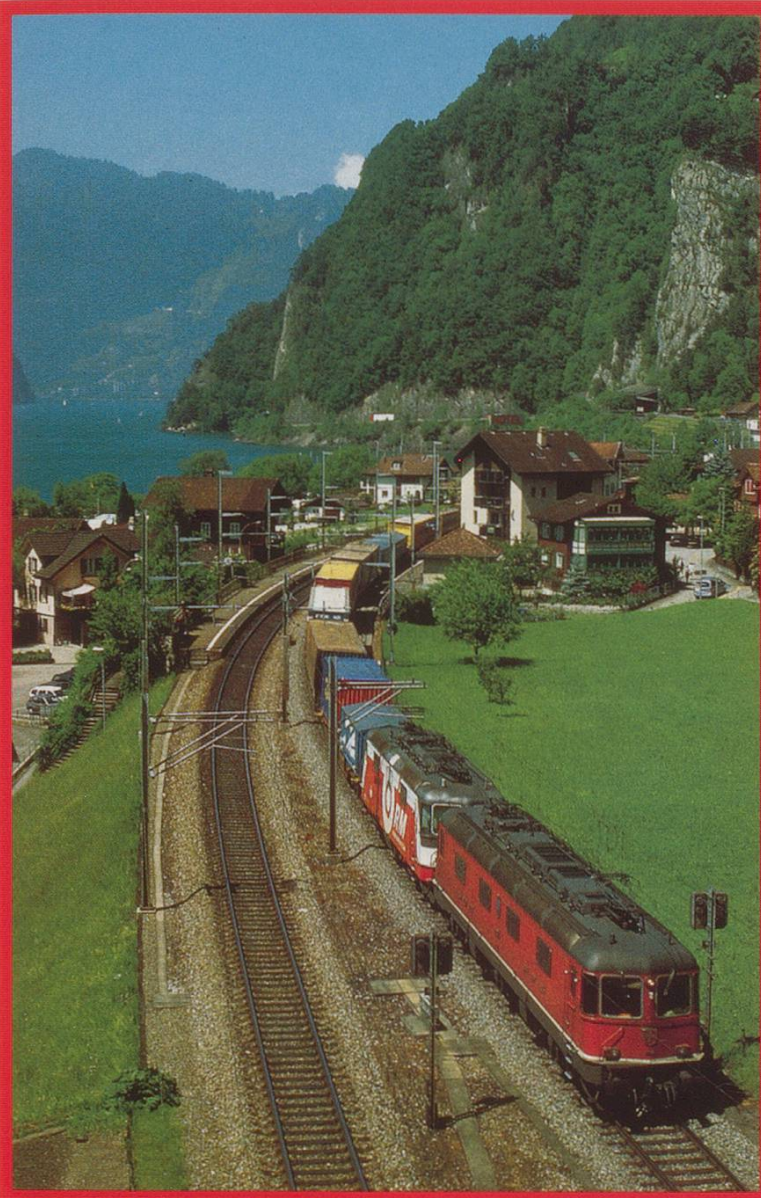
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Sisikon 30/05/02 – An Re10/10 formation heading a S/B intermodal and comprising Re6/6 11644 *Cornaux* together with former RM/EBT Re4/4 436111.

All the photographs are by David Adams

some dramatic scenery and offers some varied photographic opportunities.

The Axenstrasse, which formed part of the main road route to Ticino via the St Gotthard before the advent of the motorway, is an engineering feat in itself. Blasted out of the sheer rock face that rises from the east shore of Urnersee, the fjord-like southern arm of Vierwaldstättersee (Lake Luzern), the road passes through several tunnels and galleries, some of which, having been built since my first visit in the middle sixties, have ironed out several dangerous bends. The road tends to rise on a gentle gradient passing through several relatively short tunnels until shortly after Tellsplatte where it starts the descent to Flüelen on a steeper gradient than hitherto. The footpath is on the lakeside of the road and although it actually passes through a couple of tunnels there are several locations where it follows the course of the old road around the outside of the tunnels. There is also a path down to

Tellsplatte landing stage for those wishing to continue or return by boat from that point or indeed divert onto the “Swiss Path”.

The directions from both Sisikon SBB station and the SGV landing stage are straightforward, just walk away from the lake up to the main road and turn right. The road climbs, not too steeply, and in a few minutes is above the tunnel portals to the south of Sisikon station. The vantage point here offers a superb photogenic setting for southbound trains after about 12.30. Care has to be taken to try and avoid a signal between up and down lines obstructing the front of southbound trains. I spent nearly an

During a recent visit and after spending the late morning at Arth-Goldau on Thursday 30th May 2002 I retraced my steps to Sisikon taking the 13.25 Erstfeld local formed by SOB RBDe 566 403. The weather remained superb for photography and I had waited for such an opportunity during my annual one week visits for the last three years with a view to walking along the Axenstrasse to Flüelen, a distance of 6km. At last my goal was about to be achieved, well almost. This flatter section of the Gotthard line appears to attract less interest among photographers than the northern ramp and the famous double loops at Wassen, but nevertheless it provides



Sisikon 30/05/02 - RBDe 560 039 is seen departing Sisikon with the 1407 Zug-Erstfeld *Regionalzug*

hour at this point alone and managed some rewarding shots.

I dragged myself away at 14.50 and started the walk. After about 10 minutes, at a point called Grawegg, there is a view back towards Sisikon and to add to the interest a black kite and a buzzard were gliding over the lake as two more freight trains rumbled through.

The southbound line is in tunnel until about 1km short of Flüelen but the single track northbound line follows the lake shoreline and passes through a series of shorter tunnels offering glimpses of the lake in places. After about another five minutes I came to a point that overlooks the northbound line, now some distance below, where it crosses a girder bridge at Gumpisch. Alongside there is a new footbridge that forms part of the "Swiss Path" which runs between railway and lake just above lake level at this point.

The background here is filled by the peaks of the Gitschen (2540m) and the Uri-Rotstock (2928m) on the west bank of the lake. Unfortunately this vantage point faces roughly SW which puts the sun completely in the wrong place for photography but in the circumstances I was quite pleased with my portrait shot of the RBDe 560 returning from Erstfeld.

However, I did not linger for more shots in these difficult lighting conditions and headed

Sisikon 30/05/02 - A view of Sisikon from Grawegg on the Axenstrasse. the keen sighted may be able to spot an Re6/6 passing on a S/B train of car transporters though the N/B train of empty flats passing at the same time is a different proposition.





30/05/02 - The view South from the Axenstrasse galleries near Adams Rüti. Flüelen is in the distance where the wide valley narrows. The Bristenstock (3072m) dominates the centre background.

for my next port of call, the galleries just beyond Tellsplatte that overlook Flüelen and the southern end of the lake. This is near to a point known as Adams Rüti! (Do I have a distant ancestor in these parts?)

Here I had a close encounter with crag martins that were obviously using the first gallery as a nesting site, swooping up and down to the

nates the distant centre background.

Unfortunately, my walk down to Gruonbach, where the railway exits the last tunnel before Flüelen, was thwarted on this occasion by road works. Just short of a vantage point, which offers a superb view of the north-bound line (well it did in 1970!), my way was barred by barriers and a diversion onto the

lake edge to collect mud for nest building. The view from here is one to savour and beyond Flüelen includes the wide Reuss valley, flanked by high mountains, along which the railway runs south through Altdorf to Erstfeld where the Gotthard northern ramp commences. Shortly after Erstfeld the line briefly takes a westerly direction to round the base of the Bristen (3072m), which rises from the Reuss valley and domi-

Flüelen 30/05/02 - Next stop Bellinzona - 460 034 in Zugkraft Aargau advertising livery heads the S/B EC Tiziano (Hamburg-Milano) on time at 1709. This was its second S/B run that day having worked the 0830 IC from Zürich and returned north to Luzern with the EC Verdi





Near Gruonbach, Flüelen in May 1970 - An Ae6/6 heading a N/B passenger from the point where road works prevented access in May 2002.

“Swiss Path” was necessary. The main road was not accessed again until I reached the northern portals of Gruonbach tunnel. Unlike the relatively easy going so far this involved not only a fairly steep descent down many steps but also some fairly steep climbing and the going was certainly heavy for someone of my advancing years and unhealthy state of fitness (I fully concur with the wise decision of Peter Rose in SE6/11 to avoid the “vertical” climb from Rütli!). Still, I made it but was certainly glad of the break to take shots of southbound trains leaving Gruonbach tunnel. I missed the two southbound passenger trains just after 16.00 as this unplanned diversion put about another 15 minutes onto my journey. This latter viewpoint is reached by taking a right hand turn off the main road on the outskirts of Flüelen onto a narrow road that immediately crosses the southern portals of Gruonbach tunnel which itself is only 98m in length. The road then runs adjacent to the railway leading to Flüelen SGV landing stage and SBB station. Just before those

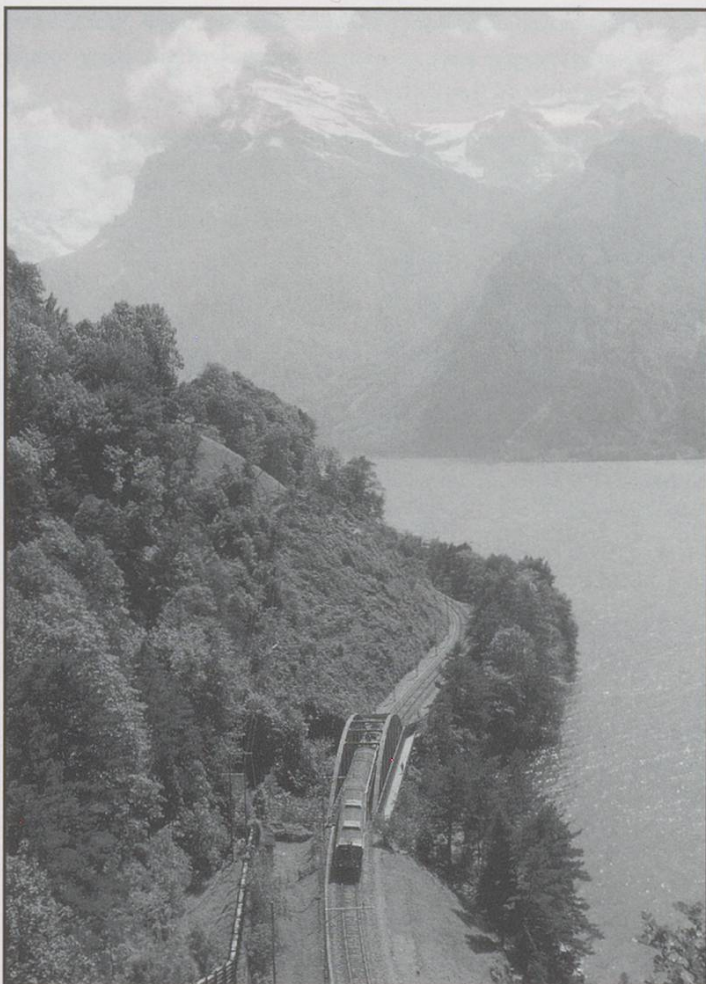
points the much-photographed white church on the opposite side of the line is passed.

Portrait shots of southbound trains are the only real option at Gruonbach. The scale of the background here is immense and, I do like to get the sky into pictures wherever possible. This is certainly one location where, in hindsight, the sky is better ignored.

I continued towards Flüelen and, on time at 17.09, 460 034 in “Zugkraft Aargau” livery hauling the southbound “Tiziano” (16.23 ex Luzern) made a nice shot with that famous Swiss style white church in the background. 460 034 had already worked to Chiasso on the “Teodolinda” (08.30 ex Zürich) and returned with the “Verdi” to Luzern (due at 15.38), so it was certainly earning its keep that day. Non-number crunchers please note that a lot can be learnt about locomotive workings and utilisation (especially passenger workings) by noting their numbers. On Monday 27 May 02 for example, 11602 passed Erstfeld shortly after 07.00 hauling a northbound sleeper train from Italy which it would have worked from Chiasso. At 10.00 the loco was outside Zürich depot and at 13.20 it arrived at Lausanne piloting 11106 on what

must have been an additional Expo 02 working. At 20.30 it was back outside Zürich depot and at 23.20 it passed Erstfeld on the "Gottardo", the 22.07 Zürich – Roma/Venezia sleeper, heading back to Chiasso. I was certainly intrigued by its utilisation that day and there is certainly a lot more to be gained from the practice of noting numbers than just ticking them off on a list. As a result I am always drawn subconsciously towards the number when I see a locomotive.

You will no doubt have noticed that I also have an interest in wild bird life, which makes for an ideal pastime when waiting between trains or indeed travelling by train. If anyone knows where to see wallcreepers in late May without involving "vertical" climbs and near accessibility by rail please work the answer into a future article. I can reciprocate with white storks on the BT, sorry SOB! No, they are not trains or even trolley buses but of course they are a means of transportation even if there is an age restriction!



I finally arrived at Flüelen station at 17.20, just in time to take a shot of Re6/6, 11672 *Balerna*, the subject of one of Gerald Savine's superb paintings, passing through on a north-bound freight. No sore feet but "RSI" was definitely threatening my right index finger after pressing the camera shutter release 55 times that day, something of a record for me. Back home I just cannot stop switching my projector on and reliving that truly magnificent day. Urnersee, with its dramatic surroundings, has a very special charm of which I never tire.

The ten new SBB Cargo class 482s should have already become part of the Gotthard line scene since my late May 2002 visit (when 482 000/1 were on daily trial runs from Erstfeld) and Re6/6s are now starting to appear in a similar new blue "Cargo" livery, losing their original numbers in the process. Single Re460s are also now used on some internal freight and infrastructure trains that would hitherto have been Ae6/6 hauled. I have already seen a report that SBB Cargo has an option for a further 100 class 482s and that 40 are to be ordered to allow all Cargo owned Re460s to transfer to the passenger sector for push & pull work. There must now be a large question mark hanging over the future of the Ae6/6s, especially on this line where they are already sparsely used. Multi-voltage locomotives of various nationalities and ICN type passenger trains will surely infiltrate the line well before the base tunnel is open. I urge you not to leave it too long if you want to savour the current operational scene while it still has a predominance of Swiss traction.

I shall certainly return, but please hurry with the road works!

Gumpisch near Sisikon 30/05/02 – RBDe, 560 039 returns with the 1501 Erstfeld-Zug *Regionalzug* alongside the Eastern shore of Urnersee and the Swiss Path. This shot makes an interesting 'then and now' comparison with the one published in C.J.Allen's definitive 1960s work, *Swiss Travel Wonderland*