

Swiss railways for the under 10s

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I was prompted to write this article by the responses of many people, when told that we are taking a holiday in Switzerland. Oh, I wouldn't have thought that's a suitable place for young children they say, and go on about how they did not go out of the UK until their youngest child was 7, or if they are one of the more adventurous, say that they went to Brittany every year, by car.

Some of these people have an interest in European railways, some even in Swiss railways. How could they let a year go by, let alone the whole of parenthood, without a single dose of Swiss railways? So here are a few clues on how you can combine an interest in bringing up children with an interest in Switzerland. But! This is not just an article on peripatetic parenthood, I hope the tips have more general appeal.

Getting to Switzerland

I had thought that, despite the fact that my work for Virgin Trains entitles me to free travel on trains (Eurostar excepted), having two children it might be as cheap or cheaper on the plane. The thought of 2 x 2 berth sleepers (no reduction in sleeper supplements for us) seemed prohibitively expensive, and 14 hours of daylight travel may well cause any parents patience to be pushed beyond the limit.

On researching the options for our first visit with two kids (December 1998) we found Easy Jet anything but an easy option. Yes, they may be cheap, but to get the cheapest fare you need to book within minutes of the seats coming on sale. At this time the return seats are unavailable, as they only book a few days at a time. Last Winter you had also to add hotel accommodation in Luton and Geneva because the flights were too early to allow travel from elsewhere that day. I tried to book three days after the seats came on sale, only to find that

the fare had gone up by almost 70% in those 3 days!

Probably the best is Edelweiss air, which is almost as cheap. But if two families travel together you cannot beat the train. London to Basel, even for those who do not have rail staff privileged travel arrangements was £109 return via Eurostar and Paris in December. Fortunately our numbers came to exactly 6 in December, filling a couchette compartment. For 2 and 3 year olds this has to be a real snip. £120 by air, £55 by rail, and this includes a couchette fee. Half that again if you can squeeze 2 small kids into one bed!

Where the train really gains is in elongating your holiday. If you want to avoid stopovers you lose a big chunk of the days you arrive and depart through travelling. With early arrivals by couchette on day one of a weeks holiday and late departures on day 8, the train leaves much time available. Also, you do need to give up half a day travelling from Paris on day 9, but that may be a Sunday anyway if you are booking a Saturday to Saturday self catering holiday. Couchettes cost only £10.50 on the Paris-Basel route, far less than a stopover en-route.

True, you do need a spirit of adventure for train travel, but that's what this article is about, maintaining your spirit of adventure in parenthood, and probably passing it on to the kids as well.

Where to stay

Self catering is probably best for young children, unless you go for a hotel that has special childrens meal times or serves them in the room.

I discovered, with the help of Switzerland Tourism, that venerable Swiss institution Reka. No doubt several of you will have heard of it, but may not know what it does. One of its functions is to act as a holiday home booking agency. However it is an unusual institution as



SRS Associate Member Emma Baker draws attention to the fact that some of the MOB's older stock is often found on the Lenk branch. This is BDe 4/4 3001 at Zweisimmen on 16/9/99.

Photo: Giles Baker

it is a co-operative which has social aims as well. It gives discounts on accommodation to low income Swiss families. It sells Reka cheques, which are a bit like travellers cheques but only for travel related services. Unlike Travellers cheques there is not a commission but a discount! What is more, thousands of Swiss employers take part in selling them, and they fund most of the discount.

You can of course pay for the accommodation with a bank draft, there is no need to find a way to get hold of Reka Cheques. The range of accommodation will beat any self Catering brochure you will find, and at least 20% cheaper than the other firm that sells Swiss self Catering accommodation in the UK - on similar properties.

Another way in which Reka wins hands down is that it owns a number of good quality small Villages des vacances of its own. Butlins these are not. Entertainment for kids include

swimming pools, mini-golf, playgrounds, play-rooms, pony rides, and on some days free nursery places!

In 1999 we stayed for a week at the Fereindorf (Village des vacances) in Lenk. Great value at Sfr 630.

Conclusion

So, if you have got young children, and haven't been to Switzerland for a while, has this wetted your appetite? Just one more tip; Plan well. Its a right pain turning up somewhere to find your apartment is 500 metres above the station, and you are going to have to push the pram every night! If you put in the extra effort that is needed in planning, there's no reason why your holidays should not be as enjoyable as ever!

Happy travelling!

Editors note: Giles has also produced an interesting and relevant travelogue. Any one wanting a copy, please contact the Editor