

Incident at Alp Grüm

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Our 1998 Summer Holiday was spent at Bergün at the excellent Hotel Darlux.

Following a wet night we decided to take the Bernina Express to Le Prese for lunch. The weather became beautiful. We returned to Poschiavo before catching the 14.50 Bernina Express back to Bergün.

All went well until we were approaching Alp Grüm when the train came to a halt about 400 metres from the station on a steep up gradient. We were quite near the rear of the train and could not see the locomotive due to the curving track.

After a few minutes silence the train began to reverse. It was clear that we were running back, not actually being driven. Was it brake failure? After about 200 metres of this we came to a noisy halt and there was more silence for about 10 minutes. Then locomotive noises started again and we were expecting to move off when there was a loud explosion in the area between our carriage and the one in front and, the door being open as the tea trolley was passing through, a cloud of smoke poured into the carriage.

There was not exactly panic, but everyone decided to evacuate and quickly made their way into the lineside woods. We afterwards learned from an American passenger that a member of staff had advised her to take her children off the train.

Just as the last person was getting off, the train pulled forward, with the doors still open and disappeared up the track, leaving about 40 startled passengers and a conductor watching it go. We soon pulled ourselves together and, shepherded by the conductor, we walked up the track to Alp Grüm station, where we found the train waiting for us. Signs of smoke having gone, there was no alternative but to get back on, and the train resumed its journey at 15.53 instead of the scheduled 15.26.

Another member of the train staff stationed himself at the end of the carriage to operate the

INCIDENT AT ALP GRÜM

lights through a tunnel, presumably because of local power failure, and no doubt to watch for further problems. No apology or explanation was offered except a curt statement to some German-speaking passengers, the only word I understood being kaput. Some time later another staff member did come round and said that, because of the problems, the offending carriages would be taken off at Pontresina. We should move forward in the train there, to the part which would form the Bernina Express, and which would travel direct via Samedan as usual.

Having arrived at Pontresina the plans obviously changed as, after we duly moved forward, the train was split behind the failed carriages, and we continued to St. Moritz. Here we went through the station to the sidings where a complicated shunting process took place. This included fly-shunting the failed carriages past ours at high speed; perhaps it wasn't a brake fault after all. This procedure seemed to excite some American passengers more than the explosion had.

We were then attached to the end of a normal service train and the journey continued back to Bergün with normal efficiency.

I have no idea whether the incident was as dangerous as it seemed at the time. None of the staff seemed to be very concerned, in fact they all took it in their stride as though this sort of thing happened every day. Certainly none of them felt it necessary to communicate with the passengers until the time came to advise us to move down the train at Pontresina. A soothing message over the public address system, in any language, would have helped, but this may not have been possible.

It has to be said that this was the first incident we have been involved in during many holidays in various parts of Switzerland. Except when we were delayed by the derailment at Lausanne in 1994, but that is another story.