

The letters pages

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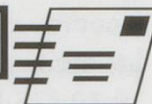
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Readers may recall that I indicated that I would be printing Alan Pike's reply to Keith Pennyfeather's letter from the last issue. The two letters below, from Swiss correspondents, I feel give enough flavour of Alan's talk to render publication unnecessary.

From: Joy & Gerald Funnell - Hastings

Being, I suppose, somewhat idle, I do not keep sensible records of our visits to Switzerland, albeit we try and take the caravan there twice a year to Interlaken. Having got there, we abandon the use of the car, save for shopping, trips over the passes and the other places where trains do not run. We also enjoy driving to Andermatt and after 16 years still get a thrill watching the trains come down the hill to the station from Disentis.

A few random thoughts cross my mind about the content of the magazine, for what they are worth. In looking at the question of walks, one that we find most attractive is that at the foot of the North Face of the Eiger. Being lazy, its the train to Eigergletscher. Then, whilst the train disappears into the mountain on its way to the Jungfrauoch we start on the walk towards Grindlewald. True, it is not of the easiest, but the views of the North Face close to are stunning as are the views all round. Its well worth the effort.

Your article on steam at Gletsch proved enlightening. However, investigation at the Andermatt end reveals a disappointment, or it may do. If one is not armed with advance information one finds that the trains have gone and, understandably, there are long gaps between services. Whilst one can look at the various carriages at that station (and there are not very many) you cannot see the locomotives as the shed is out of bounds. Access for visitors without cars is realistically possible at the Andermatt end of the line - but not at the other. There is a bus service but that is not very frequent. When we return in the spring we may know more.

Finally, having from time to time seen the steam specials from Interlaken Ost to Giswil I can share with Michael Cross his enjoyment. The only additional point I would make is that the speed with which the little tank engines move on the flat is really quite staggering. When shunting at either end or at Meiringen they move like racing cars - far faster than I ever recall seeing a tank locomotive move on an English railway either before or after nationalisation.

From : A.Hauser-Gubser - Hettlingen

Privatisation in the Swiss Context

I have read with mixed feelings the debate on the future of the Swiss Federal Railways. Although I was not present at the SVEA convention, I can hardly believe that Switzerland is interested in copying Great Britain's railway policy. It must have been a misunderstanding or an ironic remark of the president. I would like to point out that the new Railway act has been valid for a very short time now. Furthermore, the Confederation and the Cantons are the share owners of the new or should I say old society. I would rather say that this law gives the Swiss Federal Railways an improved liberty to act in a market which is becoming more and more competitive. Under the former law, agreements as made with the German Federal Railways or the Ferrovie del Stato would have been impossible, because after a referendum the people would have had to decide with a vote. In this respect, the so called "Referendums-Drohung" (referendums threat) is something like the sword of Damocles. The governing people are always quite prudent in making their laws and a draft is always sent to the interested cantonal governments, the political parties, associations, churches etc. before going in the final discussion. A defeat at the ballot box should be avoided if possible. In this connection it is not quite correct if Mr Hoekstra says in his article on the coming tilting trains, that the politicians have decided to use them. After the debacle of the SBB planners regarding railway 2000, there was no other possibility to find a solution within the credit accorded by the people.

Another vote would have been rejected most certainly. Members who are interested in our political system are recommended to read "Why Switzerland?" by Jonathan Steinberg, Reader in Modern European History published by Cambridge University Press. It is brilliantly written. On some 260 pages our system is concisely explained and, what makes it especially readable, the author also criticizes where he feels it is needed.

The integral concept of travelling in Switzerland will be kept, there are at present even plans to improve it considerably. During 1999 an increase of 15-20 % in passenger traffic has been noted on all lines where the half hour sequenced timetable was introduced. Hence the management wants to improve the financial situation even more. It is obvious that a considerable number of these passengers are country people, parking the car at the station and travelling by train. It is also planned to improve the regional traffic considerably by using fast shuttles, possibly with tilting technology. It is also quite logical that freight and passenger traffic are considered as two separate markets which have to be worked with two different sales philosophies.

From: George M Hoekstra - Kandersteg

Four short remarks on letters and an article in Swiss Express December 99.

First of all about tilting trains: I can assure Bob Whiteley the "zero line" is neither a myth nor a marketing hype: the centrifugal force (and with it the pressure of the fluid in your balance organ) increases the further away from the axle of rotation you are. Remember the old spinning stages at the fun fairs? The only people managing to stay on it were on or very near the axle! So if you are standing rather than sitting down, your centre of balance is further away from the centre of the tilting curve. For sensitive people like myself this is quite noticeable.

Secondly: about the SVEA AGM. I was present at this meeting and can put Keith Pennyfeather's mind at rest. The stark sarcasm of Alan Pike's remarks about British Trains After Privatisation (an address he held in German) were not lost on anybody present, including the two SBB representatives sitting opposite me.

Thirdly: The Lötschberg Base Tunnel. Exhibition at Goppenstein station. Richard Pinner is quite right and it is a shame this is not better advertised. The video is superb with the best slow-motion shot of a full-gauge tunnel blasting I have ever seen! The exhibition is open every day and free.

Last but not least. I cannot agree with Don Neale's remark about awful bouncy NINA units in his interesting article with lots of tips of things to see. I have travelled a lot on these units between Bern and Neuchâtel (not only to eat croissants!!) and found the ride quite smooth. Did Mr Neale travel during the work of doubling the line to Rosshausern when short pieces of track were sometimes only temporarily bolted together and not welded?

From: Norman Simmons - Fleet, Hampshire

A Curiosity from Interlaken

Anthony Lambert's wonderful book, Switzerland by Rail, shows on p.393 in the Forsyth Travel Library advert a reference to Swiss Passes for couples showing considerable savings. I ordered two from the US as none were available in Europe. Forsyth were not very efficient or even very willing but I obtained them eventually and they proved very useful. In correspondence with STS I have discovered that they are to be made available in Europe and the UK (*see elsewhere in SE*) and can recommend them.

At the same time I also raised two other matters with them.

Why is the 0939 IC from Interlaken Ost shown as a connection at Spiez with the 1003 to Zweisimmen whereas the 0934 Regional, which actually has through carriages is not similarly shown? My experience is that this causes confusion at Interlaken Ost as passengers arrive there expecting to catch the 0939 and change at Spiez are puzzled when they find another train due to leave 5 minutes earlier bearing Zweisimmen coach boards!

Why the poor connection at Brig at this time of day? The 0934 from Interlaken Ost arrives at Spiez at 0956, which is exactly the time the Brig train is due to leave. The next train does not depart for another 40 minutes.

The reply from SBB Customer Services is shown below

Dear Mr. Simmons,

Regarding your remarks, we can offer the following comments:

1. Connection Interlaken Ost - Zweisimmen - Montreux. It is a fact that the change-free connection Interlaken - Zweisimmen today is not shown in the official timetable, neither in field 320, nor 120. However in field 320, there is a pointer saying that the GOLDEN PASS connections are listed in field 471. As an automatic computer function in editing the official timetable, the fastest connections are given (also with change-of-train). But the final decision as to which connections shall be shown, lies with the private railways concerned, here the BLS and the MOB.

2. Connection Interlaken Ost- Brig. In Interlaken Ost, the connecting trains from Lucerne are set to provide the connection to the InterCity trains for Bern/Basel/Zürich. The through coaches of the GOLDEN PASS connection to Zweisimmen ("Salon Bleu") can however not be joined to these IC trains, for technical reasons. They are therefore joined to the regional train, leaving Interlaken Ost normally at the minute 32. In Interlaken Ost, the minimum transfer time for a guaranteed connection is 5 minutes, and the fast train from Lucerne arrives at the minute 29. For this reason, the departure of the regional train with the "Salon Bleu" had to be scheduled 2 minutes later. With the consequence that in Spiez, the connection to Brig is broken. There, the InterCity train to Brig cannot wait for this connection, otherwise timetable stability would be jeopardised.

3. Swiss Pass with reduced rate. We are pleased to let you know that from 2000, we are going to introduce a "Saver" formula for all Swiss Passes and Swiss Flexi Passes. This means that if 2 or more people are travelling together, they will all benefit from a 15% discount on the normal tariff.

A similar offer was introduced in the overseas markets some years ago, and the success of this attractive discount has convinced us to extend it to the European markets.

From: Denis Stevens CBE - Blackheath Lötschberg and St Gallen

Since Richard Pinner rightly points out the importance of the Exhibition at Goppenstein, I believe like-minded members would wish to know of Patrick Belloncle's wonderful book *Le chemin de fer du Lötschberg* (Les Editions du Cabri, 1986, CP 1800 Vevey). Magnificent illustrations in colour and B&W, many line-drawings and lists.

Keith Pennyfeather's timely letter on privatisation strikes home. Such a disastrous scheme may well make private citizens into overnight multimillionaires, but it does very little for the general public.

It is encouraging to read articles written by lady members. Both Mrs Williams and Judith Curwen are to be thanked for brightening our pages. Next time in St Gallen they may like to visit the textile museum, spaciouly set out on three floors.

From: David Baker - Tadcaster

19 Woodlands Avenue, Tadcaster, N. Yorkshire, LS24 9LE

I am presently translating "Jungfrauregion" by Hans Schweers and have come across a name for which I can find little detail. Perhaps our readers can help, could you please include the following in the letters, or other relevant, section?

The Jungfraubahn used lightweight, wooden bodied, He 2/2 locomotives of only 12 tonnes, at the start of operations between 1898 and 1906 and ran train sets of loco plus two carriages. These sets were designated "Rowan-trains"! The principle was to transfer weight from the carriages onto the locomotive to increase the effective axle weight and hold the cogwheel down into the rack-teeth. The carriage next to the loco had only

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one biaxial pivot on the side facing into the mountain and the platform on the downhill side rested on the locomotive. This method was not carried forward to the next series of locos in 1912, they were 20 tonnes and of sufficient weight to maintain contact.

But who was Rowan, and was this principle used elsewhere? Please can anyone help?

BLUE LOOS

Editor's note - I was surprised how many replies Phil Weaver's letter produced. I cannot print them all but would like to thank in particular; Dave Howsam with the first reply, about 40 minutes after delivery via e-mail and Stefan Umholz who e-mailed from Switzerland. There are others, including Shane O'Connor. I must admit that I had no idea how knowledgable the average SRS member is about modern day drug culture. However there is still some controversy as the following replies indicate.

From: Alan Parsons - Horsham

I would like to comment on the letter entitled Blue Loo on p62 of the December Swiss Express.

Loos with blue lighting are becoming common in many large European Cities. They exist elsewhere in Switzerland, for example on Chur Station. I understand that this is an anti- drug device. In the blue light it is very difficult to find a vein in the arm where drugs can be injected. As the light contains much ultra-violet , some interesting fluorescent effects occur with certain colour clothing and tooth fillings!

On another subject I was interested in the articles on Bergün and would like to recommend the Hotel Darlux in that village. Apart from being an excellent hotel the village-view rooms also give a fine view of the Albula line as it passes three times across the facing hillside. You can sit on your balcony and study the trains. The hotel breakfast menu carries a part of the Albula story each morning. Well worth a stay.

All bar the following two letters fell into the category above - preventing drug abuse.

From: Michael Feaver - Tunbridge Wells

(but at the time standing on Spiez Station)

Blue Loos

I was surprised by your correspondent Phil Weaver's amazement at the blue loo at Lausanne station. Surprised because I had found just such a one elsewhere years ago. It was also in a subway, but I could not remember where it was! I thought it must be at Spiez, and here I am, proving the my memory did not play me false. I commend it to Phil Weaver on his next visit!

Incidentally, I am on my way to Goppenstein, hoping to see the Lötschberg Tunnel exhibition, which your other correspondent, Richard Pinner, told us about in the same issue. Sadly I shall not be able to report on it before the next deadline.

But you will be able to write it up for the next issue will you not Michael?. The final reply came-

From: Anne Williams - cyberspace

Swiss toilets, Greek taverna kitchens, meat stores world wide, operating theatres and any number of places concerned with hygiene have for many years used blue or green lights or fabrics. These colours inhibit the growth of bacteria which do not thrive in them and thereby provide a natural bactericide.

So there you have it, drugs or germs? The fact that the light has been around for a number of years lends weight to the latter theory and I think that the difficulties presented to the modern drug user is a useful coincidence which has masked the original concept. Unless you know better of course.