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THE DAY THE CYCLING CIRCUS CAME TO TOWN



The Meiringen-Innertkirchen Bahn at Meiringen Alpbach Bhf., also the finishing strait for the Tour de Suisse in June 1999. Let's hope it was a "level crossing". Photo:

If you have ever watched the Tour de France being shown on Channel 4 each summer you will have some idea of the razzmatazz and temporary infrastructure that the professional cycling circus that tours Europe brings to each community it visits.

Visualise a small Swiss town comfortably sited in its valley in the Alps with a local railway quietly and efficiently running between the jumble of chalets and farms as it goes about the daily business of serving its customers.

Add the two together and you are part way to being in Meiringen in the Bernese Oberland last June 20th. As Swiss Express readers will know Meiringen is the junction where trains on the SBB metre gauge Brünig Line reverse direction on their trips between Interlaken and Lucerne, and where the Meiringen Innertkirchen Bahn (MIB) provides a link down the Aare valley between its namesake towns.

It was a sunny summer Sunday and the 63rd Tour de Suisse was coming to town. A road race stage had finished the previous afternoon in Grindelwald and the hundreds of cars, trucks and buses that form the accompanying caravan had already moved into town when we arrived mid-morning. Elizabeth and I were staying outside Thun on a holiday that put together the sustainable elements of cycling and Public Transport. We had already ridden some stretches of the Swiss National Cycling Network from our base hotel and having seen the publicity for the Tour de Suisse we decided to use our Regional Rail Passes to watch others do some pedalling.

The trains to Meiringen were packed for the Swiss are as keen on cycle racing as they are on using their bikes for transport. Some 15% of all trips in the country are made by bike making them third in the European cycle-use league behind Holland and Denmark. Cycles are available for hire at most stations and

Meiringen was no exception with a row of over 20 pre-booked bikes awaiting their customers. The SBB station yard had been taken over by the team buses and mobile workshops. Roads were closed to cope with both the cycling and the mass of people and even the MIB was to have to curtail its movements to cater for the Tour. All around the town trade stands, produce stalls, and food outlets had been set up. Bands played. Outdoor Discos thumped. Local organisations supplied beer and wurst for donations to their funds. The multi-nationals gave away baseball caps (we gained 4) cycling bags (total 7), sweets (too many) and other goodies.

On this Sunday the Tour was staging an Individual Time Trial where the 120+ riders went off at 1 min intervals around a course of some 40km via Brünig & Brienz, with the start and finish points either side of Meiringen. A few hundred metres after the start they rode over the MIB's link to the SBB adjacent to its main station, and 200m from the finish they crossed the line again adjacent to the halt at Alpbach which became the temporary terminus for the afternoon. Crowd control barriers went up across the tracks and the TV crews were camping out in the MIB yard. Even in Switzerland the trains give way to the international sporting circus when it comes to town.

Later in what became a very hot afternoon we moved by SBB train down to Brienz to see the action from another viewpoint. We could move but people who had come into the valley by car were stuck until the Time Trial finished at



The TV cameras take over the main MIB station. Tour de Suisse. June 1999
Photo: Malcolm Bulphitt

5pm. A cool beer on a lake ship to Interlaken and the BLS back to our Hotel finished off an interesting day of Bike and Bahn when we became a part of Switzerland at play.

The other side of the level crossing and a cyclist comes sweeping into the finishing straight. The service was cut short at Meiringen Alpbach station at this time. June 1999.
Photo: Malcolm Bulphitt

