

"Relief" on the Bernina

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The joys of walking in the Alps, coupled with travel by an extremely interesting railway system to reach and return from the walks (and so observe railway operations), is one of the bonuses of a holiday in the Grisons. Armed with the Swiss Pass, it is possible to visit all of the valleys, passes and walking areas of that Canton. Where the rail doesn't reach, there is always the Post bus. Having been fortunate to spend holidays, with my wife, for the past decade or so in the Grisons, I have seen a large change in the railway operations there. Originally the Crocodiles were operating most of the passenger trains in the Engadine, the coaches and most of the engines were painted green, and hard leather-covered or wooden seats were the norm.

The way that the staff coped with various incidents that I saw at first hand was very efficient and typically Swiss.

One day in September 1995, as the weather in the Albula valley was very overcast, we decided that a journey to Poschiavo or Tirano would enable us to find a sunnier clime. It being early in the morning, we managed to catch the Bernina Express B. This train is made up of the normal set of coaches running from

The driver inspects the damage,

Chur to St. Moritz with the through Tirano coaches added at the rear of the train. Due to the number of people making the through journey from Chur to Tirano, the through coaches are usually well filled. It is just as easy to travel on the normal trains and transfer at Samedan and Pontresina, thus travelling in greater comfort, away from the tour parties. We managed to obtain a seat in the front compartment, immediately behind the driver of the leading motor coach, for the journey from Pontresina.

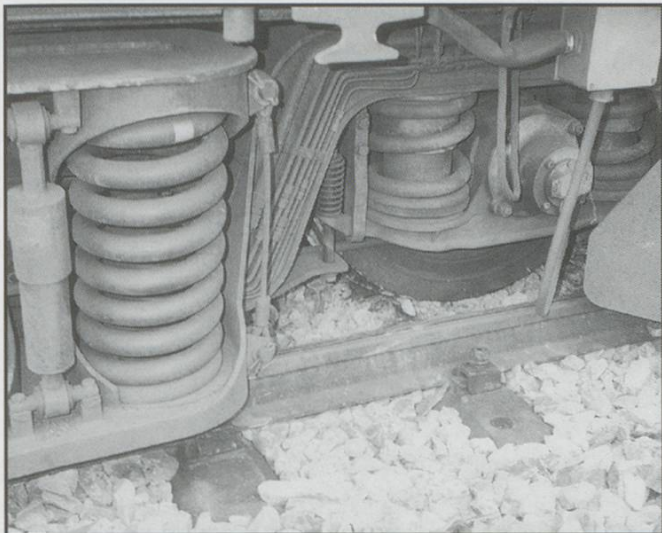
The train was pulled by two of the newer motor coaches, numbers 42 and 53, stopping at Morteratsch, Ospizio Bernina and Alp Grüm, before descending the gradient towards Poschiavo.

Between Cavaglia and Cadera, we were coming out of the mist, when the coach began to shake violently, bouncing up and down and lurching to the left hand side. We had derailed! The driver brought the train to a halt and together with the conductor, descended onto the track to inspect the damage. This was easier said than done, as to one side was a steep tree covered slope rising upwards into the mist, whilst on the other, right hand side, a retaining wall supported the track above a steep tree covered slope. This dropped down to the level of Poschiavo, some five or six hundred feet below. The rear bogie of the first motor coach and both bogies of the second motor coach had derailed. Goodness knows what would have happened if the coaches had derailed to the right offside of the track, rather than to the left.

Several passengers, including the writer, also got out to inspect the damage. The bogies had derailed at a rail break. The wheels had gone over several sleepers and had then travelled along a girder, which at this point supported the rails. It appeared as though the ballast at this point had dropped, due to movement of the supporting ground, and girders had been positioned under the track to support the rails. Perhaps it was further movement that had caused the rail to fracture. The front coach was kept upright because the casting of the bogie side frames had slid along the rail, whilst the second coach was well and truly embedded in the ballast.

Obviously the driver had been on the radio to Poschiavo depot, for soon the conductor went through the train telling everyone of the situation and that a relief train would be sent from Poschiavo.





Close up of the derailed bogies.

After about 45 minutes a train was heard ascending from the south. It was a works train consisting of motor coach, number 36, and a covered wagon loaded with sundry tools and equipment. The maintenance gang soon got to work to try and put the coaches back on the rails. Hydraulic jacks were inserted under the running gear and soon the rear end of the front coach started to rise up with all the passengers still inside! (Don't the Swiss have a Health and Safety at Work Act?). Balks of wood were inserted under the coach between the rails to help spread the load.

The maintenance gang get to work.



Further observation was cut short by the arrival of our relief train being pushed up the track by an old motor coach. Now the fun began as all the passengers had to transfer to the relief. No easy job in that everyone had to walk along the retaining wall past the maintenance gang, over the various crow bars, jacks and tools and make their way up the steps onto the train. This was not helped by the fact that

quite a number of the passengers were old and infirm. Everyone helped everyone else and soon everyone had transferred. Many of the passengers were asking about missed connections at Tirano, to which the guard could give no answer.

The train ran down to Poschiavo, now blanketed in cloud and with a steady drizzle drenching everyone as they got off the train. The station was thronged with passengers, some waiting to go South, and others waiting to go North. They were joined by those off the train. The relief train, after a long wait, and very full, set off southwards. Those going to Tirano just for the day were advised to wait for transport back northwards. The local post bus duly turned up, having been diverted from its usual journeying around Poschiavo. A wet party of travellers boarded with the usual shoving and pushing, every seat and standing space being taken. Even more were crammed on until even the driver could hardly move in his seat. That was the signal to depart, and so the bus ground its way over the Bernina Pass and down to Pontresina, where the sun was shining on the passengers as they made their way onto the platform to catch trains to St Moritz and Samedan.

We wondered what had happened to the following trains, including the main section of the Bernina Express, which we later heard, was stopped at either Alp Grüm or Bernina Ospizio. I wonder what the passengers thought of their day out, sat in the train watching the rain sheeting down on Lago Bianco, and their subsequent return without seeing Italy.

On another September occasion, we awoke one morning to find the whole of the Albula valley covered in snow down to the base of the mountains. The sun was appearing, so it would be a glorious day for a walk in the snow. Off to the station at Bergün, only to find a goods train stopped in the station, many passengers not knowing what to do and the station master on the phone to control. It appeared that the snow was of the wrong type (yes they do get the wrong type of snow in Switzerland) and had brought down the catenary somewhere between Preda and Bergün and a train had got its pantograph caught up in the wires. A small permanent way gang had gone out to repair the wires and all power in the section had been cut off stranding a Chur bound train at Preda. A bus was summoned from Filisur to take passengers travelling North and it appeared trains were stuck at every station between Thusis and Samedan.



Passengers make a precarious walk along the track towards "relief".

Our walk now took on the form of a quick hike up the road to Preda. Hardly any traffic was moving, nothing passing us on our walk to Naz and on to Preda. The snow here was very thick, and walking

was difficult; we reached the station to find the Chur bound train consisting of the usual set of coaches with a string of car carriers attached at the rear, each one carrying its full complement of cars. Obviously the Julier pass was also closed and people were relying on the railway to get them out of the Engadine.

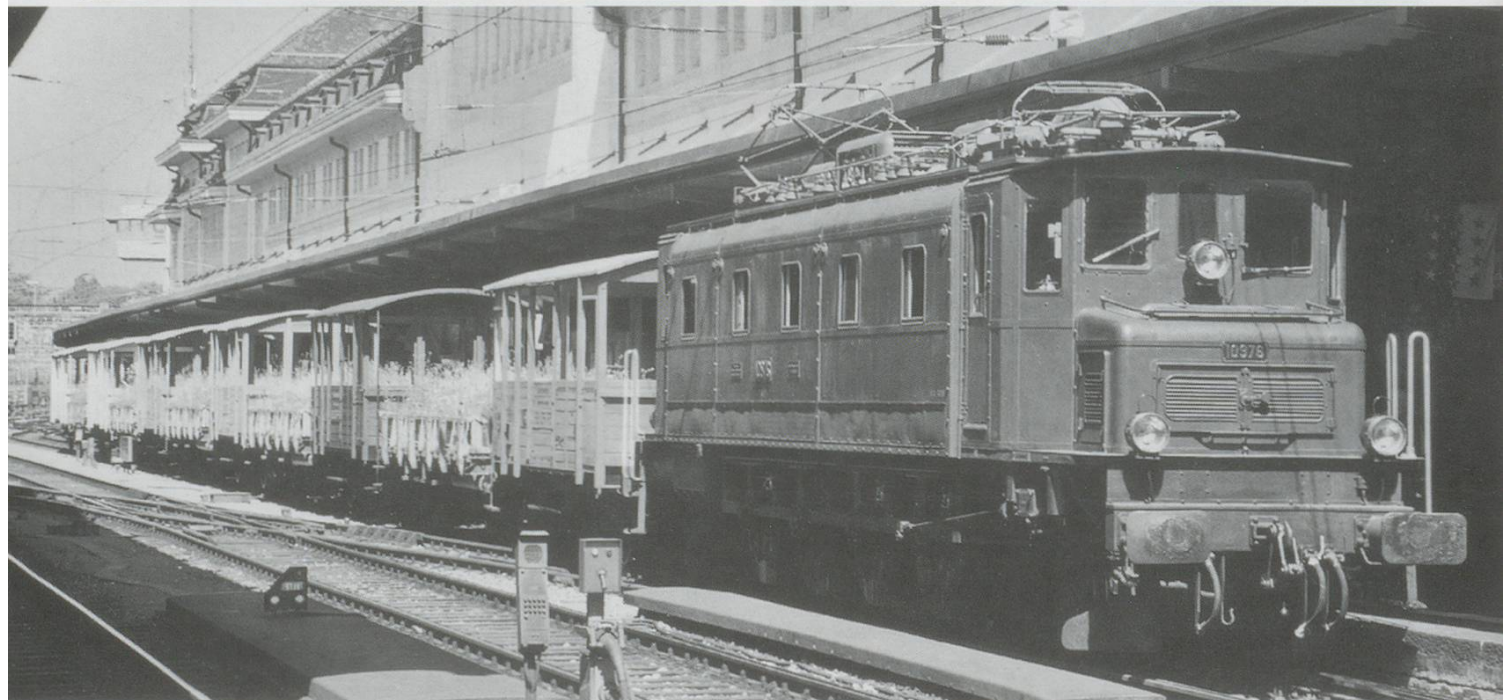
The driver was with the conductor in the station on the phone trying to find out what was happening and when they would be on their way again. Several school parties were in reserved coaches at the front of the train and most of the occupants were engaged in a large-scale snow fight, one school against the other. I often wondered why there was such a large space by Preda station!

After a walk up to the Albula Pass, we returned to Preda station to find that traffic was moving again. A train came in heading towards Samedan which we caught to find that in the lower Engadine there was now no sign of the snow and everything was moving normally. By late afternoon, even the main line was back to normal.

Then there was the Steam special to Scuol, which stopped at various points ex route to disgorge hordes of photographers into the fields whilst the train made several run-pasts; the same train being chased by the MITV video team in their car

. . . But that's another story. And one we would all like to hear. Yes? (*Yes please says the editor*)

All photos in this article by the author.



See next page - Ae 4/7 No.10976, with it's train of open wooden carriages, interspaced with the "meadows in bloom" gardens on wheels in Lausanne station. All my colleagues were politely listening to the dignitaries on platform 19 but "that man" sneaked off to the other platform to get a picture of the train in the sun. Photo: GH