

Letters

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FROM: DAVID ADAMS – SOLIHULL

Executive Decisions

Near the end of his interesting article "Executive Decisions" in the December 2005 edition of *Swiss Express* Steve Bratt makes reference to the new total smoking ban on Swiss trains and infers that if he was an SBB employee this would be of little interest when the company is faced with a SFr 1 billion shortfall in future pension liabilities.

I have recently read, but cannot remember the source, that as a result of this ban there are plans to shorten the formations of SBB loco hauled services. The thinking behind this is that previous smoking accommodation was very poorly patronised and therefore savings can now be achieved by reducing the rolling stock requirement. Of course this operational saving would fall far short of the shortfall but it would be a financial step in the right direction.

Across the whole of the SBB network there are instances where better use could be made of rolling stock resources in order to save money and a glaring example is the current use of ICN sets working the Basel - Zofingen shuttle in the off peak. However, there are signs that economies are being made. Plans have recently been announced to replace ICN's on the Konstanz - Biel hourly service by Class 460s and push & pull formations. These ICN sets will then operate between Basel & Lugano, saving an engine change at Luzern and cutting 15 minutes off the current journey time. I recently acquired all the SBB passenger locomotive winter diagrams and was surprised to find that on weekdays there are only just over 80 Class 460 diagrams for a fleet of 119 loco's. A similar ratio applies also to Re 4/4^{II} passenger fleet, for even though some diagrams are intensive there are many with a very low utilisation on a daily basis. It therefore seems very likely that we shall see some dramatic changes in operating practices as well as the threat of rural branch line closures in the not too distant future. With "Flirts" appearing everywhere and an announcement that Class 560's are to undergo a refurbishment programme by 2010 there is no doubt that SBB-P's requirement for Re4/4^{II}s is going to be significantly reduced.

Savings are there for the taking but achieving these will most certainly not be to the liking of most SRS members.

FROM: RICHARD BAKER – PINNER

Plane vs Train

With the greatest of respect to the editorial from June 2005 and the two letters in *Swiss Express* for September 2005 reference the discussion "Plane vs Train", I would wish to suggest that these discussions are simplifying the subject and avoiding the real issue. Regrettably, the suggestion that "there isn't any" incentive to travel by train, focuses only on cost and economics. In the short run, and with short-term objectives, the speed of the plane trip is bound to win over all other forms of transport. One letter writer says "... then plane it has to be." But is it really that simple? As individuals and as a member of a Society which champions Switzerland and its railways, surely our thoughts should also be of the broader issues and the long term?

Having travelled in the early summer of 2005 to Austria and then back into Switzerland (all by train and public transport), it was clear to me - in a much more obvious way than in previous years - that the impact of significant aspects of climatic change was already noticeable. Naturally, the forms and the causes are often blurred and unclear. I saw enough evidence, for example, of lowered rivers; changes to the snow reservoir systems which slowly melt to feed the rivers; and changing glaciers; to be deeply concerned. I also heard many people speak of climatic problems, and saw various articles highlighting poor weather and the effect these changes were having on tourism. All this was **before** the catastrophic floods and rainfall in the alpine areas - described by the Editor as of "biblical proportions" - that were so well illustrated in the articles in *Swiss Express*.

No matter how much some may try to bury their heads in the sand, **there is** a connection between the activities **we all** take part in and the changes in the climate. The huge irony is that tourism and travel, the very things we value because they nurture and support the very railways we love, are hazarding the long-term position of these alpine countries by contributing to climatic change. Without the winter sports industry and the summer walking and tourist industry many of the funicular lines, and such delightful systems as the RhB,

would be economically threatened. But climatic changes **are** coming. There are no ifs and buts. The problem is that although they have begun, we do not know the extent or speed of such changes. What we have to do is to factor them into our own personal equations.

In the short term we can easily fly by plane and get to Switzerland quicker but the price paid does not even reflect economic costs let alone environmental costs. We can go by train and get there more slowly, it is not always so easy to book, and it can be more expensive. However, whilst the evidence is complex, most authorities agree that air travel is very significantly more damaging to the environment than rail, and that many of the environmental costs of air travel are rarely talked about, let alone priced into the ticket. But rail travel of course also causes some damage to the environment, though not nearly as much.

I have no wish to harm Switzerland through my admiration of its railways nor my love of its scenery. My partial (and admittedly incomplete) solution is to limit my visits and their form. I try to choose carefully what seem to me the least damaging environmental options when I travel, and also when I live there as a tourist - I also seek to protect the environment as best I can back here in Great Britain.

Oh how I wish that life and decision-making was as straightforward as your editorial and correspondents somehow seek to make it! Quite simply, unless **we all** make better - and less short-term - decisions now and in the future, we will contribute to harming and even threatening, the very railways and the country we profess to love.

FROM STEVE BUCK - SUTTON COLDFIELD

Plane vs. Train

I feel that I must take-up the Editor's invitation to add to the Plane vs Train debate in the June and December 2005 editions of *Swiss Express*. It is unfortunate that Mr Hanley appears to have had some dreadful air travel experiences over the years. I have to admit that most of my journeys have been part of packages, but I have found that air travel has worked well for me when travelling to Switzerland.

Back in the glorious 80s, when there was an overnight steamer from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, I made several journeys by that route to Southern Germany and Switzerland. Leaving Birmingham New St at about 1530, with a same platform change at Peterborough, I could be in Basel by teatime the following day. However, I admit to having had some horrendous North Sea crossings by this route.

Now, if I try to travel by train - leaving home at 0630 in the morning, via London and Paris using Eurostar, I can be in Basel just after 2200hrs, with two cross city station changes loaded down with luggage and with a very tired and bored wife. As a rail enthusiast I enjoy the journey in its own right, but the ability to wander off and take the odd photo or two vanishes under these conditions.

However, if we leave home at the same time, and take the 20 minute journey to Birmingham Airport, we can catch the 0840 Swiss flight to Zurich where I can be standing on the platforms of the main station taking photos by about 1240, ready to take the 1309 Cisalpino across the Gotthard with an arrival in Lugano before 1600. It is equally possible to get to most of the tourist destinations about the same time. I travel using Swiss Travel Service who provide the special green luggage labels that enable our luggage to be handed in at Birmingham Airport and we next see it at the door of our hotel room. Other companies such as Kuoni and Inghams also provide this service, and I understand these labels can be purchased via the Swiss Centre with the travel passes for those independent travellers who self plan. The result of this is a happy wife who is content for photography at Zurich and other places en route, and travelling totally unencumbered, not to mention 2 precious days of annual leave saved. For me the plane wins every time.

Also, through the magazine, can I thank the gentleman from Leeds who was staying in the "Grischuna", who I met on Filisur Station in June as the Glacier Anniversary specials went through, for introducing me to the Society as well as Bob Lamb in Lugano for reinforcing the message. Thank you too for a great magazine.

FROM: MALCOLM BULPITT - BY EMAIL

Plane vs Train

Your Editor, perhaps foolishly, has opened up the debate on the plane vs train debate. Some of us have little choice in the matter. My travel diary records that at the time of writing this email I had just completed

my 276th trip by plane – I have a massive debit balance in my personal carbon account, and this does concern me. *Swiss Express* is now frequently sub-edited by laptop in an airport lounge whilst waiting for a delayed flight. As a Safety Engineer working for a small UK company with an international portfolio I am fortunate to get paid to travel to places people pay to travel to, although I reserve judgement on the hours spent in-limbo in yet another soulless terminal building. At least sometimes these hours can be used to help the Swiss Railways Society and to partly ease my carbon conscience.

I would prefer to travel by train, and in mainland Britain I make every effort to do so. Realistically though, in our modern world the commercial pressures to be somewhere in the least time, and at the lowest cost to the client, rule over both personal choice and the complex issues of the health of the environment. The low cost airlines have forced down the cost of air travel across the board and equally have almost eliminated the concept of “service” even from the heritage carriers. From bitter personal experience I now refuse to fly *Ryanair*, but by this airline’s very existence the likes of *British Airways* have had to adapt to survive.

For all the faults of railway privatisation in our country, and similar politically motivated reorganisations across Europe, to travel by train is generally a pleasant experience if you have the time and money to indulge in it. Service does still exist on the rails. Eurostar from London to Bruxelles or Paris is an option in comfort and time terms, but difficult to justify in financial terms in a cost-conscious world. Likewise a four-hour trip from London to Edinburgh by *GNER* sees an excellent level of service, and sits well in the elapsed time it takes, but the cost will be double even the *BA* fare. Move away from these major city-pairs and the train cannot even begin to compete with the plane for longer distance trips. Flying is not environmentally friendly – there is little argument over this – but it is also the lubricant of both the European and the global economies. The largest single component of both of these is now the tourist industry in which we all probably take part. We go to Switzerland to ride and enjoy their trains – but generally as tourists, and normally on time and cost budgets – so the plane often becomes the mode of choice.

If we are spending our own money then we can attempt to balance the economic and moral choices, but in many cases the choice is not ours. Environmental change will, in time, have impacts on all of us but in our global village our transport will more often turn out to be manufactured by the aeronautical branch of Bombardier rather than by their railway supply one. As a world society we have let out the genie of cheap air travel – as individuals we cannot put it back in the lamp.

FROM: CHARLES PHILLIPS – BY EMAIL

Plane vs. Train

Responding to the Editor’s invitation to join in the debate on the above subject, I use trains as opposed to planes for a number reasons.

Firstly I have a sense of nostalgia and romance that you cannot get with a modern jet, but you still can get with an international train. The thrill of seeing the foreign destinations on the departure board at the station as you board the train. There is often the name of the train. The realisation as you get on the train that you will get off in another country. Then the aura of the train. Don’t ask me why, but even on the London to Edinburgh run I’ve experienced it.

Then there are the happenings. I’ve had some very interesting, and looking back sometimes funny, experiences on international trains. For example going from Budapest to Cracow at the time of the foot and mouth epidemic I had to ask a Polish senior customs official if it was alright to take a tin of salmon into the country. Or being on a train arriving late at Basle from Cologne and then leaving bang on time for Luzern.

Of course there is the scenery. I’ll never forget my first sight of mountains. It was from an Ostend to Verona through train when going into Austria. Equally the arrival into Portugal through the mountains is incredibly beautiful. Then there is the food service. Not all trains have restaurant cars now. For example the Orient Express is now reduced to a buffet trolley. On the other hand I once drank Spanish champagne in the restaurant car of the Joan Miro running from Paris to Barcelona.

Also, as Ralph says in his letter, there are people – the passengers. Sometimes too there is the language difficulty. On the Brussels to Munich train a young woman pulled the communication cord in the middle of the Ardennes forest and tried to get off the train at a place where two tracks became three, but was not a

station. And it was raining. And the poor driver had to get out twice and reset the brakes on the carriage she pulled the cord on. Another reason is the challenge. There is something satisfying about completing a long journey. I remember the feeling of satisfaction of arriving at Stockholm from London via Brussels, Hamburg and Copenhagen.

Of course there are disadvantages. A lot of through trains have been discontinued. For example that from Brussels to Vienna, which was far superior to taking the Orient Express from Paris to Istanbul. The cost of train travel is normally more than going by a budget airline. Trains don't always arrive and depart at civilised times. But then do aircraft? However, on the plus side it could also be argued that trains are a more Green means of transport than planes. At the end of the day it is a matter of individual choice. The trouble is in the current world the alternatives are not always explained to people.

Forgive my ramblings, if that is the correct word, but I hope they will provide illustrations of some of the advantages of rail travel as I see them.

FROM: RALPH HANLEY – SOUTHAMPTON

Train vs. Plane

Thank you for publishing my letter in *Swiss Express* and your invitation to clarify my comments. The background to my flying experiences was some 8 years ago on business trips mainly in Europe, but also North America and Asia. Depending upon company profits I have flown from First Class, through Club and Full Fare economy to even APEX when company profits were low. Most of my flights were on national airlines and I would see British Airways as the most consistent performer. At least they look after one when flights are cancelled, unlike some southern European carriers who merely shrug their shoulders and walk away, leaving one to find a hotel and get there!

As you note, generally airlines are good at advising causes for delay. But I have also found rail companies generally good at advising delays and their causes. At least that is my experience in the Benelux, Germany and Switzerland . . . although I may not always understand the language. Certainly P&O on their cross channel ferries are very good at informing passengers and providing regular updates.

So I guess in conclusion that we agree on some aspects of my letter, but agree to disagree on others!!



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