

The right kind of snow

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2006)**

Heft [3]

PDF erstellt am: **01.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854802>

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THE RIGHT KIND OF SNOW

Photos: Martin Fisher



Little sign of global warming as Annie Portsmouth and Sue Fisher venture out into inhospitable Ospizio Bernina on 19.2.06. RhB ABe 4/4s 42 and 48 form the service train, 49 awaits it's next duty.

Having made our first autumn visit to Switzerland (Swiss Express, June 2005), Sue & I thought we should sample the country in winter. Fellow West Midlands Area Group member Morris Portsmouth and his wife Annie had the same ambition and so it was that the four of us flew by easyJet from Stansted to Basle on Friday 17th February. With their underground main line stations the airports at Zurich and Geneva provide a smoother transition on to the SBB than is possible at Basle. However the PTT's limited-stop bus (Route 50) into the city centre worked well enough despite the inevitable conflict between tourists with their luggage, and commuters homeward bound from work.

We stayed overnight in Basle and so on Saturday morning we were able to see something of the city. There was no hint of snow - indeed, the climate was just as it had been back home in England - but the near constant rumble of trams outside the SBB station was proof enough that we were in mainland Europe. We took one of the

hourly double-deck trains from Basle-Chur. It is worth noting that it is not very easy getting heavy luggage up to the top deck of these units, and even harder to find somewhere to put the luggage in a carriage that is already filling up. Although the curved windows hamper photography, it has to be recognised that such thoughts would not have been uppermost in the designers' minds and the windows do at least provide

Bern tram Be 4/8 713 in Basle outside the SBB station. 18.2.06





RhB Ge 4/4 652 "Lenzerheide" brings a Chur bound train into Filisur, 18.2.06. Hotel Grischuna to the right.



Snow is blown away from the platform at Ospizio Bernina - and into the path of RhB 49, 19.2.06

a good vantage-point from most seats.

As we journeyed south-eastwards the light dusting of snow on hills gradually became more substantial, but it was only after the cross-platform change to the Rhätische Bahn in Chur that snow became more widespread. By Thusis there was snow everywhere (roads excepted) and on arrival at Filisur snow covered the outer ends of the platforms and the road up to the Hotel Grischuna, and beyond.

Morris & Annie had

recommended the Hotel Grischuna so Sue & I joined the many SRS members who have stayed there previously. We can thoroughly recommend the hotel to any other members who have yet to sample it. Rather than a window overlooking the railway it suited us to be on the other side with a lovely view of the village, the mountains beyond, plus more distant views of trains making their way to or from Bergun. For anyone who is worried about the constant rumble of trains so close to the hotel, the late evening train service is thin and to the best of my knowledge there's nothing overnight between about 10pm and about 6am – and even after 6am the trains aren't obtrusive.

Sunday morning was bright and sunny but the forecast was for snowfall further south. One of the things we wanted to sample was the Bernina in wintry conditions, having seen the splendid Van der Berg DVD 'Bernina in Winter', so we took the 10am through train to Filisur. This was double-headed by Ge4/4s 619 & 625, one of which took us through to Pontresina (presumably the other went on to St Moritz). As we climbed to the Albula it became cloudier and we were not to see the sun again until the following day. The Ge4/4 gave way to ABe4/4s 54 & 53 and we set off for the Bernina. It was too cloudy

to make it worth taking the cable car to Diavolezza so we remained with the train to Alp Grum. Stepping out into the snow was an experience – immediately beyond the steps the snow was only a few inches deep but another stride or two away from the track and the snow was a foot deep at least. Easy enough for most but I was recovering from swollen knee ligaments damaged, would you believe, at the previous month's West Midlands Area Group meeting. Truly, our Group is like no other in the Society!

The views from Alp Grum were non-existent unless you happened to be interested in the RhB itself for parked in the station, while the crew had a well-earned lunch break in the station café, were Gem4/4 802 and Xrotet 9218 liberally coated with snow and icicles. We also lunched in the café and then went back up to Ospizio Bernina with ABe4/4s 42 & 48. Ospizio was incredible: 7,400 feet above sea level reached without rack-assistance up a ruling gradient of 1 in 14. A blizzard was blowing the whole time we were there so after the passage of one train the only line in use was covered in snow by the time the next train appeared. However, readers will not be surprised to learn that each train ran on time with one even appearing a minute early. ABe4/4s 46/43 employed the services of plough Xk9144 but others just travelled unaided.

The next day we took the 09.00 train down to Chur and at Reichenau we had a fleeting, tantalising, glimpse of Ge6/6 'Crocodile' 414 on a freight. As we came into Chur Ae6/6 11466 was seen, equally briefly, in a siding with one bogie down in the ballast and Bm6/6 18511 in attendance with a 'Hilfswagen'. Following a tight connection we took the train up to Arosa where sunny intervals alternated with snow flurries. It was during one of the sunny spells that we did the 'tourist thing' and, looking like extras from 'Doctor Zhivago', could be seen taking a horse-drawn sleigh around the lake and village. On return to Chur I used my knee as an excuse to stay



RhB Ge 4/4 650 "Seewis" begins the climb out of Bergun, 21.2.06

Davos Frauenkirch, 23.3.06





RhB GRM 4/4 802 and Xrotet 9218 await the return of their crew at Alp Grum, 19.2.06

RhB Ge 4/4 646 "Sta Maria/Val Mustair" on the Landwasser Viaduct, 21.2.06



on the station whilst the others did some shopping. 11466 and 18511 reappeared, 11466 being taken across the station and parked inside the engine shed.

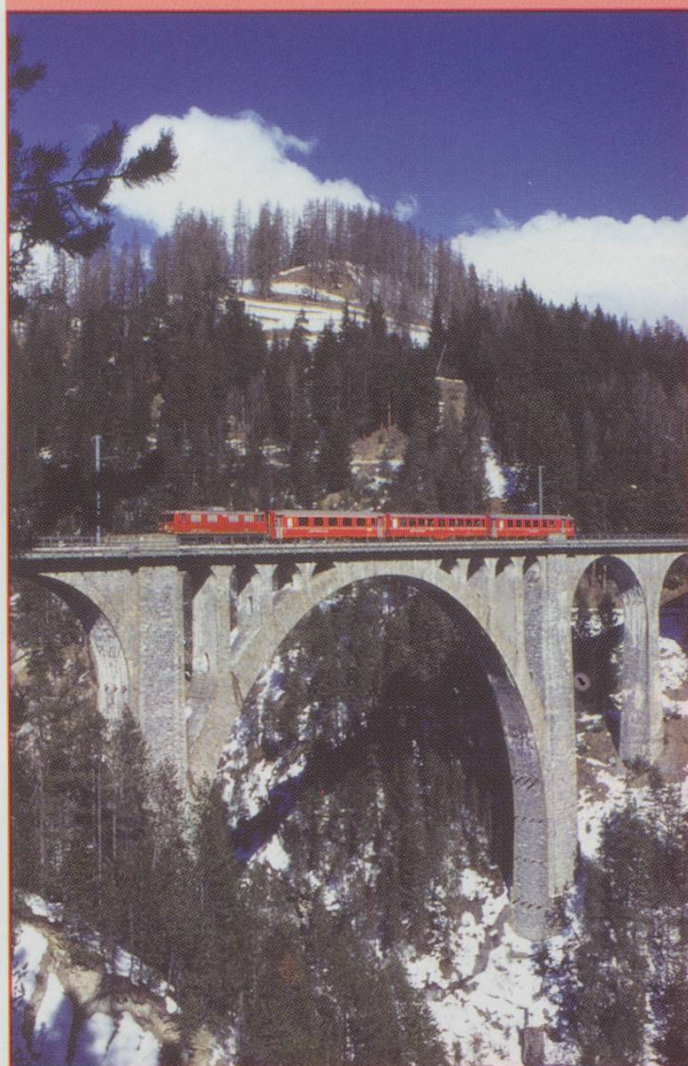
Tuesday was bright & sunny so we took the 9am to Bergun behind Ge6/6 703. This class put in frequent appearances during our holiday on the Chur-St Moritz route on both passenger & freight duties. In contrast, there seemed to be only four Ge4/4¹¹¹s on this section (646 and 650-652).

Much of the day was spent pottering about Bergun village and the lower slopes of the spiral above Bergun. Ge4/4 601 was employed on the Bergun-Preda push-pull shuttle for tobogganers. On our return to Filisur we set off to walk to the famous viewpoint over the Landwasser Viaduct. Sue & I were an hour ahead of our friends but having been given directions it seemed the walk would be perfectly straightforward. The first part of the path was not too bad, although we were glad we had our sticks and there were occasions when we sank in the snow to at least knee level. We then became lost and after walking up a slope underneath the Schmittenobel Viaduct that was steep and covered in bushes, deep snow and scree we rejoined the proper path. Just as well the hospital consultant couldn't see me. Happily we made it to the viewpoint, as did Morris & Annie who followed the correct path. After we had recovered our breath Ge4/4s 650 & 646 duly obliged by crossing the Landwasser.

Having decided that the following day we would go over to Andermatt we took the same train as two days previously as we reckoned that by getting in the rear coach and getting off at Reichenau we might just get a shot of the "Crocodile" on the freight. No such luck – instead a Ge4/4 was on the turn that goes up to Ilanz. Ge6/6 703 took

us up Disentis where we changed on to a MGB train hauled by HGe4/4 103. At Sedrun we saw the SBB-owned metre gauge rack branch line going off via a steel viaduct to serve construction works for the Gotthard Base Tunnel. Climbing still higher the conditions worsened and Oberalp looked rather bleak, there being no clue for the uninitiated that a lake lay beneath the snow & ice on the inside of the bend in the track. Further on conditions worsened still further so that at one point there was not a single rock, post or whatever to relieve the total whiteness. At Nättschen lots of passengers, of all ages, got out so that they could ski, toboggan or walk down into Andermatt. We returned from Andermatt on the "Glacier Express" duly paying the supplement (from memory of SFr9 per person) but it did mean we were on a through train to Filisur. As on our outward journey, we had quite a long wait at Nättschen for a train coming the other way (on this second occasion we passed ex BVZ HGe4/4 4) but I don't recall any late arrivals so assume these waits were timetabled.

We all like walking and so, having had a lazy day travelling to Andermatt, we decided that on Thursday we would walk from Filisur to Wiesen and then take the train on to Davos. At the start nothing could have been simpler. In bright sunshine, we followed a lane out of Filisur that climbed very gently with views across to Alvaneu, and then the first of a few glimpses of the Davos branch and of Ge4/4 602, which shared branch duties with classmate 608 that week. Soon we seemed to be miles from anywhere but following a slight diversion that gave a view back over the hotel we continued along our intended route with conditions under foot becoming more difficult. Although others had clearly been this way there



RhB Ge 4/4 608 "Madrisa" crosses the Wiesen Viaduct, 23.2.06

RhB Ge 4/4 601 "Albula" is overtaken by Ge 4/4 704 "Davos" on a freight, Bergun, 21.2.06





RhB 9218 and 802 at rest in Alp Grum, 19.2.06

In poor light, RhB G 4/5 107 sets off from Filisur, 24.2.06



were times when our steps sunk some two feet into the snow as we lost the path. Faced with the choice of walking over to the railway line and walking along the line itself or scrambling up towards the path we had been on earlier we chose the latter option but it proved to be longer and quite demanding due to the deep snow. It was a relief when we regained the correct path that led us on to fine sunlit views of the Wiesen Viaduct, before following the path alongside

the Viaduct to get to the station. That evening Frau Uffer at the Grischuna quietly explained that the path we attempted is closed in winter!

From Monday each morning over breakfast we had usually seen a freight working going up the main line at about 08.15 hauled by a Ge6/6 or a Ge4/4. Having tried and failed to photograph it on Thursday (it was either running late or had been cancelled) Morris and I decided to have another go on the Friday. To our very great surprise, the train appeared at about 08.20 hauled by 'Crocodile' 414, albeit in less than perfect light. We later discovered that there is an archive picture on the Filisur WebCam which shows this moment with Morris on the left and me in the middle of the shot.

During the Thursday evening another guest at the Grischuna said he'd heard a rumour that preserved steam engine G4/5 107 would be taking a charter train on Friday from Landquart to Klosters and Davos. However, no timings were mentioned and it did not seem worth changing our plans. Morris and Annie went to Preda and Bergun for the tobogganing and Sue & I decided we would take a look at the Engadin. We went up to Samedan where I saw Ge4/4 621, the one that I had never seen previously, before we travelled

down to Ardez. In the summer of 2004 we had walked around Guarda, Fran and Scuol so this may explain why we stopped off this time in Ardez. There was not too much to see and do in the village in winter so we opted to go over to St Moritz as Sue had not been there before. Many regard the town as something of a disappointment but we considered it was worth giving it a try, but it was only mildly interesting. As the weather wasn't bright enough to make it worthwhile going up into the hills above the town, we decided to go back early to Filisur, where we arrived at 16.00 and I assumed that I had finished with photography for this holiday.

However, as we drew into Filisur, I noticed some old coaches in the Davos platform and then could see further down the platform smoke drifting skywards. I went over to the Davos platform as quickly as I could, just in time to photograph No. 107 backing off from the turntable. After a few minutes, the tour party boarded their train, leaving a few people to photograph its departure from the platform. To my surprise another member of this select group asked me to look the opposite way to see blue Ge6/6 412 appearing from the Davos direction with a water-tanker in tow. 107 duly left down the main line towards Thusis and, after it had run-round its tanker, so too did 412. A great way to end the holiday. Unfortunately, it was half an hour later when Morris & Annie arrived back in Filisur unaware of what had been going on just a few miles down the valley. Then, on the Saturday, it was back home to Britain.



RhB Ge 4/4 646 calls at Bergun, 21.2.06



RhB Ge 4/4 608 "Madrisa" approaches Filisur from Davos, 23.2.06

RhB Ge 6/6 "Crocodile" 412 at Filisur, 24.2.06

