

Letter

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FROM: STUART CONLON – ST ALBANS

Plane vs Train

I have nothing against planes, particularly if that is the only sensible method of travel available. But fly to Switzerland? Why put yourself into a steel tube after the hell of the departure lounge when Europe's best trains are at your disposal. So far I have had holidays in Interlaken, Lucerne & Klosters and always gone by train, the trips booked through Swiss Travel Service who have provided both an excellent service and good organisation each time. Using trains is perhaps expensive, but I am on holiday and appreciate the comforts. Latterly I even travel first class at not much more cost and certainly not very much more than the package would have been by air.

The first trip to Switzerland since my schooldays was to Interlaken to assess what it would be like. This was on Eurostar to Brussels and then to Basel on the "Iris". This was a long trip across Belgium, Luxembourg and eastern France and meant arrival at Interlaken 11 hours from home. A great way to start a holiday much enlivened by the Belgian lady sitting next to me who consumed several beers every time the trolley went past, and whose French was similar to mine by the time she fell off the train at Strasbourg - or was it Metz - or Mulhouse! Interlaken was reached at night after two trouble free changes. My 8-day Swisspass was then used to the full to explore Swiss railways. I was so hooked that on my return home I immediately joined the Swiss Railways Society.

The next trip was via Paris on Eurostar and then TGV to Lausanne. From there on to Lucerne and an old hotel on the river by the wooden bridge which was perfect. However, the perceived problem with the TGV to Lausanne is the way it feels like a crawl from Dijon to the Swiss border as it becomes an ordinary express off the high-speed lines. Not having done this trip by air I don't know how it compares overall, but arrival in Lucerne was in daylight after a very early start from home and only an 8-hour trip. Again there were no problems with time-keeping either in or out of Switzerland.

The next trip to Switzerland was to Klosters. I did not think it was possible to get there in a day but STS organised it excellently. It took about 14 hours including an STS organised taxi across Paris and numerous changes after arriving in Lausanne. A bonus of course is that on this

route you get to travel on the Swiss ICN from Lausanne to Zurich. Klosters is ideal to explore the RhB from and I was able to cover all of the RhB in the time available. It still amazes me the amount of help you get if you ask for information at the most out of the way station. I only had to say where and when I was going and immediately computer printouts were obtained clearly showing what I needed to do, where to change trains etc. These experiences highlight that there is every reason to tour Switzerland by train. So why not go there by train?

I can think of many reasons not to use the plane. By staying on the ground you are not:

- contributing to atmospheric pollution;
- adding to the noise of modern society;
- helping the case for constant airport expansion;
- suffering the unpunctuality and unreliability of planes. On my holidays by train to, and in, Switzerland not a single train on over 70 journeys has been late, or cancelled (including Thameslink!);
- experiencing departure lounges at airports, and the behaviour of people in them;
- digesting airline food;
- queuing at security, immigration and customs;
- waiting for your (often damaged) baggage to appear on a broken carousel.

However, if you take the train you are:

- using the most eco-friendly method of travel after walking and cycling although, unlike airlines, the railways pay tax on fuel in the UK;
- being economical with space. In France a TGV can carry twice the number of passengers than an Airbus 380 (not yet in service) on the LGV to Lyons on a right-of-way barely wider than one carriageway of the parallel Autoroute;
- dealing with staff who are generally keen to assist, especially in Switzerland;
- experiencing the higher comfort level of standard class in trains compared to cattle class on planes;
- suffering a lot less official hassle - even at Waterloo International;
- enjoying a view from the windows;
- realising that 300km/h over the ground is a lot more exciting than 650km/h through the clouds;

So there are my highly subjective comments. I will contend that if a decision has to be made between cost and value. I know which I prefer - and trains are sexier!