

Routes from the Rhône

Objektyp: **Group**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(2008)**

Heft 94

PDF erstellt am: **29.06.2024**

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ROUTES FROM THE RHÔNE



Mont Blanc group from Montroc.

PHOTOS: Jason Sargeson

Founded by the Romans between 41 and 47AD the busy cultural and commercial town of Martigny in Canton Valais lies in the Rhône valley at the point where it is joined by the ancient highway over the Grand St Bernard Pass. Martigny's Gare CFF is on the busy main line along the Rhône valley where it is a stopping place on the through services from Genève to Brig as well as on the RegionAlps local services. It is also the terminus of two quite different local railways both operated by Transports de Martigny et régions (TMR). One, the standard gauge MO, runs up to Orsières and Le Châble, its services operating as the "St Bernard Express". The other line is the metre gauge Martigny-Châtelard (MC). The TMR is also a partner with CFF/SBB in the RegionAlps operation. These two articles give a flavour of the railways around this town.

MONT BLANC EXPRESS

Jason Sargeson

Services on the Martigny-Châtelard (MC) are marketed as the "Mont Blanc Express" for after it leaves Le Châtelard in Switzerland it enters France where its operation is taken over by the RFF(SNCF) and it continues on to Chamonix –Mont-

Blanc. It takes on average around 90 minutes to complete the trip from Martigny to Chamonix as the train is unhurried due to numerous station stops and waits for oncoming trains. On a good day the trip is very scenic and there are

many interesting villages en-route that are worth stopping off at. The MC is unusual as its 830V electricity supply comes from either the usual overhead wires or, in some locations, from a third-rail. On the French section the power is supplied entirely from a third-rail so the French rolling stock cannot proceed further into Switzerland than Le Châtelard-Frontière station which is just the Swiss side of the border.

At Martigny the platforms for the Mont Blanc Express are at the west end of the station with the 13c Tour de la Bâtiâz in full view (Photo 1). The train runs along the valley beside the main line to Vernayaz. After this stop there is a steep ascent on the Riggenbach rack up the hill and into the Trient Valley. There are superb views back down the Rhône Valley from the train. At Le Châtelard-Frontière there is sometimes a train change (Photo 2). There is a fine view from the station of the surrounding mountains (Photo 3). On the Swiss side of the border all the train announcements are in three languages, but once over into France - expect only French...

After the train enters France there is a long



1. MBE Bdeh 4/4 No 8 at Martigny Station with the castle in the background.



2. Changing trains at Le Chatelard.

3. MBE No 53 waits at Le Chatelard.



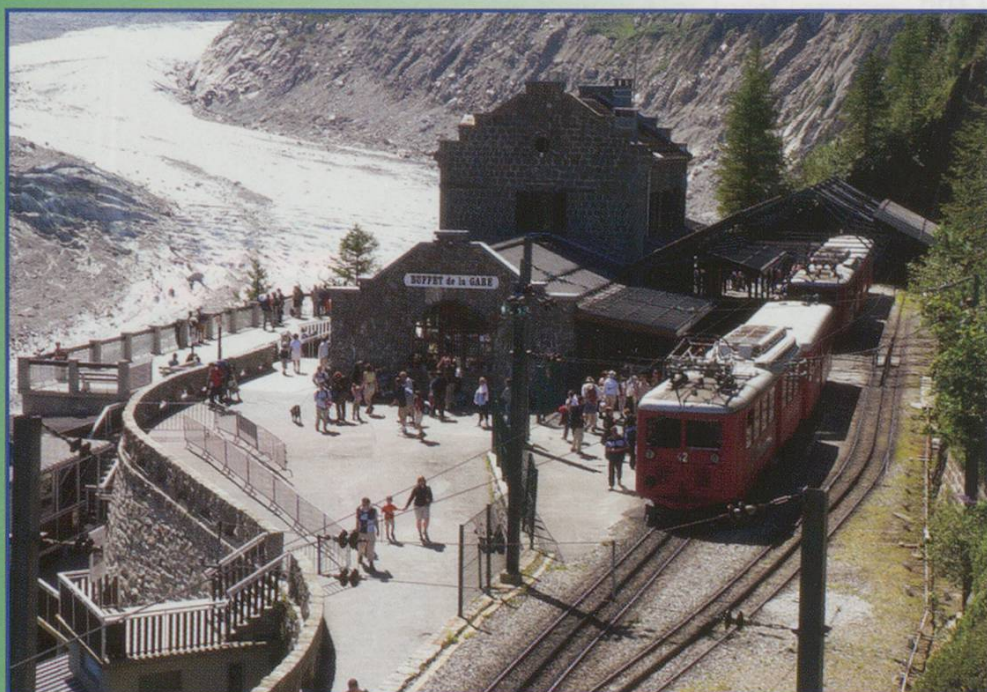


4. A MBE Bdeh 4/8 pulls into Montroc Le Panet on 27/7/07.



5. The sun glints blindingly from MBE No 53 at Chamonix Station.

6. CM Bhe 4/4 No 42 and Montenvers Station while the passengers admire the Mer de Glace.



tunnel from the Trient Valley through to the Arve (or Chamonix) Valley. When the train emerges at Montroc-Le Planet there are superb views of the Aiguille Verte and other surrounding peaks (Photo 4). The Mont Blanc Group first becomes visible from this station. As the train continues down the valley the views of Mont Blanc become

even more special. At Chamonix station there are good views of Mont Blanc and the Glacier des Bossons from the station (Photo 5). The Swiss Pass is valid all the way to Chamonix.

At Chamonix there are numerous attractions including cable cars to Le Brevent and the Aiguille du Midi. For railway enthusiasts a further train ride up a rack railway to Le Montenvers is a good choice (Photo 6).

The views of the Mer de Glace and the surrounding mountains are stunning. I liked the instruction at the ticket office in Chamonix – “Only one family member in the queue please”. Maybe we could start applying this in England, especially in Marks and Spencer!

VERBIER VACATION

Ken Follett



TMR(MO) low floor 'NINA' EMU RABe No.527.513 service from Le Chable on viaduct approaching Sembrancher on 10 October 2006. PHOTOS: Ken Follett.

The high alpine resort of Verbier is clearly not the most obvious place for a Swiss Railway buff to spend a holiday, but the offer of a friend's apartment to celebrate my 55th birthday was too good an opportunity to miss even though we would be travelling during the low season in October 2006. Verbier lies over 1000m above the Rhône valley at Martigny. We purchased our 8-day Swiss Passes for use on the trip taking advantage of the 7% discount offered at the time to members of the Swiss Railway Society. Thanks; I recovered my subscription (and more!) in one fell swoop.

Arriving at Genève Aéroport, off an easyjet flight from Luton, we located our main line train that would take us direct to Martigny. Here we changed onto the Martigny-Orsières (MO). This line, electrified at 15,000V, took us to Le Châble, a small village some 830m

above sea level. The operations on the MO are unusual in that they do not always correspond to the "clockface" timetable operated across most of Switzerland. The journey from Martigny to Le Châble was operated by Class 527 'NINA' units. Passengers wishing to travel to Orsières (the original route of the railway) needed to change at Sembrancher. This section of the MO was normally being operated by Class 537 railcars that were occasionally strengthened with a driving trailer. These may well have been the arrangements put in place after the landslide near Bovernier the previous 25th July that damaged 'NINA' unit 527.511.

Waiting for us at Le Châble (the MO only reached here in 1956) was the scheduled Postbus to take us the last 8.5km to Verbier, a rise of approximately 700m negotiating 13 hair-pin bends on the way. All of this took us 8 hours from the time



TMR(MO) Saint Bernard Express railcar RABe No.527.51 at Martigny on 8 October 2006



PTT bus at Le Chable (MO) station.

we got up in Kent to the time we walked through the apartment door; including 2-hours of absolute purgatory checking-in and getting through security at Luton Airport! After that the flight and all the transport connections in Switzerland went like clockwork. Anyone who has been to locations like Verbier during the low season will appreciate that many facilities are closed. The first of many encounters that

we had with such closures was the Télécabine from Le Châble, which explained why we had to use the Postbus service instead. The other Télécabines in the resort were either closed or operating a very infrequent (3-hourly) service and even then the restaurant at the top station, Les Ruinettes, was closed. Such closures were not limited to Switzerland for we found that the French rack railway up to Le Montenvers from Chamonix was also out of service, possibly due to out-of-season building work at the lower station. Reconstruction of the narrow gauge terminus at Aigle station also saw the trains of the AOCM and ASD being replaced by buses at this period. Although disappointing, the closures have given us reasons to return in order to ride these lines.

Having a week of cloudless skies and autumn sun we were able to make many trips during our stay using the MO to travel down to Martigny on a regular basis. A planned ride over to Chamonix using the Mont Blanc Express (*as described in the parallel article – Ed.*) was also not without its problems. The route was working up to the border at Le Châtelard-Frontière but the French part of the journey required the

use of a replacement bus service – again the operators were taking advantage of the low season to undertake essential maintenance work. At Chamonix we had intended to travel down the rest of the SCNF metre gauge branch to St Gervais, but time was against us. Again, we will have to return. Travelling back to Martigny we found that the services on the two parts of the TMR did not interconnect - missing each other by 4 minutes. Very un-Swiss.

Other trips from Martigny included riding on one of the infrequent through trains, formed of a Class 560 EMU, down the line on the south bank of the Rhône to St Gingolph; travelling on the main line to Montreux, Vevey and Lausanne; using the Rhône valley line to Brig; and travelling up to Orsières on the other part of the MO. With excellent autumn weather Verbier in the low season was not such a bad place for a railway buff to stay.



TMR(MO) EMU ABDe 537 No.507 "Martigny" at Sembrancher on Orsières branch.



AOMC bus at Monthey Ville station on rail replacement.



TMR(MO) non-powered railcar No.33 at Orsières.



SNCF 'Stadler' Class 2800 EMU No.52 at Chamonix Mont Blanc on 8 October 2006.