

Members' letters

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From David Stevenson – By Email

In May I read in the *Independent* that Eurostar will now book you through to Switzerland. Great I thought as I go there two or three times a year. At last an easy way to book and go by environmentally friendly rail, and what's more with return fares claimed as being around £100 per person - even better.

Then I checked for two people . . .

Travelling Eurostar and TGV from St Pancras-Zürich the actual practical fare is £420 return for two people in the cheapest seats using the one train a day we could access from Worcester. To take "advantage" of this fare we have to get to St Pancras which is expensive, and is more or less impossible by car (for Eurostar travel anyway) from where I live. Coming back, if I used the train home from London I would be travelling in the peak so we would have to take out a mortgage to pay the UK rail fare. Also, I did not mention that you cannot even book a Eurostar ticket more than 3-months in advance.

However if we fly *easyjet* from Luton the return fares for two would total £173 and we can travel on the days and at the times I want to travel, and I can plan and book our trip many months in advance. The airport is near the M1 and the parking is easy and economic. If we flew Swiss from Birmingham it would cost £260 return, yes that's Swiss from Brum, which is usually the world's most expensive route. Flying from Heathrow there are some nine flights a day at a cost of around £200. I could also drive to the airport, park and leave the car at a reasonable rate. Flying from Birmingham I don't even have to do that as one of the family can easily take us there.

Guess what . . . we won't be travelling with Eurostar, particularly as you have to drag your luggage between terminals in Paris as well. Joined up thinking by Europe's railways, I don't think so.

From Chris Elliott – By Email

Living in the South of France I have been involved with the series of public debates

which have taken place earlier this year in connection with the future LGV from Montpellier to Perpignan that is planned to join the newly opened High Speed Line from Perpignan to Figueras in Spain. The need to build an additional line, which would be provided as a backup as and when the existing line faces problems as it often does, was cited as urgent. What's this to do with Switzerland? As I discovered on a recent visit to that country they have identical problems south of Berne and between Lausanne and Genève.

Travelling on an Interregio train from Bern to Fribourg on one leg of the trip we were held for an announced indefinite delay in Bern because of a signal failure at Flammat - this stretch forms part of the main line between Zürich, Olten and Bern to and from Lausanne and Genève. In the end it became a mere ten minute stop but enough to disrupt some connections. Far more serious, however, was a two hour enforced stop caused by a locomotive bringing down a section of catenary between Nyon and Genève.

SBB/CFF were faced with a juggling exercise to accommodate the constant arrival of trains from Bern and Montreux into an already busy Lausanne station, a situation that they handled without too much difficulty. However the same cannot be said for the hundreds of passengers who only had inaudible announcements only in French (fortunately the writer speaks this fluently) the gist of which seemed to be that for at least an hour no information about onward travel would be available. Only after almost two hours the first audible announcement came across that the service would shortly be resumed.

What started as a simple problem ended up as nightmare for the many hundreds of passengers wanting to get to Genève for onward connections, and to its airport to catch flights!

The line between Lausanne and Genève is a strategic line that west of Nyon is scheduled to run at over-capacity yet does not have any diversion route available when trouble inevitably strikes. The conclusion must be that if you base your national policy on a

combined, well-integrated and organised public transport system it has to be designed to provide a solution when there are problems of this magnitude.

In my view SBB need to consider the lessons learnt and decide what they can do to deal with what is a familiar problem in the UK, and to a certain extent also here in France.

Editors Note: Chris will be pleased to read the news item in Sidetracks.

From Paul Grant – Toronto

It is two years since my last Swiss visit and in that time period many things have changed – yet others have not, with the Re4/4s still being the maids-of-all-work. Last time the Re6/6 seemed to be in retirement but on my trip this June there were a lot in evidence on all types of freight workings.

Going south of the Alps on the Gotthard route few ETR 470s were to be seen on Cisalpino services. The one I saw at Bellinzona was out-of-service and being hauled by a loco to an unknown destination. Rather than the full ETR 610 operation starting in June as scheduled Cisalpino services were going no further south than Lugano. The whole Cisalpino operation seems to have degenerated into a sorry mess. Speaking to SBB staff the subject of the ETR 610s was greeted with scornful laughter. One apparently well-informed person noted that Alstom are still stalling over installing items of operational equipment in the ETR 610s. Apparently the top brass at SBB have lost all patience with Alstom and want to find an alternative to the ETR 610s and to get rid of the ETR 470s – but, as the local guys pointed-out, who would want them?

In the Ticino I chose to stay just outside Bignasco at Caveragno the terminus of FART's Autobus Line 10 that runs hourly from Locarno. From there I took the four-services-a-day AutoPostale route up to San Carlo alighting at Foroglio to see the spectacular waterfall. This high alpine valley was another world. The communities have no electricity and are only inhabited from April to October. The bus too is only scheduled to run in this period. Despite its

isolation the restaurant at Foroglio served a superb lunch and the beautiful stone-built village cost me a whole roll of film – I have yet to go digital.

To explore the RhB I had based myself at what turned out to be a chilly Pontresina where we had -2c temperatures and white frosts in June! Interestingly both the Bernina and Heidi Expresses seemed to be the preserve of the older 600 series locos. During my visit the RhB appeared to have staff at only a few stations on the Albula and Bernina route. The only ones that seemed to me to be regularly manned were Thusis, Bergün, Samedan, St Moritz and Pontresina.

My third base was at Spiez where I have been a regular visitor since 1957. Watching operations at this station was always good but with the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel it seems even busier. I fully recommend the new BLS trains now operating over the old line to Kandersteg, etc as their deep windows allow good views of the scenery. The single line route alongside the Thunersee to Interlaken seemed to be hopelessly overloaded, resulting in frequently delayed services. Little rolling stock now seems to lay-over in the sidings at Interlaken Ost with even the German ICEs being pressed into early morning/late evening Swiss service on return trips to Basel. On a trip back to Spiez from photographing Oberhofen Castle I managed to ride on the 103 year old *Blümlisalp* which was in wonderful shape. A great end to my Swiss visit.

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