

Rhätische Bahn 2011 : Bryan Stone brings us up to date on the "State Railway" of the Graubünden

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RHÄTISCHE BAHN 2011

Bryan Stone brings us up to date on the
“State Railway” of the Graubünden.



In winter the road between Preda & Bergün becomes a sledge track.

ALL PHOTOS: Bremgarten

The Rhätische Bahn (RhB) is in the course of a major renewal of rolling stock. Some of this programme is well advanced with the fifteen bi-current Stadler ABe 8/12 “Allegra” railcar sets in operation for the Albula, Bernina and Arosa lines. These units are intensively programmed. A typical day being a Chur – Arosa round trip; a main line run to St Moritz; Tirano and back; returning over the Albula to Chur; and a final Arosa return trip. Five more similar units are now on order in an ABe 4/16 format (single current, less power, more seats) for the Chur commuter service between Schiers and Thusis. Part of the ambitious plans of the RhB has been accepted; with Canton Graubünden approving the plan for a 30-minute “Takt” interval service on the RhB, although the BAV (Federal Transport Office) has yet to pronounce on it.

With the introduction of the 2011 summer timetable there were no more diagrams for the 601-series Ge 4/4 I locomotives with Nos 604, 606, 607 and 608, all withdrawn and broken up in March and April, whilst No 601 had gone earlier. They still were in demand during the late ski season and in the previous month (February) No 607 had worked with No 603 on the Arosa line whilst No 605 was working to the last on the Bergün – Preda “Schlittelzug”. Now No 603 has been offered on-loan to an Augsburg (Germany) museum collection and at the time of writing attempts were being made privately to have one preserved. It is the Allegras, of which the last (No 3515) was delivered on March 31, that have made these engines redundant. The Ge 4/4 I were however pioneer machines, built by SLM in 1947 (601-604) and 1953 (605-610) as a lightweight express engine, echoing the Re4/4 of SBB. They revolutionized the RhB, and between 1986 and 1992 were given new crash-absorbing driving cabs,

multiple unit and push-pull controls, new transformers, and much more.

Although local services on the Chur-Disentis line may also be railcar sets, the bulk of the service is provided by Glacier Express trains that require locomotive haulage, often a Ge 6/6, which is changed with MGB locos at Disentis. The need for full mainline loco-hauled trains is also perceived on the Chur-St Moritz line. The next rolling stock order is therefore for seven 6-car, close-coupled, high-comfort sets, two cars of which will be 1st class. Two sets will normally operate together as 12-car trains. An attractive feature at one end of each set is an observation car with opening end and side windows. The RhB, after watching what generally happens today, obviously wants to cater better for photographers. By the way my tip to photographers using the current trains is, if you know the line, to check the ends of your car before the spectacular bits to find a pull-down window, then, when you know what's coming, go to that end of the car. If there isn't a window, change cars - go on, we all do it. Apart from these train sets the Glacier/Bernina Express trains run on the main line either in seasonal paths, or with their observation saloons combined with regular expresses. The new 6-car mainline sets will be about 112 m overall length; have an authorised maximum speed of 100kph; have a maximum weight in service of 153 tonne, and offer 70 1st and 186 2nd class seats, but without a catering vehicle. It is planned to add a Restaurant car between two 6-car units in a 12-car composition.

Even today's regular Albula-line expresses are not without interest. They are often of 12-cars, quite enough for the 4% (1:25) gradients, although the Ge4/4 III seem to handle them

with ease – although in one respect they fail. Look carefully and you will find a baggage car about 4th back. Look harder and you will see a pantograph. An RhB conductor recently told me that these are explained to the innocent as a new assisting locomotive! They are not; but they do feed a transformer and power supply for what the Americans call ‘hotel services’. To us Europeans that is auxiliary power to the lights, heating, air conditioning, toilets, laptop plug-ins, etc. It appears that the ancillaries output from the Ge4/4 III and others cannot meet all demands, so an extra reinforcement is required. So far the artist’s impressions from Stadler for the new mainline sets don’t show this interesting ‘extra’. We’ll see. That’s not all of course, for the RhB has also operates heavy block trains of freight, oil, refrigerated goods in vans and containers, and cut timber (much of which goes to Italy via Bernina) over this exacting route. These trains are usually Ge 6/6 II powered, and there is at least one daily pick-up goods each way, crossing usually in the Bergün/Filisur sector, as well as a southbound mixed train at 04.30 in the morning – or so I am told. This mixed train used to run at midday and years ago my wife and I often took it from Bergün in winter (in its open-platform wooden-seat saloon) to sledge from Preda back down to Bergün.

Bergün station has been rebuilt – and to know why you must know about the “Schlittellzüge”. These have run since the Preda-Bergün road, part of the Albula Pass route which is closed to traffic in winter, was made into a superb sledge run. The direct line between these two stations is about 4 km; the railway distance some 12.5 km; and the road (and sledging) distance through the Albula Ravine not much less, whilst today the sledge route has refinements like straw bales in the tight curves. These were unheard-of thirty years ago when the “Schlittellzüge” (sledging trains) were a whole set of wooden-seated open-platform cars, some 2-axled, and scarcely heated, since windows and doors were always open. They would be shuttled up and down all day (on booked paths of course) between Preda and Bergün, at each end occupying the track by the station building. You could hire a sledge too; buy a ticket at Bergün, and you picked up the sledge at Preda in the goods office. It took about 20 minutes to get down but you had, as now, to walk through Bergün village back to the station.

Times change. The wooden seats and the Ge 6/6 Crocodiles, off up the hill with ringing coupling rods, have gone. The stock is often rather downgraded – last winter a set of 1939 middle-entry cars, the engine a 60-year old Re 4/4 I – but in Bergün they have built a new special bay platform, with spur, a long awning, and new signals, just for the “Schlittellzug”. The crowds had to be seen, and these would mill around on the running lines at Bergün when all was at ground level, so I suppose it couldn’t stay as before. I saw the new bay platform and awning, this January, and was amazed, but could not at first feel excited. But I’m sure it’s better, and safer, and you wait under cover, and at least the old station building has survived. Of course, funny things happen; it can be that the “Schlittellzug”, like sometimes the Filisur – Davos shuttle, gets a gleaming Ge 4/4 III to pull its little train, while a Ge 6/6 II turns out on the Glacier Express. But the RhB



1. Ge4/4^I 605 in the new platform at Bergün with the Schlittellzug in December 2010. PHOTO: Bryan Stone

2. The Klosters shunter attaches a solitary ballast wagon to the Landquart bound freight. PHOTO: David Carter

3. Ge4/4^{III} 652 *Lenzerheide-Valbella* arrives at Klosters with a Davos train 24/07/08. PHOTO: David Carter

4. Abe 4/4's 56 and 52 at Alp Grüm, 14/03/07. PHOTO: Mark Evans

lives in the high season on its wits, when everything available gets pressed into service.


To be comprehensive this article should mention the Landquart-Scuol expresses through the Vereina tunnel, which

usually get a Ge4/4 II, and the Scuol – Samedan – St Moritz trains which get anything that will go. The Ge 4/4 I class had been regulars on the little Davos – Filisur, so that too will change. There is also a daily goods from Samedan out to Scuol, usually with a Ge 6/6 II, as also on the Albula main line. Co-op is a good customer, also with its containers, and only the railway assures year-round access. One curiosity has just disappeared. Up to last year motorists could load their cars on flat bogie wagons at Thusis, which were attached to selected expresses, and were unloaded again in Samedan. This was a year-round service, but very few used it. Now it's stopped; it was another random complication. Most of the year the Julier pass from Tiefencastel is now open, so global warming and the RhB's Klosters - Sagliains shuttle in the Vereina Tunnel have probably killed it off.

If you have a chance, visit Bergün in winter and ride the sledge run. It's quite (well, fairly) safe. But best of all is to take the camera, be at the back of the crowd, and stop on the way down to wait for trains on the famous viaducts. Visiting the RhB never tires. I have ridden over most of it on the footplate and there are still steam trains with 2-8-0s Nos 107 and 108. There is the feeling of a real railway, with 12-car expresses;



Having taken the train to Preda, the sledging enthusiasts of all ages prepare to slide back to Bergün

fierce grades and bends; freight; crossing stops; bells; and all on the meter-gauge. Yet down at Reichenau it's another world; and at Domat-Ems it's heavy industry; in Scuol it's almost in Austria (they once wanted to go through); in Tirano it's Italy! Take your choice. The whole is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and it is a different railway world to step into off the SBB at Landquart or Chur. 

SWISS RAILWAYS SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & SPRING MEET 2012

This will be held at the NOVOTEL, Victoria Street, Bristol, BS1 6HY on Saturday 24th March 2012 from 11.00-16.30.
The formal AGM will commence at 14.00.

Non members of the Society are welcome to attend the Spring Meet but a donation of £2.00 per person would be appreciated.
The event is organised by the Bristol & Bath Branch with the support of the Management Committee.

CONFIRMED SALES STANDS

Contikits, Gerald Savine Railway Prints, Platform 5 Books, Hornby International, NScaleCH and WINCO.
The Society Stand together with the Bring & Buy Stall will also be there.
There will be the photo competition with the usual three categories.

LAYOUTS AND DISPLAYS

Layouts confirmed to date are "St Nicholas" Roger Ellis, "Radeberg Ost" Alan Wardman, "Sans Souci" Harry Harper and "Beckenvick" Simon Ellis.
The day's events will be followed by a formal dinner at 19.00 for 19.30.

MENU

Leaves of Galia Melon (with a compote of Mixed Berries)
Pavé of Salmon (with a Tomato, Dill and Vermouth Sauce), served with a selection of Vegetables and Potatoes.
Chilled Lemon Tart (with Kumquat Sauce)
Freshly Brewed Coffee and Chocolate Mints

The cost is £24.00 per person including service and VAT, but excluding wine.

Please send your cheques made out to the Swiss Railways Society and send them to Roger Ellis, Alf-N-Alf Cottage, Kingsbury Episcopi, MARTOCK, Somerset, TA12 6AZ. I must receive the monies by 1st March 2012 at the latest.

HOTEL ACCOMMODATION

A special rate has been negotiated with the Novotel and including full English Breakfast is £79.00 per room for the Friday and £75.00 per room for the Saturday. If you book for the two nights the rate will be £75.00 for each night. In common with most City Centre Hotels there is now a car parking levy which is for example £10.00 for 24 hours.

When booking on 0117 9769988 please tell the Hotel this is for the Swiss Railways Society AGM.

THE FRIDAY EVENING ENTERTAINMENT

At 20.00 in one of the Victoria Rooms Mr Alan Wardman, Mr John Jesson and Mr Roger Ellis will present a delightful colour picture show entitled "Spiez 2011" for the pleasure of the assembled audience.

The Hotel can provide us with a "Hot & Cold" 3 course buffet for £18.00 per person (including tea and Coffee), but need a minimum number of say 25 to take advantage of this offer.

I need to know by 1st March if you do wish to dine so that I can advise the Hotel.

Roger Ellis (REllis@alfnalf.fsnet.co.uk) 01935 824428.