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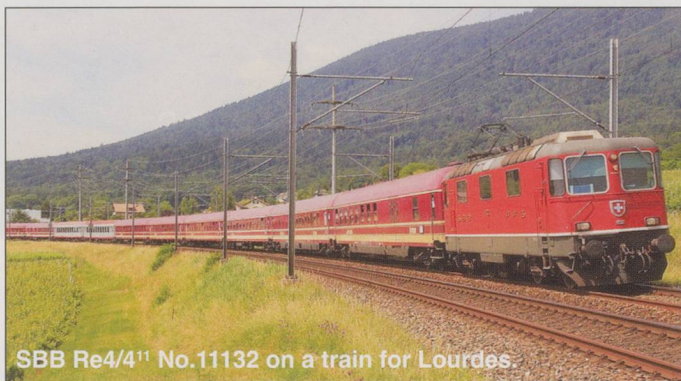
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## *Pilgrims to Lourdes* Bryan Stone and Mario Stefani (who supplied the photographs) review this traffic



What may seem an unlikely subject for *Swiss Express* is in fact still a substantial business for Swiss railways. Lourdes, in the Pyrenees, is the location of a Grotto, which is, for many devout Roman Catholics in the hope of healing, a greatly revered place of pilgrimage. It is served by the SNCF, and especially in the period from Easter to Whitsuntide, is visited by many thousands from all parts of Europe. Considerable organization is required, since distances are long, many pilgrims are elderly and invalids, and special facilities are needed. A programme of special trains is run, mostly as charters by private organizations. Switzerland sees trains from Germany, typically via Basel/Genève and St Margarethen/Zürich, and there are also charters from Catholic regions of Switzerland. Rolling stock is increasingly provided by private operators, including couchette cars and a number of adapted cars for wheel chairs and for the bed-ridden. The SNCF still has, it appears, a considerable fleet, marked by a purple strip above the window line. There still exist some ambulance cars from earlier military and civil defence requirements. Some 470 voluntary helpers are involved, some to accompany the trains supplying refreshments and care.

A voluntary body, whose title translates as the 'Interdiocesan Lourdes Pilgrimage, German and Rhätoromansch Switzerland', based in Uznach (SG), coordinates things in eastern Switzerland and charters trains and rolling stock, mostly from SNCF. This year 2,369

pilgrims were booked by this group, including 300 invalids. A typical day train leaves Chur at 04.41, making several stops in Switzerland (including in Thalwil, reversing so as to serve central Switzerland and Luzern), and continuing via Genève into France, arriving at 21.15 in Lourdes. The disabled travel by overnight trains, three this spring, with planned arrival in Lourdes at 07.00, for transfers to hospitals. There are also pilgrims who make private journeys by regular trains; SNCF advertises widely, also on its Swiss website.

The German Lourdes trains normally take the Jura line through Neuchâtel. The attached photos show a Chur – Lourdes train of special SNCF stock, with Re4/4<sup>11</sup> No.11191 on May 10th 2014, at Landquart, and a transit train northbound from Genève to Basel, with private German stock, behind Re4/4<sup>11</sup> No.11132 on June 14th, at Boudry near Neuchâtel. I cannot say what miracles were done in Lourdes, but Mario Stefani who had waited for this train, missed out as it eventually passed 7 hours and 16 minutes late, because of a French rail unions' strike. It was destined for Köln (a major Catholic centre) where the railways were also closed at that time for several days by severe thunderstorms. We might fear that some pilgrims had a difficult journey home. +

*Editor's Note;* Perhaps a member has experience of the SNCF organisation, and the resources needed for this traffic, which is so unlike anything today seen in Britain.