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Memory Lane - and beyond

Paul Jenkins reports on a marathon exploration with a Swiss Pass

The view from Leuk across the Rhone Valley and the protected Bois de Finges towards Sion.

All photos: Paul Jenkins

My interest in Switzerland dates back to the mid-60's when, as a 17 year old enthused with wanderlust, I hitch-hiked with a friend to Lucerne and camped at the Lido site alongside the Verkehrshaus. Having just a few pounds in my pocket I walked up to the Rigi Kulm and was smitten by the sheer perfection of the scene as it unfolded below. Some later involvement in the travel business, and a few holidays with family and friends in more recent years, enabled visits to a few other areas not seen before, but there were still places I wanted to see. So last summer I invested in a 3 week Swiss Pass and then spent many happy hours studying possible itineraries on the superb SBB On-Line timetable. For this trip I set out to explore the southern Cantons,

flying in to Geneva and travelling west to east, including the Ticino, on to Graubünden and then back by way of Luzern to Basel.

My first two nights were spent near Montbovon, where I arrived on the last train of the day from Montreux, my flight having been delayed. From here I had planned an ambitious itinerary for the following day, taking in the Jaunpass to Boltigen, BLS to Zweisimmen, MOB to Gstaad, PostAuto to Les Diablerets, train to Le Sépey and two more buses over the Col des Mosses to Chateaux d'Oex. It all worked perfectly, but for one reason or another (largely the weather which, sadly, was mostly poor) it proved to be the only day when I stuck entirely to plan. But that, of course, is the joy of travelling with a totally flexible Swiss Pass and the hours spent in pre-planning were certainly valuable in making me aware of the possibilities. My second day I divided between Montreux, Lausanne, and a boat trip across the lake to Bouveret and St Gingolph. In the days that followed I took the PostAuto over the Forclaz Pass and on by train to Chamonix; the funicular up to Crans-Montana; buses to Evolene and Saas Fee, and the MGB to Zermatt, where I rode up to the Gornergrat and managed most of the downhill on foot. That was fun but Zermatt itself I found disappointing. It was always a tourist magnet of course but what character I could remember from previous visits seems to have been largely lost in the rush

Paddlesteamer 'La Suisse' arrives at St Gingolph on 27 June, en route to Vevey.

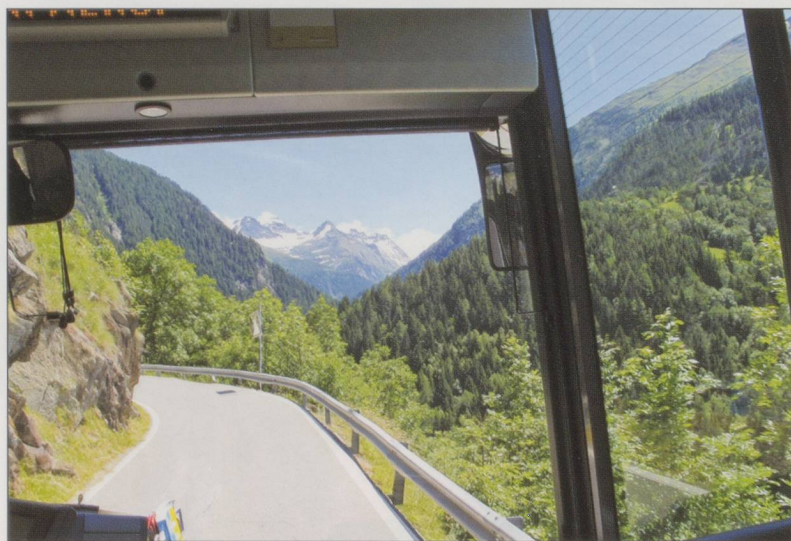


to build more and bigger hotels and plush boutiques. The Matterhorn has a lot to answer for! Next came Leukerbad and the cable car up to the Gemmi Pass. I've always fancied the walk across to Kandersteg but again the weather was closing in. I did however manage the slightly hairy walk back down to the village so that was one box I could tick! I took the post-bus over the Simplon Pass to Domodossola and, as so often on this trip, I was one of very few passengers and able to bag the front seat.

Travelling between hotels at Ausserberg and Göschenen I alighted at Fiesch to take the cable car up to Eggishorn. For once the weather was perfect and I was able to delight in the superb view along the length of the Aletsch Glacier with the Jungfrau Massif beyond - and to enjoy hot chocolate and apfelstrudel in the Berghaus. Later that day I took the post-bus along the valley to Binn which, on a family visit many years ago, my mother described as the prettiest place she had ever seen. The long road tunnel up to the head of the valley does give it something of a 'Shangri-La' feel. From Göschenen I was able to take in the Gotthard and Nufenen passes in the morning (travelling with a chap from Lancashire who was a regular Swiss Pass traveller, but who generally preferred the winter months, when he thought the weather was more reliable and the scenery even better) and then the Furka Steam Railway in the afternoon. This amazing heritage line runs only on a few summer weekends and booking is essential. The lively atmosphere during the break for bratwurst and beer at the summit station was great fun, as was being able to spend most of the ride on the open rear platform. I say 'most' because it's not a great place to be in the longer tunnels!

Next came the Ticino and I took the opportunity to rent a bike from the station at Airolo and spent the morning cruising gently down the valley, where possible following the





TOP: For once a near-cloudless sky as the writer enjoys the stunning panorama across the Aletsch Glacier from the Eggishorn above Fiesch.

MIDDLE: The pretty view from the front seat of the postbus heading for Binn. The three-tone horn is put to good use on this narrow road.

BOTTOM: Recovered-from-Vietnam DFB No. 1 prepares to depart the Furka Pass station on 4th July.


Gotthard trail, to Biasca. This provides plenty of opportunities for lineside photography and a leaflet from the Airolo Tourist Office, plus information panels along the way, detail the history of the line. Just before Biasca is an Information Centre for the new Base Tunnel but I was out of time, needing to make a return train trip to Airolo to collect my bag. From my next base, outside Locarno, I was able to enter another tick on my wish-list by riding the Centovalli line all the way to Domodossola and back again, breaking at several points along the way, while from Rovio, near the bottom of Lake Lugano, I visited the incredible 'Gallery Baumgartner', a model railway collection at Mendrisio - a 'must' for Swiss model rail fans. Like almost everywhere I visited on this trip, entrance was free with my Swiss Pass.

The 'Bernina Express' PostAuto took me on from Lugano to Tirano for the Bernina line to Pontresina, from where next day, I took the Livigno bus through to the National Park, and thence on to Mustair, a really lovely ride. The RhB took me back from Zernez to Pontresina. The Bahnmuseum Bergün is also free with the Swiss Pass and although I thought it relied rather heavily on screens showing old film-clips, it is certainly worthwhile for fans of the railway and the story of Swiss tourism in general. From Chur I made my first ever trip to Arosa and was sad not to see that lovely blue floral livery that, in my mind at least, typified the line. All is standard RhB red now. On my last but one day I travelled through the Rhine Gorge to Disentis/Mustér and then on two PostAutos over the Lukmanier Pass to Biasca, thence back through the Gotthard to Göschenen and on by bus to Wassen. For my last day I'd planned to ship-hop along the lake to Luzern but the skies suddenly cleared and I decided to round off the trip on a high, so to speak, by re-visiting the Rigi Kulm, this time on the rails! I was expecting to pay 50% of the fare, as with most mountain lines, and was delighted to discover that my pass actually gave me a 'free' ride, taken standing on the open platform at the front of the train and enjoying all those old familiar mountain aromas! I travelled on to Luzern via Arth and then on to Basel for my evening flight home.

My accommodation was always at the bottom of the price scale but still perfectly respectable and cost me, on average, a little over £50 per night, including breakfast.

For a couple travelling together it would be significantly less per person. My trip spanned the period late-June to mid-July and while this is not quite at the peak of the summer season I was surprised how often I was the only, or nearly so, customer in a hotel, in a restaurant, on a PostAuto or even, on one occasion, on a boat on Lake Lugano. Presumably the economic situation in Europe



generally is taking its toll on Swiss tourism. All in all I thoroughly enjoyed my trip down 'memory lane' and the chance to fill in some of the blanks in my Swiss experience. Not everyone would wish to travel quite as intensively as I did but of course the more use you can make of it the better value the Swiss Pass becomes. It did occur to me in one idle moment that there could be an opportunity for someone to present some suggested 'Swiss Pass' itineraries in book form. Add some recommended hotels, and maybe market some fixed price accommodation vouchers, as Thomas Cook did in the very early days of Swiss tourism, and it could be just the thing to fill some of those empty seats! 

TOP LEFT: Elderly but still smiling, Be4/8 No 42 about to depart Ponte Tresa for Lugano on 7th July.


BOTTOM LEFT: The Rhb 'Bernina Express' bus operates the daily 10 a.m., 3-hour long, service from Lugano to Tirano.

TOP RIGHT: Rhaetian Railways Allegra, No. 3510, runs along the street at Chur as it arrives from Arosa on 11 July.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Rigiabahn No. 16 runs down towards Vitznau with its train of vintage stock on 13th July.



Puzzle picture

No prize for recognising Basel SBB, but the picture raises an interesting question. All over Switzerland, there are cases where a third rail is added to ensure that trains of different gauges (usually metre- and standard gauge) can use the same alignment. Does any reader know when the third rail was added to the track through certain platforms at Basel SBB? Was a metre gauge train or tram expected here? 

Tracks in Basel SBB on a sunny winter morning.
Photo: Bryan Stone