

Bordering on the Quirky

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Bordering on the Quirky

Rob Morrey



Route 8 trams at Weil am Rhein terminus.

All photos: Rob Morrey

I have long been fascinated by national borders. A visit to Berlin (East and West) in August 1986 for the 25th anniversary of the Wall is forever etched on my memory, and place names like Helmstedt still send a shiver down my spine. The Swiss border is of course totally different but definitely quirky, even today in the days of Schengen. It is said that Switzerland is landlocked, but bodies of water like Lakes Constance (Bodensee) and Genève (Le Léman) shared with other countries only confuse the issue. Logic is in short supply - as illustrated by the German enclave of Büsingen (*see SE121, March 2015*).

My chosen destination in July 2018 was the City of Basel, an ideal venue for border eccentricities. I flew to Basel Airport, which is in France, and waited 45 long minutes in the queue for passport control, only to be waved through without even a cursory glance at my documents. Then it was a Swiss bendy-bus on BVB Line 50 that whizzed me (along a Swiss road on

French territory) to the almost unmarked border and ultimately the SBB Bahnhof in the centre of the City - the second year in a row for me arriving in Switzerland by bendy-bus, as I travelled into Genève from Annemasse in France on my previous trip. I had chosen to stay at the superb *Schweizerhof* by the station and my air-conditioned



The view from the Schweizerhof Hotel.

room overlooked the many tram stops and the station frontage. Welcome to paradise, I said to myself. The more so as hotel visitors are given a free city travel pass for the full duration of their stay. Paradise indeed. And the weather was hot and sunny too. It doesn't get better than that!

On my first morning (still sunny) I took some early morning photos of trams and buses - there are after all two 7 o'clocks in a day! Then it was breakfast - at 7.23. Why at such an odd time, I hear you ask. I believe most sane people aim for breakfast on the hour or half-hour, so I try to keep ahead of the game. Members may like to discuss this tactic - but it could become a long-running cereal! After a large buffet breakfast it was off to Basel's Badischer Bahnhof on a No. 2 tram.

The DB station is huge, with frequent DB passenger trains, some SBB trains operating under contract on German local services, and a procession of freights. Back in the day, you had to go through customs to access the trains as the station was on Swiss territory but the railway counted as Germany - I told you this place was quirky. In 2018 the customs halls have gone but I noticed that when ICE services were arriving from the north (i.e. Germany), Swiss customs officials appeared from nowhere to keep a beady eye on arriving passengers - curious. I was able to wander and photograph without a problem, noticing that the DB station staff were conspicuous by their absence. Sadly, DB's timekeeping was poor throughout the holiday and some trains looked scruffy - one ICE was in service with graffiti all over two coaches.

After a while I caught a bendy bus (Line 30) to see Basel's splendid Spalentor, then it was time to go to France on a tram. City trams are green, but I rode on a yellow BLT tram on Line 10, which took me out of Canton Basel-Stadt into Canton Basel-Land and ultimately goes to Rodersdorf in Canton Solothurn. I was able to travel as far as Ettingen using my city pass, where I alighted, bought a cross-border ticket, and caught the next No.10 over the cantonial border to Flüh in Solothurn, then over the Swiss border to the French village of Leymen, the only non-Swiss stop on the line before trams re-cross the border into Switzerland to reach

Turning circle at Flüh.



BLT trams cross at Leymen, Alsace.

the terminus at Rodersdorf. It is not just the international borders that confuse around here, but the cantonial ones as well! Having arrived in Alsace I soon realised that the word "tranquil" was probably coined with Leymen in mind. After taking photos of trams and station, I set off to walk back to Switzerland. It took around 20 minutes along a quiet country road with no pavement to reach the invisible border at Flüh, a small village just centimetres inside Switzerland. It possesses the tightest turning-circle I have ever seen - no wonder they use articulated trams! Then it was back to Basel in style- the rear of the tram is in effect an observation car - so I could clearly observe the varied nature of the line, which is a mix of single, double and interlaced sections (see SE134, June 2018).

Until recently the green BVB trams of Basel did not venture "abroad" but times have changed. There is a service to St Louis in France and Line 8 now crosses into





Border bridge at Laufenburg, towards Germany/Apfelkuchen.

Germany to reach Weil am Rhein - to the delight of the Swiss, who can now seek out bargains in the cheaper Eurozone. It is also easy to reach Weil by a DB local service. The really intrepid can arrive by SBB with a little ingenuity. Weil Bahnhof is the first station out of DB's Basel Bad on the main line. I dined three times in Weil - having breakfasted at 7.23 one gets hungry... found a superb German hostelry, the 'Alte Zunft', some 100m from the station/tram stop. Huge main courses cost €10-12, and you do not need a pudding! An absolute gem. The Lachsrosti is to die for.

Next day was a German day - after a Swiss breakfast of course. Using a Baden-Württemberg ticket (€30 Euros for two travelling together) I rode to Freiburg and then on a SWEG diesel railcar (built by Stadler - but in Germany) to the lovely town of Breisach. The line along the southern edge of the famous Kaiserstuhl wine growing area is part of the Breisgau S-Bahn operation based on Freiburg that is currently being electrified. Breisach is a border town located on the Rhine - Germany one side and France the other - BUT the Germans blew up the railway bridge over the river in 1945 and it is yet to reappear (see *September 2018 Swiss News - Ed.*) so Breisach is a terminus. DB dropped me off at Weil on the return at feeding time and I was back in the *Schweizerhof* in time to see England's World Cup win over Colombia.

My last full day was spent exploring the diesel-worked DB line along the north bank of the Rhein (for most of this length the border), from Basel Bad to Singen and passes through the City and Canton of Schaffhausen en route. I went as far as Waldshut to see the photogenic Altstadt then backtracked to the magical German/Swiss town of Laufenburg. A quite enchanting place, well away from the tourist beat. The small town is in two halves and two countries joined by a footbridge (formerly a

Stadler DMUs at Breisach in Germany.

road bridge) over the Rhein which forms the border. DB have two stations here, and SBB one - so what's not to like? After exploring the sleepy Swiss part, I called in at a hostelry right by the German end of the bridge- an ideal spot to indulge in a scenic coffee (and, I must confess, a scenic Apfelkuchen mit Sahne) and idly wondered what life was like there during World War 2. Suitably fortified, and in blazing sun, I caught a local train to Bad Säckingen, a busy but attractive town which has an impressive wooden footbridge (à la Luzern) connecting it to the Swiss bank and ultimately, unless you are full of Apfelkuchen, to Stein Säckingen. The border is a white line painted at the mid-point of the bridge.

Currently in this part of modern-day Europe borders are no more than metaphoric white lines wherever you go - something many in our country find hard to comprehend. This is another little-known spot that is worth a visit. Then back to Basel Bad Bahnhof and on to Weil - and you know the rest!

My last morning (before a late - in both senses - afternoon return flight to the UK) was wet, so I took a Line 13 tram to Muttentz to see the huge freight yards from a strategically sited over bridge. Mind blowing. Then, monsoon notwithstanding, I went on the Line 16 tram from the main station to Bruderholz (where it metamorphoses into a Line 15 to continue back to downtown Basel) as I love the steep, winding climb via Jakobsberg to the terminus. A rare example of a city tram going up a mountain. All too soon my holiday was over, my 35th visit to Switzerland (I started young), but the first one without using any SBB trains. Basel has oodles of attractions of its own anyway and I thought it a super destination. I did observe Swiss trains at the main station - with one or two surprises. The word *Ersatzzug* appeared more than once on the Departures board and the make up of some trains was



unexpected, for example the use of twin Re 4/4 locos on a few trains, and the appearance in one service of a *Gotthard Panorama Express* coach. Anyway the money I saved by not needing a Swiss Pass or similar I put towards a nice hotel. DB was OK and their Länderkarten are excellent value. As for SNCF... It was my original plan to spend a day in Colmar, BUT the French section of the main station is a building site, which I can accept, until I found no trace of a booking office, or timetables, or staff - there was but one ticket machine. The trains were therefore a well-kept secret. So I did not go to Colmar!

The jewel in Basel's crown is surely the fantastic tram network with trams gliding along at all hours, seemingly to everywhere - a stark contrast to the local buses in the People's Republic of North Staffordshire. And they were free to me so I could roam the city at will. You certainly do not need a car to explore Basel and its environs. The questions I ask myself as I return from foreign parts are:

1) *Would I go again?* 2) *Would I recommend it to friends and family?* The answers: **Yes and yes!!!** ☝



BVB tram at the Spalentor.

Line 16 tram climbing Jakobsberg.



Bridge at Bad Säckingen, towards Switzerland.

Re 4/4 x 2 at Basel SBB.



Where's Heidi?

Where would you find this warning sign?

Answer on Page 46.

