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NARROW GAUGE IN GRAUBUNDEN

By David Steer

The Rhätische-Bahn (RhB) is the largest of the privately owned Swiss narrow gauge railways. It operates in the south-east canton (province) of Graubünden and features 395 km of line with 115 tunnels totaling 38.6 km. There are 485 bridges with a total length of 12 km. It is a true model railroad in 1:1 scale, and the combination of picturesque scenery, frequent service and narrow gauge is an attraction too strong to be missed.

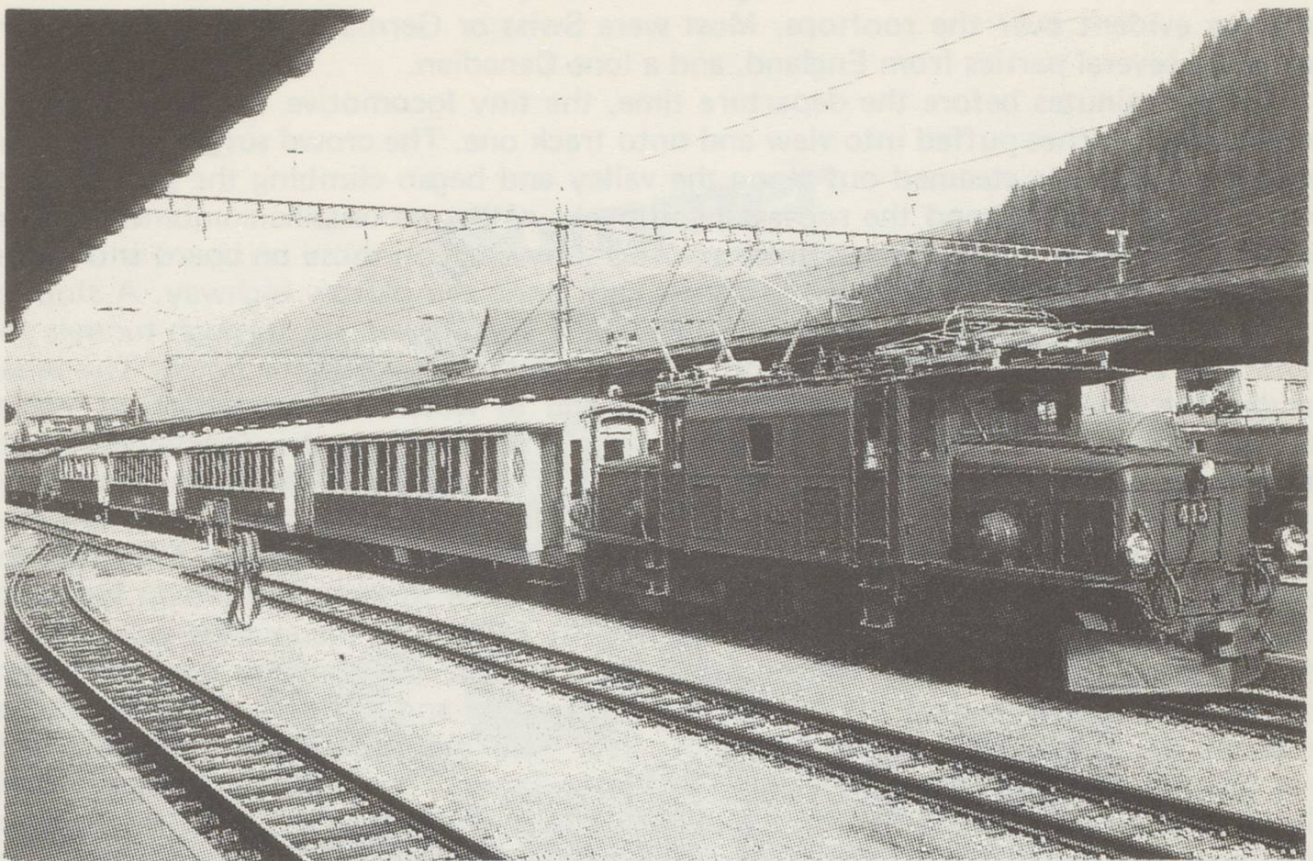


G4/5 No. 107 with special excursion.

Photo: D. Steer

The RhB operates a number of public excursions for rail enthusiasts each year. The "Nostalgie und Romantik" tours operate three times per year in the spring, summer and early fall. These trains are listed in the "Steam In Switzerland" timetable published by the Swiss National Tourist Office. The route is the circular path from Landquart to Chur via Klosters, Davos and Filisur. The Nostalgie section of the trip includes a small steam locomotive and vintage open-platform cars and operates from Landquart to Davos. At Davos there is a lunch stop with plenty of time to sample the local restaurants. The Romantik section includes the luxurious Pullman saloon cars and a vintage electric locomotive. This operates through Filisur and back to Chur.

This year circumstances conspired for me to be in Brussels in mid-October to attend a conference, and a check with the timetable revealed that the excursion was scheduled for the Saturday before I was due at the conference. It did not take long to decide to pay the extra fares for the ticket to Zürich and a four day Swiss Rail Pass, providing unlimited passage on regular Swiss trains and a discount on excursions such as the RhB Nostalgie und Romantik.



Ge6/I No. 413 with Pullman train.

Photo: D. Steer

Accordingly, October 13th (1988) found me packed into a KLM 747 for the overnight flight to Amsterdam and the early morning connection to Zürich. A few hours sleep on the plane made the sunrise over Holland refreshing and, after a short stopover, it was off again. Arrival at the Zürich Flughafen was overcast and after passing customs, I attended the Swiss rail office to obtain a current timetable. This would become my bible for travel during the next four days. I was also able to check my suitcase through to the town of Chur where I would be staying. Then it was off downtown (by train) to search for model train shops. The grey sky belied the fact that it was quite warm (18 degrees) and I soon became uncomfortable with my parka, sweater, toque and mittens. (It had been snowing when I left Ottawa). After selecting a narrow gauge Gepäckwagen (baggage car) and a coach at the Modell-Eisenbahn Shoppe, I boarded the train for Chur. This trip included a stop at Kreuzlingen on the shore of Lake Constance where it was sunny, picturesque and warmer yet. Later in the evening I arrived at Chur to find my suitcase waiting at the baggage office. It was then only a short step across the plaza to the Hotel ABC Terminus and some sleep. It had been a long day and night.

An early start the next morning put me on the 7.19 Intercity train (standard gauge, "Rheinfeil", Chur - Dortmund) which carried me to Landquart by 7.28. A check with the ticket office revealed the excursion train would leave at 8.55 from platform one. I had more than an hour to photograph the trains, rolling stock, and the mountains. The sun rose over the peaks at about eight o'clock and it was railfan's heaven. Even without knowledge of the special excursion, it was not hard to tell a happening was in the making. Slowly they began to appear on the platform and sprout among the tracks - Eisenbahnfans (railfans). Looking almost like the North-American species, they can be easily recognised by their colourful clothes (no funny hats or badges on the European species), extensive camera, video and audio appendages, and their habit of pacing the platform watchfully and photographing anything that moves (and many other things too). Many also kept a

careful eye towards the works buildings where a wisp of black smoke and an aroma of coal were evident over the rooftops. Most were Swiss or German. Some spoke French. There were several parties from England, and a lone Canadian.

A few minutes before the departure time, the tiny locomotive (Number 107) and three vintage coaches puffed into view and onto track one. The crowd surged aboard, and precisely on time we steamed out along the valley and began climbing the pass towards Davos. The green fields and the snow capped peaks of the mountains combined to form magnificent scenery and there was much photography both by those on board and by the cavalcade of eisenbahnfans following in their cars along the narrow highway. A stop for water was made at the picturesque town of Klosters. Then it was off, through tunnels and forests and over the Wolfgang Pass into Davos where we stopped for lunch. The break provided the opportunity to wander the town and to watch the procession of regular trains through the station. After lunch, the train changed from the "nostalgic" steam train and its vintage cars to a "romantic" train of luxurious Pullman saloon cars headed by a miniature crocodile electric locomotive (Number 413). (The steam train returned empty to its home in Landquart). Our train proceeded along from Davos following the Landwasser valley to Filisur. In spite of the curves and the tunnels, the brown loco with its flashing side-rods made express-train speeds. At Filisur the locomotive was changed end-for-end on the train while the railfans spilled all over the platform recording every detail on film. Then we were off down the Albula valley and, after a short tunnel, burst out across the famous Landwasser Viaduct. Near here the Landwasser and the Albula rivers join. Further down the valley at Reichenau-Tamins, we joined the upper Rhein valley and the east-west main line of the RhB. As we descended the grades the forested slopes gave way to green fields and pastures, and the snow capped peaks receded into the backdrop. Arrival in Chur was on time and accompanied by much other traffic in this busy town. I caught a local train to continue on to Landquart so that I would be able to complete the circle via the narrow gauge. It was a fine tour filled with magnificent scenery, friendly railfans and many exciting trains. Many thanks to the RhB crews who made the journey especially pleasant and who assured the careful timing.

eisenbahn-zeitschrift

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