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Go By Rail; Travel by Train; Use the Railway; Fahren Sie mit dem Zug!

by Richard Baker

"Swiss Federal Railways reported a deficit of CHF 196 million in 1997..... [Passenger] ... revenue fell by 1.3%." Quoted in "Today's Railways" April 1998.

I joined the Swiss Railways Society because (surprise, surprise) I like railways. For well over fifty years, I have liked them, used them, championed them, even studied them. But I joined the SRS for particular reasons, which have as much to do with the present and future as they have with the past. These can be summarised as follows:-

1.The Swiss Railways (in total) provide an excellent example of a modern, environmentally-friendly transport system.

2.They form a working system combining a mixture of public and private operators, yet offering a single timetable, good connections, linked facilities, a recognised pricing and ticketing system, and so on.

3.They link effectively and efficiently to other forms of transport at airports and stations, with postbuses, lake shipping, urban networks and local taxi systems, to create a total, integrated transport system for the public.

4.They work efficiently, effectively, and safely, in a wide range of climatic and geographical conditions.

5.They, and the integrated transport system of which they form a major part, offer to us (especially in the UK) many pointers as to how our transport system could be developed or improved.

6.Their infrastructure from the past and its development to the present day offers many excellent examples of technological progress, mostly developed in harmony with nature.

7.Their operation confirms to us that mass transportation systems can operate successfully without total, or even significant, dependence on the internal combustion engine. They thereby offer an excellent example of how to protect the environment from the already existing, and increasingly damaging, effects of the motor car (and other environmental hazards).

8.Above all, the Swiss Railways are exciting, fascinating, and enjoyable to travel on.

The "Swiss Express" is an excellent magazine,

which sets a very high standard indeed. But I have become increasingly puzzled, over the last couple of years or so, at the amount of material which directly or indirectly, suggests using a car within Switzerland, and/or for travel to Switzerland. Such implications are often low key, but they are there nonetheless. The consequence, rarely directly referred to, but undoubtedly implied, is for less actual rail travel. Such articles may suggest perhaps more trips to railways, between railways, more looking, more photography, more videoing, etc - but in the end, they also imply less rail travel.

This approach culminated in two articles in the March 1998 edition of "Swiss Express". The first, by the Chairman (as he was at the time) entitled "A Steamy Weekend in Switzerland", describes a range of trips to and between railways, and which is accompanied by excellent photographs of railways, but it appears that none of the party actually travelled at any time by train (at least, as far as I can make out from the article). The second article, "Cheaper Holidays in Switzerland", hardly mentions railways at all, except very briefly at the beginning and end. (As it was written by the Editor, one must assume it reflects some form of editorial policy, though it may not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Society as a whole.) The Channel Tunnel is mentioned but not as a railway link; it is merely "the perfect way" of reaching the French *motorway* system quickly. When eventually the railways in Switzerland are "reached" at the end of the article it is suggested, perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek, that "Just because you take your car to Switzerland, it doesn't stop you riding on the trains, it just makes it cheaper to get there". My own observations, general anecdotal evidence, and articles like these describing such trips, when taken together, suggest that taking a car does, at the very least, lessen the amount of travelling by rail whilst in Switzerland, and often significantly so.

I recognise that travel by rail or air to, or rail in, Switzerland may sometimes appear to be more expensive, and sometimes of course it is more expensive. Some of these costs, as is the case in Switzerland (and likewise in Germany), appear high to those from the UK because relative costs of living there (and average incomes) are generally higher. But an examination of total real costs (even set

against the high average continental prices of rail travel) makes the "cheapness" of the car largely illusory. If we add to real costs, social costs, hidden costs, the costs to the driver in tiredness and stress (most articles describing car trips often also tell how hectic the trip was), and perhaps most importantly environmental costs, then the car is very much more expensive in every sense. The car may seemingly have some financial advantages if large numbers travel in one car, or if a quantity of equipment is taken, but in the former case the lessening of rail travel within Switzerland may be even greater (ie 3 or 4 people may not travel by rail rather than one).

As individuals, or as a Society, I don't believe we railway enthusiasts should merely "cherry pick" only the "best bits" of any railway system. In Switzerland the railways form a comprehensive system that thankfully remains excellently linked, and the only barriers are the natural geographical ones. We need to remember that we need the whole system to reach and travel between our favourites lines and locations. We also need to recognise that the system does not belong to railway enthusiasts (especially perhaps those from other lands), but to the Swiss, for whom it is not a holiday luxury or a hobby, but very often a necessity and a lifeline. They need the "ordinary" parts every bit as much as those parts recognised as famous or much favoured by enthusiasts. Travelling by train (and public transport generally) enables us to see the whole system in perspective and helps us understand the society in which such systems operate. It gives more opportunity, for example, to use local languages, a skill which is very important if one is to understand fully the realities and mechanics of Swiss railways. Again, interacting with "locals" is obviously far less possible and less likely when travelling by car.

But there is a much broader issue. If we believe in railways we should demonstrate our commitment in the face of other doubters by using them fully. The hard fact is that the Swiss Railways (whether public or private) are not there merely to be looked at, photographed, videoed, or written and talked about. They are there to be used, and travelled on. Only if they are used, will we be able to look at them, photograph them, and so on, now, and in the future. As members of the Swiss Railways Society I believe we have a responsibility to give back to them (and other railways), at the very least, as much as they give to us. To do this we need to use them, and encourage others to do so. By so doing we will help to ensure that future members of the Society will have a better chance of seeing and using these

railways in years to come, and thereby experience some of the pleasures we have derived from them.

But if those arguments - strong as they are - sound perhaps a little dry, surely it is the special magic of rail travel that is the clincher. For me, for example, the journey to the Swiss Railways by rail is a pleasure in itself, but more importantly it increases and heightens my rail pleasures within Switzerland. For example, one of my favourite destinations is Wengen. I remember a typical rail journey a few years back travelling onwards from Basel. It was a frosty morning in March and the journey through Bern to Spiez had many railway sightings. Changing at Spiez, one of my favourite junctions, was full of interest, but by now heightened by the realisation of nearing the mountains, and the increasing amounts of snow nearby. Onward to and through Interlaken, changing gauge and trains, and then the first crunching sound of the rack "locking on" on the climb to Lauterbrunnen. Could anybody out there with the slightest feeling for railways actually suggest that travelling from Basel or Bern (or the airports) by road to Lauterbrunnen is even a tenth as interesting, even if it might be in some sense perhaps "cheaper"? But then what is even more fascinating is that you see unexpected railway delights from the train. That morning on the last part of the journey I unexpectedly happened upon an engine "in steam" by the sheds, the steam surrounding it in the cold frosty air. It seems almost too obvious to say - you see more of the railways, and experience more of their magic, when travelling by train!

A Practical PS. The definition of a "cheap" trip will vary from person to person. Recent travel articles in the newspapers (eg the "Independent" Saturday 21st March 1998 about trips to Munich) have highlighted the fact that rail travel via Eurostar to Köln plus a careful use of the DB "Schönes Wochendend" or evening ticket can mean that most places in Germany can be reached for less than £110 return at selected times. If for "Germany" this suggestion is interpreted as near the German-Swiss border, then it must be (at these particular journey times) one of the "cheapest" ways of reaching Switzerland. For railway enthusiasts this could include a trip with Eurostar, then perhaps on the Thalys to Köln (if there is space), then with DB down the Rhein valley to Basel for about £120 return. Economies can also be made using the half price DB Bahncard. Some of these alternatives can provide a "better way" - I would suggest - for travel to and from Switzerland.