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KROKODILS UND MICH

A tale of a first timer's visit to Graubünden.



ALL THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN THIS ARTICLE ARE BY MIKE THOMAS. THEY HAVE BEEN SELECTED FROM ALL MIKE AND KATY'S TRIPS RATHER THAN JUST THE ONE DESCRIBED IN DETAIL IN THE ARTICLE.

GE4/4^{III} 642 and our 'home from home' the Hotel Grischuna at Filisur - hot chocolate always available from the bar! 08.03.04.

I was thinking more of Brusio, the Glacier Express and Kroks, although I'm with her on the Lindt chocolate. As is usual with us, having made the decision to go

My new found interest in Swiss railways started with a bad bout of 'flu about two years ago. Laid up for three weeks at home, my sanity was maintained by a newly installed Sky system. By happy coincidence, at the time the Travel Channel was showing the MITV Swiss Railway Journey series. I was hooked: the scenery, the architecture, the trains. All of it looked perfect. Almost too perfect – it couldn't possibly really be like that, could it?

My long-suffering wife was made to watch all the re-runs and eventually was forced to agree that, yes there was a certain charm to *schmalspurbahnen*. I could understand her reluctance to admit she liked trains. She has endured the 'best' that Connex South Central can offer and therefore had good reason to be cautious!

We decided that Switzerland was a country we would like to visit and agreed initially that Graubünden was as good a starting place as any. I think she envisaged the Alps, summer meadows filled with wild flowers, picture post-card mountain villages and Lindt chocolates;

somewhere other than the Greek Islands, our previous favourite holiday destination, we did nothing about it for two years. I was definitely born to be a Southern European and the lure of the Greek sunshine and chilled-out lifestyle was too strong.

But we kept going back to the Railway Journey videos and somehow Switzerland would not go away. In fact, in the spare bedroom, a small but rapidly expanding collection of Bemo models had mysteriously appeared (thanks Mr and Mrs Brett) along with what looked suspiciously like baseboards, bags of scatter material, miniature pine trees, Peco HOm track and a lot of wiring. In fact, it looked for all the world like the beginnings of a model railway. Now how did that happen?!

In the spring of 2003 the catalyst required to start the whole Swiss experience was found. Disaster of disasters, there was no availability on our Greek accommodation. Plan B swung into action – why not give Graubünden a try?

The P.C. was cranked into life and the easyJet website was perused. What's

GE4/4^{II} 627 with an afternoon goods train in the meadows outside Filisur. 04.09.04

this— flights to Zurich from Gatwick for £40 return. And book this weekend and EasyJet will pay the not insignificant departure tax. Job done! But where to stay?

I had already noted the Continental Modeller and Swiss Express both carried adverts for what looked like a perfect hotel for the rail minded (and even his wife). An email was rapidly sent to Frau Uffer at Hotel Grischuna in Filisur and within next to no time a very nice reply in perfect English popped into the inbox. Yes, there was a room available. The feeling that this really was meant to be was becoming overwhelming.

Swiss Express pointed me in the direction of the Swiss Tourist Office in London and within



two days our half-fare railcards had arrived. We were set!

The EasyJet experience was a lot less painful than we were led to believe, although very 'no frills'. What do you want for forty quid! But they got us to Zurich on time and in one piece, complete with luggage. Always a good start.

I had already studied the SBB website and therefore had a reasonable idea of what we needed to do to get to Filisur. What I hadn't expected was that the plan would work. It did. Probably the most eye-opening aspect of the whole holiday was just how well the Swiss railway system works.



My wife Katy ponders over the question of whether Connex would be running trains in this sort of weather. 07.03.04



Three changes of train, two different operating companies and no longer than 10 minutes wait for any connection. The phrase 'Gobsmacked' springs to mind. Even cynical Katy, experienced in the ways of Connex was beginning to see the possibilities of train travel!

Having left Gatwick at 0630, by lunchtime we were standing on the balcony of our hotel room, railway to the left, Alpine scenery to the right. Absolutely perfect! For those who have not been to Filisur, the Hotel Grischuna advert does not lie. The hotel is situated right at the end of the station platform and allows diners in the panoramic restaurant to wave at passengers in the panoramic coaches of the Glacier and Bernina Expresses whilst tucking into their meals. For the railway-oriented traveller (and his not so obsessed other half) it is a perfect situation. The only slight downside at the moment is the rebuilding of the station, which due to its nature can be a little intrusive. Not

enough to spoil a holiday, but in photographic terms the building work cuts down the number of vantage points. I'm sure that when finished it will look great. From what we could work out on the plans posted in the waiting room the original features, including the signal bells, wooden engine shed and turntable will be retained. Certainly, when we were there it was obvious that a lot of care was being put into the overall look of the finished project, including details such as the traditional cut stone retaining walls.

For better photo opportunities, it is best to put on your walking boots and get out into the countryside. Numerous well-marked footpaths radiate away from the station, some easy walking, some a little more taxing.

One thing we did notice was the altitude.

ABOVE: GE4/4^{III} 651 heads towards Preda. 05.03.04.
NEXT PAGE RIGHT: GE4/5 108 heads a special towards Filisur. 04.09.04.

As we are almost sea level dwelling creatures living on the South Coast, even at a modest 1000 or so meters above sea level we found that climbing steep footpaths to gain good vantage points for photos, or just taking in the peace and quiet of Swiss meadows was more of a challenge than we expected. Or perhaps we are not as fit as we like to think.

Alternatively, let the train take the strain, as British Rail used to say. The RhB will take you comfortably and, with a half-fare card, cheaply all round the Canton.

We managed to cover most of my railway wish list in the short time we had in Filisur, with plenty left for a return visit (or two) in the future. The highlights? Chur – Arosa - for the scenery (and Katy is convinced she could do some serious damage to her credit card in the shops in Chur. Luckily I escaped relatively unscathed this time but anyone thinking of visiting with their 'other half' should take note.) The Bernina Line is a must. We only went as far as Brusio this time, but well worth it. How can an adhesion only railway negotiate some of the gradients and curves found on the stretch of line from Alp Grüm to Poschiavo? It does, but I don't know how. Alp Grüm is worth stopping off at if only to experience the feeling of

being on top of the World. The views of the glacier are stunning and once your train has headed off down the valley, the peace and quiet is remarkable. We sat in the sunshine on a lump of granite and just drank it all in. Perfect mental ClipArt for a normally noisy, hectic life in the UK.

The Railrider. If you never have experienced this and get the chance, do it. For those who don't know, the Railrider consists of Ge6/6^{II} locomotive, two flat wagons normally used as car transporters and two or more open wagons fitted with reversible bench seats and runs between Filisur and Preda. The idea is you sit in the open wagons and rattle along at what seems like a great rate of knots over the numerous viaducts and spirals and through the several tunnels and galleries that make up the Albula line to Preda. The flat wagons are marshalled one at the end of the train and one next to the loco as a 'reach' wagon to offer protection from any sparks from the catenary.

An addition to the journey this year has been a short trip out to the Landwasser viaduct. To reach this from Filisur the train runs with the loco at the rear. A couple of members of the railway staff stand on the leading flat wagon armed with a two-way radio to talk to





the driver and a large torch to act as a headlight in the tunnel leading to the viaduct! Just image this being allowed to happen in the UK. The Health and Safety Executive would go ballistic!

My own personal highlight however has to have been the famous Kroks. As part of the Albula line centenary, numerous special trains have been run, including at weekends the *Historische Züge*. These have consisted of either traditional green livery RhB 4 and 8 wheeled

coaches or a rake of blue and cream Alpine Classic Pullman stock all hauled by a Ge6/6 Krokodil.

Now, since the days of my 'flu, I have been fascinated by these locos. Sad I know, perhaps it is some weird side effect from all those NightNurse tablets and Vick inhalers!

Suffice it to say that my photo album now has more than its fair share of snaps of Krokodil 414 and 412 and my video camera



will probably short circuit and explode if ever pointed in the direction of a Krok again.

To those Society members who have experienced the wonders of Graubünden I can only apologise for the foregoing ramblings, but to those who have never been or are thinking about going I urge you not to leave it as long as Katy and I did.

Katy's screen saver on her pc in the office is a picture of yours truly wearing a grin from ear to ear standing in front of Krokodil 414 at Filisur. Proof indeed that it is even possible for the most hardened, Connex weary, non-train buff to be bitten by the Swiss railway holiday bug – you have been warned!!

P.S. Since this article was written, Mike and Katy have returned to Graubünden several



times, in both summer and early spring. The scenery is still as stunning, the welcome just as warm, the trains just as punctual and the chocolate just as fattening. On the home front, Mike's miniature version of Switzerland is taking over the spare bedroom and Connex is no more. Even the smell of Vick Inhalers has faded.

PREVIOUS PAGE UPPER: Ge4/4^{III} 646 on the new double section track between Filisur and the Landwasser. 04.09.04

PREVIOUS PAGE LOWER: ABe4/4s 49 & 47 on the long climb towards Alp Grüm. 07.09.04

THIS PAGE UPPER: The afternoon log train tackles the climb out of Filisur bound for Samedan. 03.09.04

THIS PAGE BELOW: Mike's two most precious loves at Bergün. 07.09.04



