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THOUGHTS FROM THE CHAIR - Paul Russenberger

Since the AGM I represented the Society at the annual meeting of the *Schweizerische Verband Eisenbahn Amateur*. I'll cover it in greater detail in a later article – Editor permitting – but, as always, I was thoroughly welcomed. Suffice it to say that the links for us have been improved in that a list has been accepted by the SVEA for the publication of contact names and numbers for the SRS Branches. My thanks go to all Branch Organisers for agreeing to this listing.

This time I travelled out by train and returned by air giving me the chance to make a direct comparison between the two modes. My main reaction is that going by air is to be transported and to go by rail is to travel. Outward Saturday flight times could not be certain of getting me to Liestal in time, so I left Waterloo on the 08.12 Eurostar on the Friday because I wanted an afternoon in Paris to visit a museum, but going by rail enabled this at no extra cost. In terms of connections, I could have left after 17.00 and still caught the overnight train from the Gare de l'Est at 22.42, reaching Zurich at 06.20 the next morning. The return was certainly quicker, leaving Basel SBB at 17.40 or so on a direct train to Zurich Flughafen avoiding the Hauptbahnhof. By British Airways, Gatwick and a very rapid connection at Clapham Junction I was home soon after eleven. Certainly quicker and being "hand luggage only" definitely made it easier.

Living near London certainly helps in terms of rail travel. Getting to Luton or Stansted early in the morning is expensive as public transport is not practical – Heathrow or Gatwick are far easier. The overnight journey by rail has great advantages as it gives an extra day in Switzerland on the outward journey and when starting a skiing holiday enables you to reach the resort ahead of even those on the earliest flights, thus saving up to an hour or even more hiring equipment! On the return a near full day's skiing can be had on a Saturday before reaching home mid-morning on Sunday.

But there are two issues which I believe the international railway industry needs to address. The first is cost. I can reach Zurich for roundly £100 return, second class including a couchette. That is using privilege tickets. The full fare will be approximately double. Scheduled national airlines such as BA will charge around £125 to which has to be added the cost of getting to the airport, but for many that cost would have to be added to the rail fare anyway. So a family of 4 stands to save about £300 travelling by air.

Secondly, I will need to book air tickets soon, certainly before the end of June, for a skiing holiday next February half term. I cannot risk waiting for the railways to open booking 3 months before the date of travel in November. Experience has shown that the Paris – Zurich overnight train will be fully booked within hours of opening at school half term. (Incidentally, a leading cut price airline has in the past charged double the national carrier return fare for a single journey under the same circumstances!) If they are to compete seriously, the railways will have to consider the relative costs to the customer and the need to make firm bookings sufficiently far in advance at peak periods.

Dave Howsam did not vouchsafe to me whether the membership was at an all time record for the time of year when he handed over the post of Membership Secretary to Martin Fisher a short while ago. It remains clear that I seem unable to go anywhere without meeting members. I write this on a Silverlink train to Euston having just met a member on the platform at Wolverton. All of which makes me wonder why there are not more Branches ...

Enough. Have a good summer!