

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2011)
Heft: 108

Artikel: Schynige Platte Bahn
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854711>

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SCHYNIGE PLATTE BAHN

Frank Everett



Schynige Platte Bahn top station and view down the valley leading to Lauterbrunnen in September 2008.

ALL PHOTOS: Frank Everett

Back when the world was young and Terry Wogan was a boy DJ, I used to read a lot of P.G. Wodehouse books which, if memory serves me correctly, always seemed to feature blazing hot June weather. However last June, when I used Interlaken as a holiday base, for most of the time it was cloudy and damp. Not the sort of weather recommended for someone who likes to take a train to the top of a mountain and gaze in awe at the panoramic vistas that can be seen on a clear day as is the case at Schynige Platte high above the resort. When the prospect of a better day dawned I set off to Wilderswil to sample the railway that bears the name of the famous view point.

The SPB is a single track 800 mm gauge line that uses the Riggensbach rack system to climb 1,420 m to the summit, in a distance of 7.3km at a maximum 25% (1 in 4) gradient. Amazingly, to me anyway, the track was laid and the railway opened in June 1893 after just two years' work, only to be saved from bankruptcy when it was acquired by the Berner Oberland Bahn (BOB) in January 1895. It was worked by steam until 1914 when, like the BOB, it was electrified at 1,500V d.c. The SPB is only open from around May to mid-October and, to stop heavy snow damaging the overhead power cables, a maintenance crew using its 1894 steam rack loco H2/3 No 5 (Photo P.19) takes them down, reinstalling



Train approaching the final few metres after a long climb up to the Schynige Platte.

them the following spring.

Anyone who has not experienced this unique mountain railway will be in for a bit of a surprise if they expect the luxury carriages of other Swiss trains. Although all the coaches, which carry a number of different liveries, were refurbished (including strengthening to modern standards) some 20-years ago, much of the interior of the rolling stock looks as it was when the SPB was first opened 118-years ago. Two hard, four person, wooden bench seats face each other in every compartment and, when the train hits some of those 1 in 4 inclines on the fifty-minute plus journey to the top, passengers facing down the mountain sometimes feel themselves sliding forward. It may not be the most comfortable ride but it is one you should not miss if you get the chance. The trains are hauled by eleven veteran He2/2 locos, four dating from the electrification of the SPB in 1914, and seven acquired from the Wengernalpbahn some years ago which date from that line's electrification in 1909/10.

The railway starts its slow, almost walking pace journey from the BOB station at Wilderswil, just 3.2km and one stop down the line from Interlaken Ost. It parallels the BOB line over the Lutschine river heading south towards Lauterbrunnen before taking a sharp left turn to start its climb. In the busy season it is not unusual to see two or even three trains travelling in the same direction a few minutes apart. At the same time another two or three are heading in the opposite direction back down the mountain. There are two passing loops on the line, at Rotenegg (1.9km) and Breitlauenen (4.6km) just past the half-way point of the journey. Many walkers start their climb from here, and I suspect that many, who have walked up as far as this, the only intermediate station, decide to take the train the rest of the way!

Initially, there is not a lot to see on the trip as the line is in rock cuttings, followed by forest. Eventually the route is surrounded by rock strewn Alpine meadows with wandering cows, bells ringing out as they contentedly chew on the lush grass, completing the idyllic picture. One of the great advantages of the old rolling stock over more modern, panoramic trains is that the windows can be lowered, enabling photographs to be taken without the annoying reflections that have spoilt many images taken on trains with fixed windows. So, looking across the sloping meadows towards Interlaken and the lakes of Brienz and Thun laid out below, it is time to



A Schynige Platte Bahn train heads down towards Wilderswil in September 2008.

start using the camera. Once past Breitlauenen the track winds its way through open meadows interspersed with forested areas on one side or sheer drops on the other, all the time climbing steeply until the spectacular sight of the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau hove into view.

Depending on one's sense of adventure or fitness arriving at the summit station (at 1,987m only 74m lower than Kleine Scheidegg) is not necessarily the end of the journey. Adjacent to the station are the free-to-enter Alpine Gardens allowing study of some six hundred or so species of alpine plants which carpet the ground in season. July and August, although the busiest months, are the best time for this, or - whilst taking in the magnificent view of the Lauterbrunnen valley - there is a short stroll to the newly refurbished restaurant. For the fitter about forty minutes of hard walking and clambering over rocks brings you around the top of Schynige Platte, to look out over Interlaken and the surrounding area in one direction to Spiez on Lake Thun and beyond and almost all of Lake



Schynige Platte Bahn train at Wilderswil station in 2011.



Brienz in the other. Finally, for those who are more equipped to do a bit of long distance mountain walking, you can follow the rocky footpath to First and its chairlift connecting it to Grindelwald.

Readers of "Continetal Modeller" will recall that over four issues between July and September 2009 it featured a superb HO-scale model of the SPB that made interesting reading.



Copyright: "Continetal Modeller"

FAR LEFT: A look inside the cab of the Schynige Platte Bahn locomotive.

LEFT: Coupling between locomotive and carriages on the Schynige Platte Bahn train.



Editor's Postscript

Frank Everett may not have been aware that on May 31st, just prior to his visit, the SPB suffered a mishap that brought it to the attention of the Swiss Press and the BAV (Federal Transport Office).

This took place at Breitlauenen, the middle station. On the SPB the trains run on dispatcher's order, and, in convoys "on sight", and on this day visibility was good. An uphill train waited in the Breitlauenen loop, until a downhill was "inside", before departing. A downhill works train led by locomotive No 62 was however still to enter the loop, and so a flanking collision occurred, in which No 62 was derailed and fell on its side. Speeds were low as 7 km/h is the limit through points. Two things leave open questions; first, on such mountain railways, there is a rule (just like the green flags of US trains in the old days in the West) that any train which has another following must carry a signal, a green disc with bar through it. Then all know that another train is still to come. Second, the front guard of a train waiting for a crossing must, when the line is clear, climb down and set the point (by hand lever) after the incoming train has cleared it. So, theoretically, nothing can go wrong! The railway was closed for the day and serious damage to No 62 was not reported. SPB's four-wheeled box locomotives are very robust. Originally built for the WAB No 62 is 100 years old. Only a few weeks later, there was more trouble below Breitlauenen. This time a thunderstorm caught the last descending train there, cutting it off with fallen trees and broken catenary further down, and the 60+ passengers had to be brought down by helicopter to Wilderswil. Presumably there was no extra charge! 

TOP RIGHT: Number 13 "Matten" holds in a siding.

MIDDLE RIGHT: Whilst number 11 "Wilderswil" stands by in the shed.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Schynige Platte Bahn snow plough at Wilderswil station in September 2008.

BELOW: View from the top of Schynige Platte of Interlaken and the two lakes after a 40 minute walk from the summit station.

