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Albula Tunnel - ‘Sprinters’ and ‘Shuttles’

Don Gatehouse reviews the October 2016 construction-related RhB operations

A freight service from Landquart approaches Samedan with empty spoil containers at the rear.

All photos: Don Gatehouse

On P34 of *Swiss Express* No.128 there was an overview of the construction of the new Albula Tunnel that included background information on the three construction-related RhB train activities that had operated during the April-November 2016 construction window. So, not only had the titles ‘Albula Sprinter’, ‘Albula Shuttle’ and ‘Grischa Sprinter’ found their place in the RhB vocabulary during 2016 but, as a bonus, a good number of their workings produced regular daytime sightings of surviving members of the veteran Class Ge 4/4¹ locomotives. An opportunity not to be missed, beckoned! So, during my October visit to Switzerland, I based myself at the splendid Grischuna Hotel at Filisur. Prior to my trip I had examined the on-line Graphic Charts and RhB Lokdienst for any clues as to the pattern of operations but it was not until I invested CHF 3 in one of the printed daily Lokdienst supplied at Filisur station that the required information was confirmed. So, on the following

morning I was aboard the 08:02 service from Filisur to head south to put my new-found knowledge to the test.


The Spinas to Preda loaded spoil train comprised Class Ge 4/4¹ locomotives No.603 ‘Badus’ and 602 No.‘Bernina’ leading a rake of four Xa-U wagons and the Seite Spinas RhB works coach Xe 99801. The train was stabled at Samedan overnight and had been moved to the works site in the early morning. My first sighting of the spoil shuttle (or was it a Sprinter?) came at Preda, where the train was waiting to follow my passenger service through the Albula tunnel to be loaded at Spinas. On each of the days I was in the area, the daylight operations (when seen) followed the same pattern, with empty wagons from Preda arriving at Spinas at circa. 08:48, 10:48, 12:48, and with loaded spoil trains leaving Spinas at about 09:40, 11:40, 13:40. For the southbound movement of the discharged wagons, the travelling shunter would sit in the front compartment of the coach and be in radio contact with the driver, who would be in the leading cab of the brace of propelling locomotives. The day’s set of spoil movements complete, the empty wagons would be propelled from Preda to Samedan shortly before 15:00. The locomotives would then collect loaded wagons, delivered earlier by an incoming freight service from Landquart, to be moved to the main works site at Preda. During my observations these trains comprised aggregates but I guess other construction materials would feature, as and when required? The Class Ge 4/4¹

An empty spoil train waits to leave Preda for Spinas.



locomotives would then work as necessary between both construction sites and Samedan until the late evening. It was also noted from the Lokdienst that one of the recently introduced RhB Class 234 (Gmf 4/4¹¹) diesel locomotives was allocated for overnight work at the Spinas and Preda works sites. That said, none of these nocturnal activities were the subject of my observations as I was by then back at Filisur enjoying the excellent hospitality, a welcome beer and a good rest in the warmth!

The spoil from both the Preda and Spinas excavation sites would be re-cycled and used as much as possible in the works associated with the new tunnel construction and related infrastructure changes. Surplus excavated raw spoil would be loaded into containers on SI wagons for transfer to Samedan, for onward movement using RhB freight services, for sale commercially or possible use in other railway engineering projects. The early morning Samedan to Landquart Albula Valley freight service (5120) was seen to include a rake of SI container wagons loaded with outgoing tunnel spoil. In addition, I did see a consignment of spoil included in the morning Samedan to Landquart Engadin Valley freight service (5336), so maybe this was additional traffic to that moved via the Albula service in order to clear Samedan of these loaded wagons as promptly as possible. In addition to the above spoil traffic moves, observers of the Filisur webcam may well have spotted the block train move of tunnel spoil on certain Saturday mornings last year, with a returning empties train in the late afternoon. A pair of Class Ge 4/4¹¹ locomotives was the normal allocation but a pair of Ge 4/4¹ machines was not unknown!

By the time these observations are published, the 2017 construction season will have commenced and with it there may be a revised pattern of operations. So, if you plan to visit the Albula Tunnel works area to observe/photograph the traffic moves, do invest in a Lokdienst to check what is working and when. 

1. Recorded at Bever, the Spinas-Preda spoil wagons were being returned to Samedan.
2. Tunnel spoil being loaded at Spinas.
3. Loaded aggregates hoppers en route from Samedan to Preda.
4. A Samedan-Landquart freight, transporting Albula Tunnel spoil near Zuoz, Upper Engadin.

