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An Interesting Sunday in June!

by Glyn Jones



Setra Postbus 5624 on its lunch break at Gletsch before the breakdown.

All photographs: Glyn Jones

It seemed a good idea: it was the first week that the high alpine passes were open for the summer and the first weekend that the Postbuses were operating over them. It was a clear sunny day, and it would be great to see how much snow was still around, so what could possibly go wrong!

We travelled to Oberwald from our hotel in Brunnen and picked up the 12:20, 681 Postbus over the Furka Pass scheduled to arrive in Andermatt at 14:23. This bus service stops for its lunch break in Gletsch for 46 minutes, giving time for a walk around the village and DFB station. The Setra Postbus, although BE registered, was based in Airolo with a young Italian speaking driver. There were only eight passengers, plus two bikes on the back belonging to a couple who were planning on cycling the Rhône “from source to the sea”. We left Gletsch and started the climb up to the Belvedere and the Rhône Glacier, although of course this is no longer visible from here. All went well, but the bus did seem to be going

quite slowly; was this to let passengers take photos through the windows, or was there a cyclist in front of us that we could not see? When we were down to first gear and still going even slower, we realised we were in trouble and the bus pulled over to the side of the road. Engine switched off – a quick “control-alt-delete” system reboot did nothing more than restart the passenger information system and that was that, it was not going to start again without help and we were well and truly stuck in a rather isolated spot. Swiss Postbuses never break down but this relatively new one had.

We were soon joined by three police cars, a police van and numerous police motor cyclists, before being “coned off” and the police started directing the traffic around us. The driver then announced we would need a replacement bus but it would take at least an hour to arrive. One couple decided to walk back to Gletsch, not sure what they were going to do when they got there. So then there were only six passengers left on the stricken bus.

At this point I must add that this Sunday was the last day of the ‘Tour du Suisse’ cycle race and whilst in Oberwald we saw crowd control barriers and inflatable advertising displays being erected. A quick “Google” soon ascertained the race was due to finish in the Goms at Ulrichen after going over the Neufenen, Gotthard and Furka Passes, some 3000m of altitude change. This was of no concern to us as we would be in Andermatt long before the race arrived, or would we? The replacement bus arrived at 15:15, collected from Wassen by an ex-driver who was now office based and was out on a cycle ride, when asked to help. It looks like The stricken coach was soon joined by a fleet of police cars.




there is no standard procedure, especially at weekends, to deal with this situation. It seemed strange, as there always appear to be plenty of spare Postbuses at key places just in case too many passengers turn up. Maybe it is such a rare occurrence for a Postbus to breakdown. As soon as we were all transferred to the replacement bus, there was the “bomb-shell” announcement that the pass was now closed to normal traffic for the ‘Tour du Suisse’ cycle race, and the police insisted we return to Gletsch where we would have to wait for the passage of the riders and all their support crews, before we could continue on our journey over the pass.

At least we would be the first vehicle over the Furka when the road reopened as we were allowed to park near to the Hotel du Rhône. This did give us the opportunity for a refreshment stop and the chance to view and photograph a professional cycle race. There were so many support vehicles along with spare bikes on their roofs and more support motor bikes than you could imagine. We had to smile as the lead cyclist arrived followed by a television helicopter. It must have clearly shown our stranded Postbus which was now a chicane for the cyclists to negotiate.

The pass was re-opened at 16:30 and we re-started our journey to Andermatt. We passed our stranded Postbus now with its engine cover removed and an unmarked support vehicle in attendance. If it was necessary to recover the bus with a recovery vehicle, it would be incredibly difficult to negotiate the numerous hairpin bends either going up or down. We dropped the couple off at the Furka Belvedere to start their cycle ride. They had to get to Brig for their first night’s pre-booked hotel stop, and feared they would not get there until 22:00.

There was, as we had hoped, plenty of deep snow at the sides of the road over the pass despite the warm sunshine, although our main concern was what time we would get to Andermatt. We were running side by side with the MGB train as we approached Hospental, but we were then held up by a lot of traffic coming down the Gotthard Pass, so our arrival at Andermatt was not until 17:35, missing our connection to Göschenen by about five minutes. So time to sample Andermatt station buffet whilst waiting for the next train and we finally arrived back at our hotel at 20:00. We did think that the Swiss, whilst usually so efficient, are not so good when things go wrong, maybe they do not get much practice at it. We did wonder what had happened to any passengers waiting for our original Postbus at the many stops between Gletsch and Andermatt, some of which are in pretty isolated places.

As an aside we asked our replacement driver as a citizen of Andermatt, what he thought of all the new developments in the town. He said he was happy with the Chedi development and hotel, but thought the later ones now being constructed were a step too far – we agree. 

TOP: And then a police van loaded with traffic cones. There is plenty of snow even at this altitude.

MIDDLE: Safely “coned off” - the driver is still phoning for advice. The Grimsel pass road down to Gletsch can be seen in the distance.

BOTTOM: Back down in Gletsch our replacement coach has to wait for the Tour Du Suisse to pass through.

