

Great places : some of Gary Olson's favourite places to watch trains in Switzerland

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Great Places

Some of Gary Olson's favourite places to watch trains in Switzerland

All photographs by the author

There are many ways to enjoy the rail activity in Switzerland. One of my favourites is to visit a interesting station and watch the activity. I almost always travel to Switzerland armed with a Swiss Pass, which allows unlimited travel during its period of activation. I add to this the current edition of the timetable and Kummerly+Frey's great rail map, both available at train stations and many newsstands. Thus I can scout out a site from the map and use the rail pass and the timetable to plot out a way to get to good watching places. I have found a number of places that I go back to again and again because of their variety and level of activity. But I also explore new places and my list of good sites grows and grows.

As there are lots of great places to watch trains in Switzerland, what follows is a biased selection, based on the following preferences. I am most interested in standard gauge operations, particularly the SBB. I also like lots of activity and I like places where I can take pictures. If there is shunting, rearrangement of engines and other operations, so much the better. I also like lots of international traffic, with freight and passenger compositions having rolling stock from neighbouring countries. A few foreign engines also add spice. Since I never have a car when I am in Switzerland, these are all places that can be reached easily by trains with a frequent service. Finally, all these places have the advantage that you can see lots of action in a limited period of time, especially useful if you have an hour or two to kill between trains.

Zürich Hauptbahnhof (Hbf)

To someone from the US, there is nothing to rival the activity of a major European station. Zürich is an incredibly bust passenger terminal, with nearly 1500 trains each day. Except for the underground platforms built to serve the new Zürich S-bahn, the platforms are stub-ended.

For locomotive hauled through trains this requires decoupling the inboard engine at the terminal end of the platform and attaching a new engine for the outboard trip at the yard end. Since the traffic is so intense there are always engines sitting out in the yard awaiting their next assignment.

The regular interval service introduced by the SBB in 1982 means that from a major centre like Zürich there are departing trains to most other key destinations at least once an hour. Thus the activity is particularly intense from about 15 minutes before an hour to about 15 after. But it never stops. There is no freight traffic, since these trains bypass the area of the Hauptbahnhof.

My favourite spot to watch all of this action is from the yard end of one of the long platforms in the centre of the station. The new station construction has put these platforms far out into the yard, this gives an excellent view of the flow of trains in and out, the engine transfers and the shunting operations. In the course of an hour or two one can see all manner of engines, passenger stock, pendelzug compositions, shunters and miscellaneous rolling stock (eg, PTT).

The Approaches to Zürich

If you like to watch this variety of passenger traffic at or near speed and see some freight traffic mixed in, pick a good spot on one of the approaches into Zürich Hbf. My favourite is westward, partly because the large marshalling yard near Dietikon offers a greater chance to see a mixture of passenger and freight traffic. The first westward station is Zürich Hardbrücke, a small city station still well within the limits of the complex yards that extend out to the east from the Zürich Hbf. Here one can watch the traffic heading in and out of the main eastward lines, and also the traffic heading out on the northbound overpass over the yards, or through the diverging route of the Hardbrücke station



SBB Re6/6 No.11621at Erstfeld 9 October 1989

itself. From the pavements on the bridge over the yards at Hardbrücke one can get a birds eye view of the traffic and the shunting. Many slow moving freights pass beneath the southern end of this bridge towards the Hbf bypass, towards Thalwil, Zug and the Zürich portion of the Gotthard route.

Farther towards the west, I enjoy watching activity from either the Dietikon or the Killwangen-Spreitenb. stations. These small suburban stations bracket the large marshalling yard mentioned above, making for interesting freight activity. Since they are small stations, most passenger trains in and out of Zürich pass through them at speed. There are also frequent PTT trains, often hauled by old Ae3/6s or Ae4/7s.

Pratteln

I often study the excellent Kummerly+Frey Swiss Rail Map for interesting junctions of busy lines and one of my favourites is this small town just east of Basel. Basel is a major rail interchange for passenger and freight traffic from Northern Europe and France, with major

lines heading in several directions in Switzerland. Two of the busiest of these lines diverge just beyond the eastern end of Pratteln station, those to Zürich and to Olten-Bern-Lausanne. A huge freight marshalling yard is at Muttenz, between Basel and Pratteln, and all of the eastbound and southbound freights from this yard pass through Pratteln.

Arth-Goldau

This is one of the most interesting stations in Switzerland. Two major lines from the north and east converge right at the station itself and continue to the south down the Gotthard route. One line comes from Zürich, the other from Luzern and Basel. There is also a smaller line belonging to the standard gauge Südöstbahn (SÖB) that starts in Arth-Goldau and heads northeasterly towards Rapperswil and beyond to St.Gallen. Finally there is a smaller rack railway, the Arth-Rigi Bahn that leaves for the nearby Rigi Kulm summit from a station that is suspended over the SBB Luzern tracks.

The traffic on the SBB lines is intense, since Arth-Goldau is a major junction on the



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busy Gotthard route and almost all passenger trains heading either north or south stop here. There are major expresses that connect Germany and the Low Countries with Italy and, of course, frequent Swiss Intercity trains, as well as *regionalzugs* and locals.

There is also plenty of freight traffic, principally on the Luzern line. While these trains do occasionally roll right through the station, they often pause to await line clearance. There are small marshalling yards here, where local passenger trains might be assembled and some freight wagons set aside.

Erstfeld

This is a major locomotive depot on the Gotthard route. The most interesting thing to watch here is the addition or subtraction of assisting engines that are either about to tackle the Gotthard north ramp, or have just descended it. Many of the heavy freights over this route require double heading, this can be almost any combination of main road engines, Re4/4IIs, Re6/6s and, less frequently nowadays, Ae6/6s. A few freight trains require

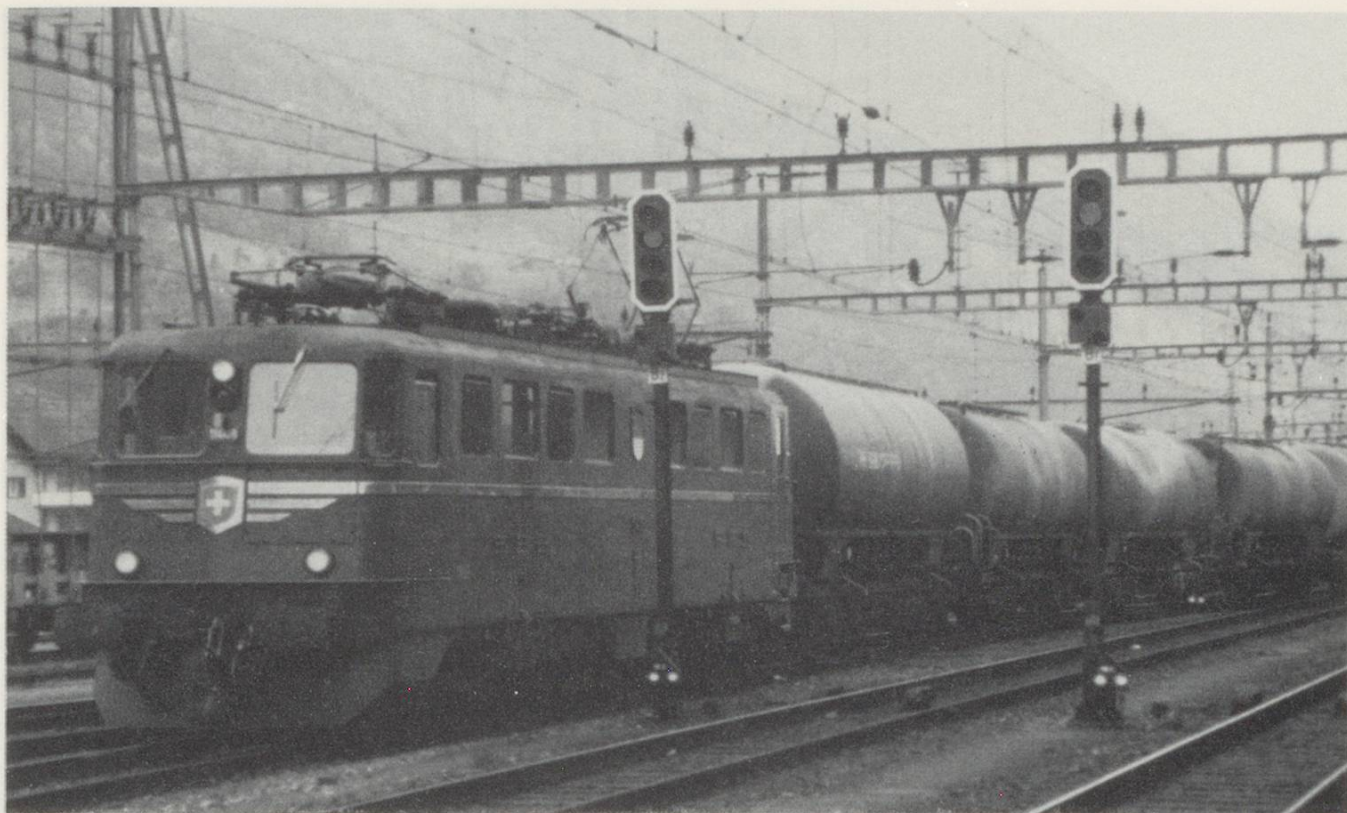
three locomotives, with the third engine cut in about halfway down the train.

Erstfeld station itself offers a good vantage point for these activities. In addition, beyond the southern end of the station a narrow road bridge crosses the yard. The main girders have an upper wire mesh guard that interferes with photography, but the approach ramps on either end of the bridge provide a clear, unobstructed view of the southern end of Erstfeld yard and the beginning of the Gotthard north ramp beyond.

Göschenen

The northern end of the Gotthard tunnel begins at the southern end of the station. Major passenger and freight traffic flows through here and much of it stops in the station. Many of the major international passenger trains have connections with the Schöllenbahn section of the Furka Oberalp and the high alpine passes though its lines out of Andermatt.

As mentioned, the Furka-Oberalp serves Göschenen on a short metre gauge spur from Andermatt. Its schedule of short shuttle trains is



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linked to the SBB traffic though here, affording easy connections. The Furka Oberalp line is rack operated from directly outside the station as the line climbs up out of the Reuss valley into the spectacular Schöllenen Gorge.

Chiasso

This station is on the border between Switzerland and Italy and its main attraction is the transfer of SBB and FS motive power on the trains as they pass through, changing from one electrical system to another. Though there is heavy freight traffic through Chiasso, it does not pass through the passenger station, but goes through large marshalling and customs inspection yards to the west.

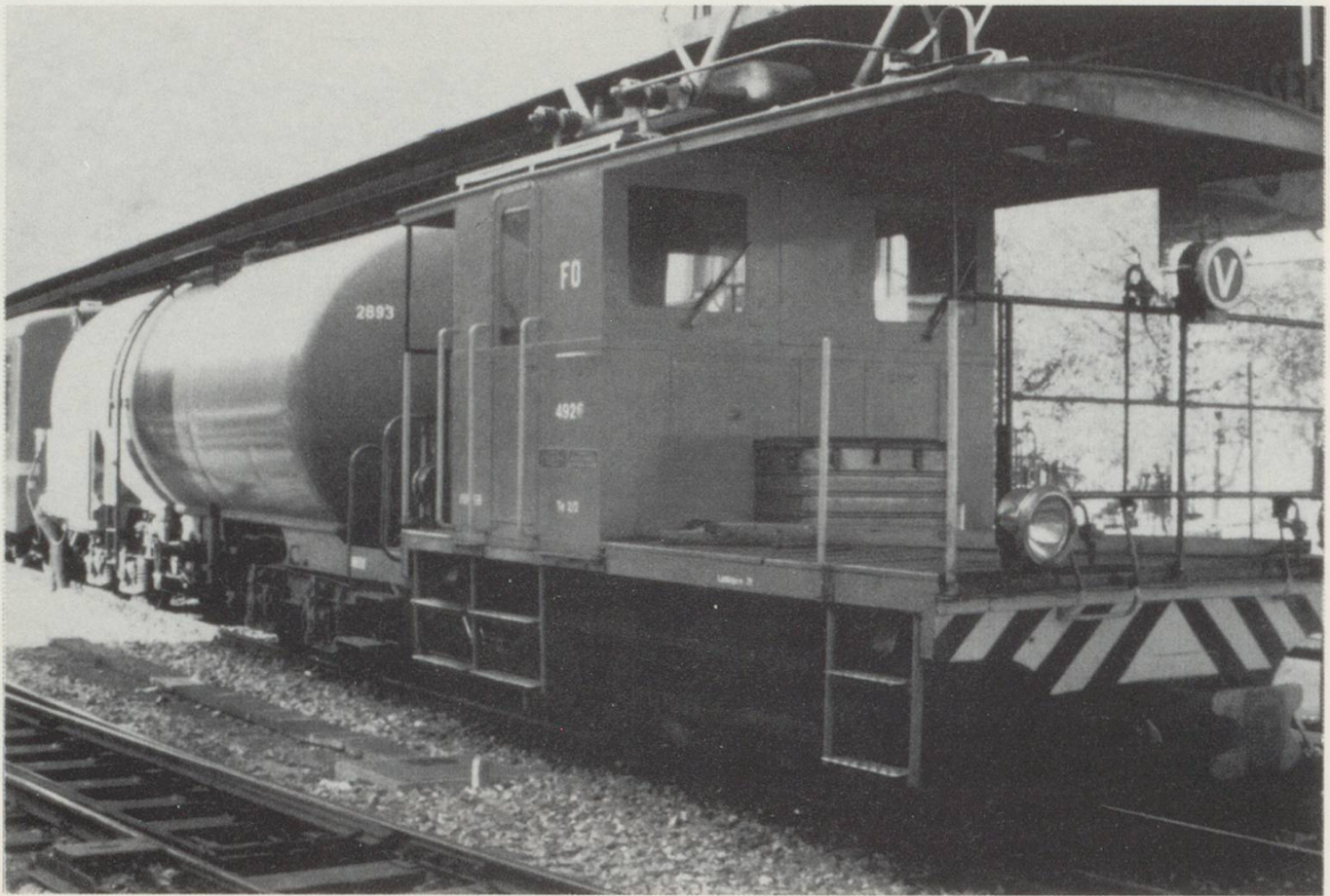
Brig

This city is situated on the Rhône River, between towering snow-capped peaks of 3000-4000 metres. It is a major rail junction for traffic along both east-west and north-south axes. Two standard gauge and two metre gauge lines converge here.

The SBB line from Lausanne and Genève,

via Sion and the Rhône valley, enters the station from the west. Parallel to this, the BLS line from Spiez, via the Lötschberg tunnel, descends down the northern wall of the valley. These standard gauge workings continue on to Italy through the Simplon Tunnel. One can watch the entire spectrum of passenger traffic here, made all the more interesting since some trains from Italy comprise separate portions for Lausanne, and heading north via the Lötschberg route. This requires shunting of passenger coaches between the tracks, often with curious passengers leaning out of the windows as they are moved through the yard. There is also freight traffic through Brig, though this is not as heavy through the Simplon as it is through the Gotthard.

The Furka Oberalp Bahn carries metre gauge traffic eastwards from Brig through the Goms valley to Andermatt, where there are connections with the SBB at Göschenen on the Gotthard line, and on to Disentis/Muster where it connects end on with the Rhätische Bahn. In the other direction, the Brig-Visp-Zermatt (BVZ) carries similar traffic to Visp and on to Zermatt.



FO Te No.4926 at Brig 24 May 1989

The many sections of the Glacier Express, which has operated all year round since the opening of the Furka Basis Tunnel in 1982, all pass through Brig, with a change of motive power between the FO and the BVZ. Most of the traffic on these lines is passenger, though an occasional short freight appears, and a few freight cars are added to the local trains.

The standard gauge tracks are elevated above the nearby streets to the north of the station building. The FO and BVZ joint station is on street level in front of the station. While there are some vantage points that give you a view of both, it is best to focus your attention on either the BLS/SBB activity on the main line or the FO/BVZ activity in front of the station. The main platforms are long and enable one to range from the BLS sheds at the western end to the shunting yards and line to Italy at the eastern ends. The best vantage point is from either end of one of the intermediate platforms. The street level metre gauge station in front is very

intimate and one can watch the comings and goings and shunting activity at very close range. See this soon, plans are under way to rearrange the routing of the metre gauge through Brig.

Lausanne

This is a very busy station for the SBB and has the extra attraction of a regular TGV service operated by the SNCF. It is on the main SBB line from Brig and the Rhone valley, with services to and from Italy to both Geneva and Vallorbe, with through services to France. Further, a second line branches to the east of the station for Bern. Interesting yards and shops are just to the west of the station. I also like Lausanne because the trains and engines are a bit different from those at the other places I have mentioned, though this will probably change as older locomotives are retired from service. One can see a fair number of Ae4/7s and Re4/4s, together with the new Kolibri NPZs and, as mentioned before, the TGVs.