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By Rail to Switzerland: Eurostar and TGV

by George Hoekstra, Kandersteg

The recent reminiscences on travel to Switzerland "in the good old days" in our magazine have brought back many fond (and some not so fond...) memories about my own trips - the other way round: My first visit to Britain in 1953 via Ostend - Dover Marine. Being issued with Ration-Stamp books: double rations as a foreign visitor, I was a very grateful guest in those days! The via Hook: long, many times rough crossing, but wonderful trains in Germany. Via Dieppe, the very basic French train with seats 5 across, but it was cheap! Then the No. 398 Basle-Calais night train with the trolley coming on in the middle of the night at Valenciennes: wonderfully fresh and warm croissants. The Jetfoil service, not only a lot faster and more comfortable, but also only max. 300 passengers to get through British Immigration instead of 2,000+ on the boat.

And today? Well, as far as I am concerned, the way to go is with the modern high speed trains. I do know there are cheaper ways to go (Eurolines Bus, also some airlines offer very good deals), but I am not a great coach traveller and flying is

only great once you are in the air, never mind the hassle (and the waiting around) at both ends. We are after all a RAILWAY Society, are we not? Why not enjoy the trip as well: One does not travel just to arrive.

By the time you read this, Eurostar will serve other cities in England apart from London and Ashford. The trip to Paris is very quick indeed (once you get to my side of the chunnel, that is) and the fares can be quite competitive. You must ask though, for special deals. If your stay includes three days, or a Saturday away from home, if you travel midweek, and so on. Otherwise you will only be offered the normal (=high) fare. Us over 60s get reductions on the international journey (including Eurostar) with the "RES" card (=Rail Europ Senior, not your normal senior citizen railcard). Also, the price for railway employees (and quite a few of our members are) have recently been reduced. As for the ease and comfort of First Class, you get what you pay for: Excellent accommodation, a Steward every car to assist you with boarding. Free newspapers and drinks and if you pick the right departure: a



nice meal, all included in the price! There are special deals in First Class too, so do ask and compare.

Once you get to Paris, you have the choice of going straight on: For Basle you can walk from the Gare du Nord to Gare de l'Est in 10 minutes. Turn left out of the station and walk to the eastern end of the station (Eurostar is at the western end), cross the road into Rue du Faubourg St. Denis, after about 50m turn left into the Rue des deux Gares (very appropriately named), walk to the end and you are looking down on three tracks of Gare de l'Est. The entrance is down the monumental steps on your right. For Neuchatel/Berne/Lausanne you need to go to the Gare de Lyon, which is two stops on the RER (Regional Express) away. Follow the signs RER D. Out of Eurostar platform turn left, walk almost to the end, turn left and left again down steps hidden by a pillar. You can buy Metro-tickets here or at Eurostar desk in Waterloo and Ashford (10 tickets only at Eurostar). Then go through the automatic gates (get your ticket back, you need it to get out, just like in London) keep looking for RER D, Chatelet/Gare de Lyo. Go down the escalators and on the platform again look for Chatelet/Gare de Lyon on the illuminated destination boards. Your train may be a double decker! It takes two stops:

Opposite: Waterloo International station two Eurostar trains awaiting service. Photo Peter Marriott

Above: Paris Gare du Nord, Eurostar, Thalys (Paris-Brussels-Amsterdam), TGV-Reseau as seen from the Eurostar waiting room. Photo: George Hoekstra

Chatelet and Gare de Lyon. It really takes longer to write up than to do. If you still feel unsure, there is always the taxi (about 60 FFr).

Why not stay one or two nights in Paris? The specialized Travel Agents advertising in Swiss Express will quote you a RIT (Rail Inclusive Tour) price. You also get the rail travel cheaper that way. If not Paris, you could do far worse than to make a stopover in Dijon (see article in September 1996 Swiss Express). All TGVs to Neuchatel/Berne and Lausanne (NOT GENEVA) stop in Dijon.

If you prefer to travel by night, take the Eurostar to Brussels and connect with the sleeper/courette train direct to KANDERSTEG and lesser known places such as Basle, Berne, Spiez, Brig, Zurich and Chur..... Talking about stopovers, Brussels is well worth one! Who knows, with careful planning of stopovers, you might only need an 8 day Swiss Pass (I cannot believe I just wrote that....). Wear your Swiss Railway Society tie, I might spot you in Switzerland or on the way!



Above: TGV Paris - Bern service: Breakfast served at your seat, but you have to pay for it separately.

Below: TGV Paris bern service: The Bar (usually car 14 or 4, depending on you train) serves hot and cold drinks, snacks and French magazines. Photos: George Hoekstra

