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3 - THE DAMPFBAHN FURKA BERGSTRECKE



DFB no. 1 "Furkahorn" departs from Gletsch with the return working to Realp on August 2nd 2000. The course of the line can be seen immediately below the rocky outcrop on the right-hand side of the picture.

Photo: Chris Rosendale

A run through spectacular mountain scenery in a steam train. Lines such as the Gyaquil and Quito and Durango and Silverton immediately fit this description, but as we probably know they are rapidly being joined by a European version found in the High Alps of Switzerland. Closed for what seemed the final time in 1981, the "Furka Bergstrecke" or "Furka Mountain Route" of the Furka Oberalp railway is being progressively reopened as a tourist steam railway, making it possible to travel by train past the Rhône Glacier once again.

A HISTORY OF THE LINE

The line has its origins in two different railway companies. Construction was started and partly completed by the Brig-Furka-Disentis company, which opened the line from Brig to Gletsch in 1913. Work on opening the line through to Disentis was suspended due to both the bankruptcy of the BFD and the effects of World War One. As a result the rest of the line

was not opened until 1925, after the project had been taken over by the Furka Oberalp company. The summer-only operation enforced by the altitude of the Furka summit tunnel, and the resulting loss of winter tourist revenue, eventually encouraged the FO to construct the Furka Base Tunnel from Oberwald to Realp, thus permitting all-year-round operation. The 15.4 km (9 miles) long tunnel was finally completed in 1982, the original summit route having closed for the final time the previous autumn.

The spectacular nature of the old summit line had, however, ensured that it had attracted a wide following and this resulted in the formation of a preservation society, the Dampfbahn Furka Bergstrecke, with the aim of reopening the line as a steam tourist railway. The first steam trains ran between Realp and Tiefenbach in 1992, with an extension to Furka, the eastern (Uri) portal of the summit tunnel opening in 1993. Gletsch, the next target, was finally reached seven years later, the

delay being caused by the need to repair frost damage to the summit tunnel and to reinstate two level crossings over the Furka pass road. So far no date has been set for a reopening to Oberwald, but talk is of "at least 2010".

high avalanche risk has to be dismantled every winter. After a twenty minute journey, Tiefenbach is reached. Here the locomotive takes on water and prior to the opening of the Gletsch extension, passed the return train from



DFB no. 2 "Gletschhorn" takes on water at Tiefenbach three years earlier in August 1997. This view shows the wild and lonely setting of this part of the line.

Photo: Chris Rosendale

A JOURNEY ALONG THE LINE

The DFB station at Realp opened in 1997 and is sited next to the base tunnel entrance some 500m from the FO station. Upon departure trains pass the depot, before entering the narrow Furkareuss valley. Just before the first crossing of the river we change to the Abt rack to commence the climb to Furka. Shortly after crossing the river the train passes through the three short Alt-Senntumstafel tunnels, which required extensive renovation prior to reopening. Climbing still, the train rumbles across the famous Steffenbach bridge, which due to the

Furka. The passing loop here is now used to store rolling stock. Returning to the rack after departure, the train soon recrosses the river on a beautiful stone arched viaduct, before climbing along the north side of the valley to reach Furka which, at 2160 m, is the highest point on the line. Here is a turntable, a buffet built into the hillside and the entrance to the summit tunnel. This time we leave on adhesion for the run through the 1858 m long tunnel, until ten minutes later we emerge into Canton Valais at Muttbach - Belvedere. Resuming rack operation, the train descends to the level crossing over the Furka pass road. No lights or barriers



A view of Gletsch station on Aug. 2nd 2000. The Rhône Glacier can just be made out high up on the mountainside above the station building.

Photo: Chris Rosendale

are present here, instead a crossing keeper stops traffic while the train twists across the road. Now the line runs along a ledge as it descends the southern flank of the Rhône Valley, in full view of the Rhône Glacier which, sadly, has almost disappeared from view due to continuous melting over the past 100 years. Gletsch is now visible below us as we descend to reach it. Finally, after another flagged crossing of the Furka pass road, the train runs into Gletsch station, 1 hour and 25 minutes after leaving Realp. The former Bernina railway snowplough is at present housed in the locomotive shed here, although it is at present inoperable.

At present Gletsch is the end of the line, but from here to Oberwald is a section which, once reopened, should be spectacular as the line descends the Rhône Gorge, passing through a spiral tunnel just below Gletsch. The final section of the line runs through the forest at the mouth of the gorge, just above Oberwald village before finally crossing the cantonal road and descends into Oberwald FO station. However it could be a good few years before this final section is reopened as much work needs to be done in repairs. A new embankment will be required on the approach to Oberwald station and the track will probably require renewal. As mentioned earlier, no date has been set for the reopening of this section.

The subject of the DFB's locomotives and their repatriation from Vietnam has already been covered in *Swiss Express*, so there is little need to tell the story of the recovery again. Not all of the six recovered locos are in use yet, but those which are are already entertaining increasing numbers of visitors on this unrivalled (at least in Europe!) ride through the spectacular scenery of the Swiss Alps. If you are within reach of this part of Switzerland I recommend that you include the DFB in your itinerary, as there is nothing else like it in Europe.

The stop block at Gletsch, looking towards Oberwald, again on August 2nd 2000. A lot of work will need to be done to bring this section up to operating condition once more!

Photo: Chris Rosendale

