

Swiss news : a miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

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SWISS NEWS

A miscellany of news and information from Switzerland

ASD relieved?

On April 1st a serious rock and cliff fall closed the lower part of the ASD below Sépey resulting in replacement buses running from Aigle to La Planches via the Col des Mosses road on the opposite side of the ravine. Reporting following a trip up to Les Diablerets on April 22nd SRS members Jim and Aline Cook note that the route would be severed until July whilst the obstructions were cleared and the opportunity taken to lift and relay the track. They observed new sleepers already on site awaiting installation although, curiously, the old wooden catenary supports dating from the 1913 opening were still in place. With the line's history of problems: two serious accidents in a year; a severely fraying infrastructure; political divergences about what transport infrastructure was really needed; a total absence of block signalling and interlocking; and often only a few passengers, the writing has been on the wall so the recent incident may have signalled closure. This has all been reported in Swiss Express. However, it appears that Canton Vaud has won its battle to retain the line with not only the track renewal taking place, but absolute block working and other safety installations are also on their way together with a new railcar. All should be in place by 2013. The Cooks resumed their trip from La Planches up to Les Diablerets on No. 404, back in service after being in the 2010 collision, as it carefully negotiated the nearly parallel rails, unlocked facing switches and unprotected crossings of the upper section, all of which will also need upgrading. A superb journey appears to have been preserved for another day.



Works on the ASD below La Planches. PHOTO. Jim Cook

TGV Changes

When the new LGV Rhein-Rhône line that will link Dijon to Mulhouse via Belfort opens in 2012 Franco-Swiss TGV operator Lyria will be moving its six Paris-Strasbourg-Mulhouse-Basel-Zurich trains to that route bringing the journey time down. However, for UK travellers connecting from Eurostar an easy walk from Paris Nord to Gare l'Est will be replaced with a cross-city Metro transfer to Gare de Lyon.

Now that the conventional line between Bourg-en-Bresse and Bellegarde has been reopened the Paris-Genève TGV services have seen their journey times reduced. A spin-off from this is that Lyria is now considering extending some of these to Lausanne and reducing the Paris-Dole-Frasne-Vallorbe-Lausanne TGV service from five to two trains a day. This reduction could bring into question the viability of the two Frasne-Neuchâtel daily links worked by the SBB. The Swiss are not impressed and the regional government in the Franche-Comté is also not pleased.

More restoration

On May 13th, just outside Basel SBB, nose in newspaper, I was startled by a real North American chime whistle. A quick look up, and a large dark green shape with a wreath of steam passed all too quickly. From a subsequent TV interview I learnt that I had inadvertently witnessed the first trial run of ex-SNCF "Mikado" 141.R.1244 back in steam after the completion of 12 years of total renovation. The oil-burning loco was built by Montreal Locomotive Works in 1946 as one of 1,340 mixed-traffic 2-8-2s supplied from US and Canadian builders to help restore services in France after WWII. No 1244 entered service at Nice depot in March 1947; she was in Nîmes by 1951; briefly in Annemasse (near Genève) in 1960; before Saint-Brieuc in the west from 1960 to 1969. After some short moves she ended up at Lyons Venissieux in 1971, one of a pair in good order and used there for specials, having run some 1,450,000km in 24 years service. After a short spell in the French 'National Cold Reserve' she was sold to Switzerland and first ran privately in 1975. Now owned by "Verein Mikado 1244", a proper railway company that has an operator's license, she will now be used in Switzerland for special trains. The company also owns two beautifully restored electric locomotives, Ae 6/6 No 11407 'Aargau', and Ae4/7 No 11026, and both may be found in service from time to time. The steam engine is neither Swiss, nor French, nor related to Swiss trains, but is inseparably part of our experiences of travelling to and from Switzerland by train from Calais and Boulogne right up to the bitter end of steam in 1971. Many travellers experienced the 141.Rs hauling us to and from Calais Maritime and Hazebrouck when travelling on the couchette train CB. They are firmly burned into memory, as much as the 05.27 arrival in Basel and the rolls and cherry jam. More info at www.mikado1244.ch.

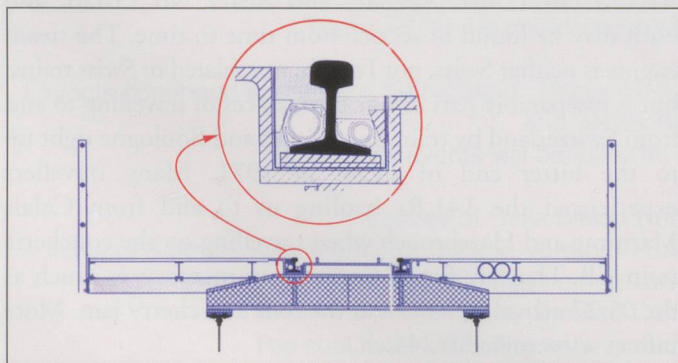
It never rains...

...but it pours. As if the SBB/Trenitalia Management did not have problems enough with the ongoing saga of the Class 470 and Class 610 Pendolino trains they did not need one of the units to be involved in a preventable derailment at Trier in Germany on the 15th February. ETR 610 011, destined for Trenitalia (and in its livery) but still owned by Alstom, was far to the north of its normal operating territory undertaking pre-delivery test runs of its tilting mechanism on the tightly curving DB line that runs alongside the River Saar, a tributary of the more famous River Mosel. The tests were also scheduled to be part of the Certification process for these

units to be able to operate in Germany. Returning to Trier for overnight stabling it ran through a buffer-stop and on to an adjacent track resulting in considerable damage to the sharply raked front of the driving cab. It was ignominiously hauled back to Basel behind a diesel loco on the 2nd March where the damaged cab-coach was replaced by one from the SBB owned ETR No 610 007 to enable the tests to continue. The result of this cannibalisation of the SBB unit was that this too was unavailable for scheduled service.

New bridges for old

Two viaducts on the MOB main line which are popular with photographers have undergone a CHF8m refurbishment. The bridges at Gstaad and Flendruz were built in 1903-4 using riveted trussed girder construction and after more than a century of heavy use they needed attention to compensate for fatigue problems, and also to reduce noise emissions. Both bridges are listed as “monuments of regional importance” and so they could not simply be replaced with modern structures. With Cantonal approval the MOB authorities decided to use a method known as “silent bridge” in the reinforcement. The concept, developed in the Netherlands in the 1990s, uses a steel caisson optimised to reduce the noise factor. In addition the rails are surrounded by a cork and rubber mixture to reduce vibrations from both the track and the truss. The project, involving a dozen Swiss companies and employing about fifty men, resulted in bustitution between Château d’Oex and Zweisimmen from late April until mid-May. An express bus catered for long distance passengers while an “all-stations” vehicle served the other stops excluding Gstaad. An isolated train shuttle service was provided between Saanen and Gstaad. With the completion of this work it is expected that the bridges will continue to give good service for another hundred years.



ABOVE: Cross section of new bridges. Courtesy MOB



The Last Mile Loco

At the Transport Logistic Trade Fair held in München during May Bombardier Transportation launched a TRAXX a.c. electric locomotive with a supplementary diesel motor. Described as their Last Mile loco the design removes the need to change locomotives when trains reach yard areas, terminals, ports, construction sites, etc. In general, the so-called “last mile” in those locations is generally not electrified, and until now shunting locomotives have had to replace electric locomotives in these areas to close the gap. At the launch Bombardier Transportation claimed that their Last Mile locomotive offered real innovation, giving rise to whole new possibilities in rail freight transportation. The first five locomotives of this type were ordered by the leasing firm Railpool GmbH at the end of last year. Three of these five locomotives will be leased by the BLS Cargo who believes that they will give them the opportunity to develop new markets with their customers in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. It is unclear when these locos will be delivered.

Zürich commuters get more standing room

On May 2 the first of a new series of 121 low-floor double-deck coaches for the Zürich Regional services (the Verkehrs-Verband, ZVV) was introduced into regular service on route S14 from Hinwil to Zürich HB. By 2016 the SBB will have received one hundred and thirteen examples whilst another eight will be delivered to the SZU this year. The order placed with the Siemens-Bombardier consortium in 2008 was worth CHF324m and was targeted to meet various considerations. The Zürich services require more capacity and the new coaches are designed for mass transportation with areas of strap-hanging space at the lower level. Station dwell-times need to be improved and the coaches have larger circulating areas to facilitate passenger movement saving waiting times. Legislation requires platform level access for disabled persons by 2024 and this is of course also popular and much in demand by all travellers.

The new coaches will be used to replace a B DPZ intermediate coach in the existing 20-year-old three-coach sets, hauled with 450 Class locomotives, to increase capacity

BOTTOM LEFT: The MOB bridge at Gstaad is still covered in scaffolding in June 2011. PHOTO: Tony Bagwell

BELOW: An MOB train crosses the bridge at Gstaad that has been repaired. PHOTO: Geoff Dunster



on critical routes. The older coaches will be re-marshalled into a back-up fleet of trains for peak hour operations to be hauled by refurbished 40-year-old Re 4/4 II locos. Additionally the first of the new generation high-capacity double-deck sets of class RABe 511, are about to be delivered from Stadler for service entry this summer. The Zürich region is therefore the first to benefit from a major increase in capacity which the success of the S-Bahn regional schemes has now made urgently necessary. The new transversal underground line from Oerlikon to the Zürich HB, comes into operation in 2013. Zürich and Genève in particular are 'enjoying' booming economic and population growth rates which have left previous planning decisions behind with the measures described here barely meeting the needs forecast by 2020. Prior to their introduction in Zürich some early examples of the new RABe 511 class (Nos 001 & 002) were on test in the Valais in spring 2011, where interestingly they are nominally out of gauge i.e. too high for the catenary hence needing special precautions to be taken. Also, on their trip there and back they travelled via Puidoux-Chêxbres and Vevey, moving 8 km through the vineyards at a gradient of 1 in 23, something they will scarcely see back in the Zürich region.

Rhône valley and the Lötschberg

In order to enable the Lötschberg Base Tunnel to be used more efficiently approval has been given for 3km of fourth track to be laid on the Rhône valley line between Visp and the junction for the new tunnel. Currently northbound freight trains from Italy that are running late when they exit the Simplon tunnel at Brig are not allowed to use the Base Tunnel and are diverted over the old route consequently increasing their lateness. The new track will allow these trains to continue on their scheduled route and then be able to wait for a path without holding-up other services. Three years after it was opened the new tunnel is running at 80% capacity on most days, and sometimes at 100%, resulting in the old route remaining busier than anticipated.

Seetalbahn Diversion


Not too many years ago the Seetalbahn from Lenzberg to Luzern was a basket case. It was generally decrepit, was close to abandonment, and being basically a roadside tramway the poor safety record of its many at-grade road crossings were a source of major public concern. But then the remarkable occurred: Cantons Aargau and Luzern agreed that it was a necessity, and set about (with some Federal funding) making it suitable for late 20th century operations. In 1998 the old route between Emmenbrücke and Walidibrücke was abandoned and a new off-road alignment was opened. Last April a further diversion was opened between Seon and Birrwil resulting in some twenty-two, mostly un-barriered, at-grade crossings being avoided whilst providing the village of a Boniswil with new station closer to its centre. In the near future we hope to bring

you an in-depth look at this most interesting of railways that has a long-forgotten English connection.

Turning the clock back to look forward

Like many railways, including the SBB (and BR), the BLS had divided its staff, resources and organization into different sectors to create quite separate business units. Costs, revenues, investments and profit and loss of each were thus made transparent. Those who were directly affected had always grumbled that this led to local inefficiency, that duplication and unemployed time could not be balanced out between former colleagues. Also, flexibility was affected as freight or passenger drivers or train crew, or locomotives, were confined to their own business sectors, though often 'borrowed' at times of stress. The BLS has now announced a reorganization to recreate one production department, combining personnel and resources, which will provide all services to the company's own businesses, freight and passenger, and also to third parties when appropriate. It is convinced that greater efficiency will result. This is a difficult move to assess for the accounting also makes demands, as many services, especially local and commuter passenger, are the subject of very specific transparent support contracts. But the BLS is notoriously good at running its business, and keeping costs low, so it's worth watching.

Lausanne – Work to Art

The Lausanne locomotive dépôt and workshops, at the west end of the station on a prime site, are to survive the loss of their railway function when maintenance and repairs cease at the end of 2011. It was announced in June that the prominent building is to be converted into Lausanne's new Cantonal Art Museum. A Spanish architects' office has won a competition to design the conversion with work starting in 2013 for an opening in 2016. 



The Lausanne Depot and workshops are visible at the far left of this view. PHOTO:

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