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SWITZERLAND IN BLACK AND WHITE

David Canning recalls a visit almost 40 years ago



Wassen 20th Oct 1973.

All photos: David Canning

I grew up in the 1950s in a rural environment where my father was a farm labourer and holidays were just things other people did, or were just days when I did not have to go to school. Foreign countries were places on maps that we were taught about, but had no expectation to ever go to. Then, after I began work as a Signaller with BR, I also never had any expectation of travelling overseas. However things changed when Marion, my future wife, suggested that for our honeymoon we visit Switzerland, a country she had visited with a girlfriend on an earlier coach trip. A decision was made and with the benefit of a railwayman's travel privileges we set off in October 1973, me leaving my native shores for the first time on an overnight ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland, in a 60mph gale with water finding its way into our cabin. The connecting train journey down through Germany to Basel was less eventful, and once in Switzerland we took trains to Luzern and on to Sachseln, on the Sarner See, where we had booked a week's hotel accommodation.


We arrived that evening to be greeted by funny 'creatures', masked, wearing weird costumes and running about all over the station poking us (and others) with brooms – we wondered what we had let ourselves in for. It was some years before we discovered that we had arrived on the weekend of the town's Älplerchilibi, or 'Alpine Fair', a tradition going back over 400 years when the community gives thanks for a

successful farming summer. As a part of the celebrations the village appoints two masked 'Wild Ones' who undertake pranks, parody events that have taken place in the community during the year, and just generally clown around. Until we realized what it was about, we amused people by telling them it was a fertility dance for visiting honeymooners! Next morning at breakfast Mrs Gasser, our hostess, started talking about local places we could be taken to. She was somewhat surprised when we said we were going to tour around by train. Noting that it was just a 10min walk to the station we commented that it took half an hour last night, but Marion then said "Ah but we stopped and took some train photos". On coming out with "That's a different kettle of fish", we realised she was not a native, it transpiring that she came originally from Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Returning to Sachseln 32 years later the hotel had gone, but this lady was still living next door to where it had stood.

Unlike today, when we know the best places to go, we were naive and knew nothing about the area, so our first day saw us simply head south on the Brünig Line just to see where it went and to take in the scenery, whilst taking train photos wherever we could. Everything was new to us and exciting: the rack coming in at Giswil; the ability to slide the windows right down – with no-one seeming to mind despite the fact it was cold and wet. For readers who know so much about



Switzerland it may seem strange that we could be so vague but I had not been anywhere abroad before, and Marion had simply been taken by coach to tourist spots. It was one big learning curve as we found ourselves at Interlaken, then on the BOB where we stopped off at Grindelwald to enjoy the alpine sun, which had now appeared, before going up to Kleine Scheidegg. Here an American noted that it was clear up at the Jungfrauoch so despite the price we thought it would probably be a one-off chance and went. However, by the time we got up there the clouds had come over and all we could see were their tops. We have never been back. Moving on to Wengen as it was getting late we phoned Mrs Gasser to tell her that we had decided to stay the night there. Here we came across an occurrence that you always remember, for at dusk it started snowing, dumping a fair amount overnight, then in the morning the sun came out and it all melted in a very short time. Apparently this was repeated for days on end. It lasted long enough for us to go back up to Kleine Scheidegg for a ride in the snow before returning to Sachseln.

Then came what has kept us so riveted on Switzerland - the place that to us is Switzerland although not one that tourists (or many railway enthusiasts) go to, but where we would go back tomorrow. The next day our plan had been to take the train to Italy, but we never got there as on the way we passed through and discovered Wassen. Abandoning the train at Göschenen we returned down the valley to this delightful place, eventually travelling there three times during the week. Our only concern was that work building the Motorway had just started and we feared this would spoil the valley and the place in general. I promised Marion I would take her back to this place again when we could afford it, so we could sit in the beautiful church and she could also sit on the fence and have her photo taken again. On retirement, after long service as a signaller and true to my word, we went back to Switzerland in 2005 and followed our honeymoon route. But of all the places revisited the view down the valley and the path around Wassen must remain our favourites. Fortunately the motorway did not seem to have spoiled it too much. When we returned again in 2006 an avalanche had closed the motorway and Wassen had returned to as it was in 1973 - quiet, with trains and cowbells being all you could hear. If we never go again we have our photographs to back up our fading memories. 



OPPOSITE PAGE

Top: Arriving at Luzern 21st Oct 1973.

Middle: Alpnachstad 15th Oct 1973.

Bottom: A north bound train leaves the Gotthard Tunnel at Göschenen 18th Oct 1973.

THIS PAGE

Top Left: A north bound freight below Wassen 18th Oct 1973.

Middle Left: Sachseln 14th October 1973

Bottom Left: Lungern 16th Oct 1973.

Top Right: Wengernalp 17th Oct 1973.

Top Middle Right: Wassen station 18th Oct 1973.

Bottom Middle Right: Wassen 20th Oct 1973.

Bottom Right: A TEE at Wassen 20th Oct 1973.

