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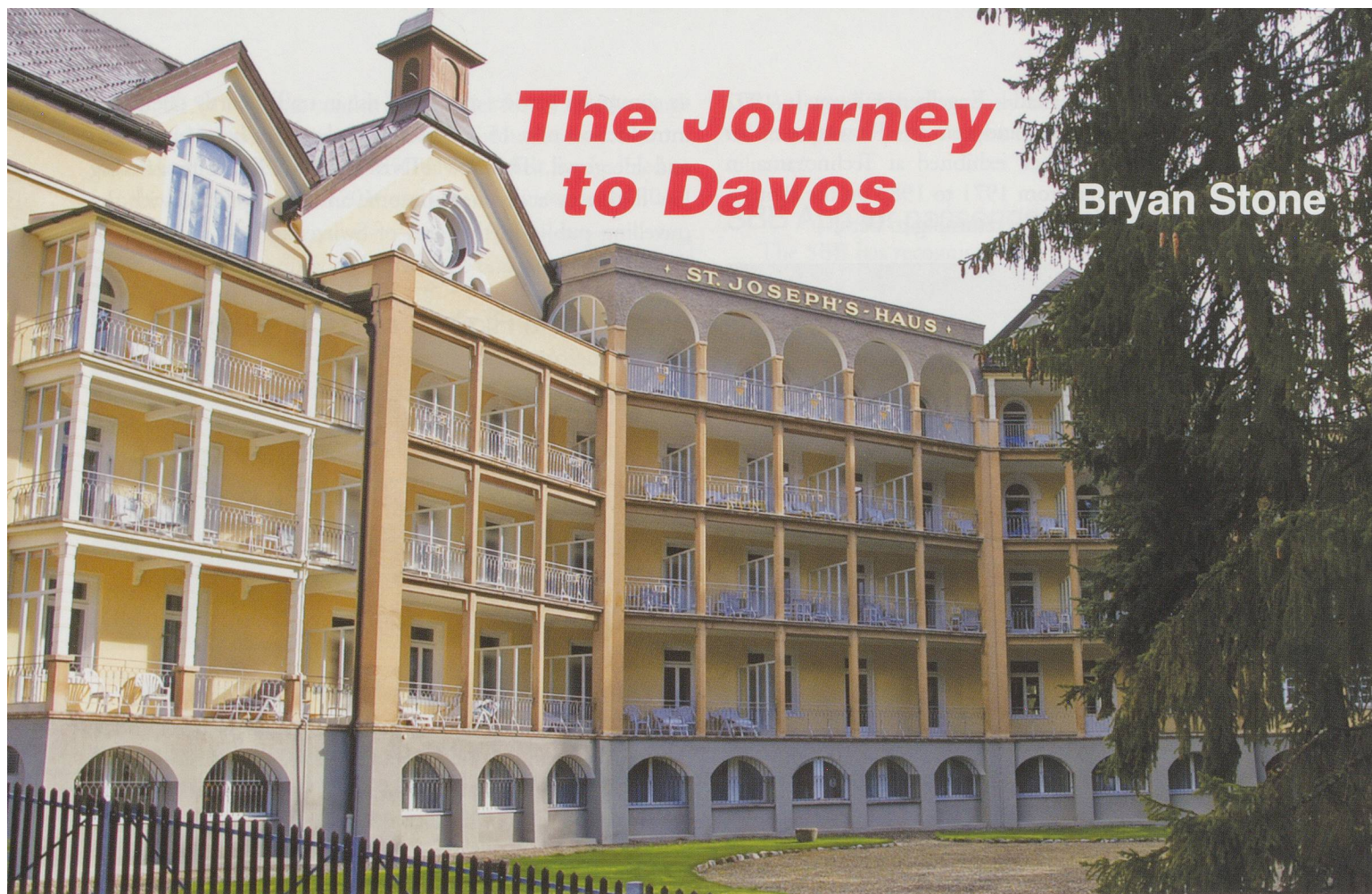
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The Journey to Davos

Bryan Stone



One of the former Davos sanatoriums.

Photo: Bremgarten

It is a truism that railways, which came late to Switzerland, opened up the Alps for the already developing tourism, but in Graubünden this happened some 30 years later than, for example, in the Berner Oberland or Lac Genève. The first railway in Graubünden, opened to Chur from Rorschach on Lake Constance in 1858 with connection to Zürich in 1859, was not for Alpine tourists.

It was planned by a London company, the Swiss South Eastern Railway, aiming at Italy via the Lukmanier Pass, to secure the 'Passage to India'. That company failed. The concession was bought by the Rothschild Bank in Paris, and a line was built as far as Chur, which would to this day remain the end of the SBB's main line. Graubünden, with St Gallen and eastern Switzerland, long continued to hope for the international Lukmanier transit, but in 1870 the Swiss Confederation, with Italy and Germany, decided on the Gotthard for the new Alpine crossing. When it opened in 1882, Graubünden was left aside; it lost its centuries-old pass and mule-track transit trade, thus suffering an economic disaster. But there was still that railway to Chur, and it called at Landquart, the point where the Prättigau, the valley from Klosters and Davos, emerged.

Davos, then a small high alpine village with a clear dry climate, was discovered and promoted in the 1850s by Dr Spengler from Germany, who noted on his travels that tuberculosis (or consumption), a highly infectious plague of Europe's dense and dirty cities, did not occur among the Davos people. There were no winter sports and the scenery is not distinguished. However, his observations

led to a sensation; here was perhaps a cure for tuberculosis patients. Dr Spengler met an enterprising and wealthy Dutchman, Willem Jan Holsboer, who married in 1865 an Englishwoman with tuberculosis. The Holsboers moved to Davos in 1867; she died, but he became a leading figure in the community, working with Dr Spengler, investing in and developing the potential of Davos. They saw a strong demand from wealthy patients, who came and, if they survived, stayed often for long periods in the new nursing homes that Holsboer promoted.

Willem Jan Holsboer.





RhB Ge4 4 I 603 arrives at a snowy Davos.

Photo: David Edwards

But getting there was very hard work, more than we today can imagine. It took some 7 to 10 hours by Post Coach to get from Landquart to Davos, or 12 hours from Chur, after a long journey, perhaps 30 hours from England via Calais and Basel. We have statistics for 1872, when 60,000 travellers alighted in Landquart. One third of these used the Post Coaches, that is 60 per day, or at least 5 to 8 coaches, and 5,000 took private carriages. These were the wealthy. It was an arduous trip, especially for the sick as it was nearly fifty steeply-climbing kilometres to Davos. Over half the passengers walked, presumably many of these were local people. Holsboer knew that only a connecting railway could bring relief.

Thus, almost thirty years after the main line to Chur had opened, he obtained in 1886, a Federal Concession to build a meter-gauge railway from Landquart. He obtained the finance, not from the Canton, but from private sponsors and all the communes en route, who also supplied most materials and stonework free. The line, still a scenic wonder, was opened in 1889 to Klosters and in 1890 up the steep 4.5% (1 in 22) climb via Calvadürli to Davos. That is why the RhB in 2014 celebrated its 125 years; the first little steam engine, 2-6-0T No.1, 'Rhätia', still exists and ran in summer 2014. The line was electrified in 1921, and the Ge6/6 crocodiles took over. Holsboer was not finished yet. His Rhätische Bahn, as it became, reached St Moritz and Scuol, and a glance at the map will show that it is in effect the Graubünden Cantonal Railway. As well as more hotels, he planned to build the railway beyond St Moritz, to Chiavenna in Italy; but that never quite happened. A bridge carrying the last

spur at the west end of St Moritz station, built to prepare the Chiavenna extension, was demolished in the present rebuilding works. Holsboer did not see the Albula/Engadine lines; he died in 1898, also missing the opening in 1900 of his Hotel Schatzalp, in Davos, later to become a legendary centre of luxury and, through Thomas Mann, also of literature.

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle came with his tubercular wife in 1893 and the two years following, they had therefore an almost new railway from Landquart, lifting Davos from its relative isolation. This, taking well over 3 hours, was much better than the Post Coach. In his last year, 1895, however, he might have enjoyed even more luxury. In that year, the Wagons-Lits Company, who used to run those wonderful blue coaches in European trains, introduced the 'Engadine Express', leaving Fridays from Calais to Chur and Saturdays back. It carried only First Class sleeping cars. It ran via Delle and Porrentruy to Basel, (as the Prussians had occupied Alsace in 1870), and took 22½ hours from London Victoria to Landquart. It was then one of the world's best trains, and connected with Holsboer's little railway. Holsboer would have loved that, as it offered the many titled and wealthy tuberculosis sufferers and their families a chance to prove how right he was. Conan Doyle also brought skiing to Davos, and fortunately Lady Conan Doyle recovered.

This article is based upon a presentation made by Bryan Stone at the 'Alpine Adventure' seminar held in Davos in September 2014. 