

Swiss news

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Swiss News

Gotthard Base Tunnel

The formal opening celebrations for the Gotthard Base Tunnel in June 2016 will be followed a few weeks later in August by a number of special, advertised trains run by SBB for the impatient. However, although scheduled services will formally start with the December 2016 timetable, SBB is anticipating that some scheduled service trains, perhaps up to three a day, will be routed through the new tunnel possibly as early as August 2016. These will be for test and instructional purposes and will not be advertised, resulting in those trains that get ahead of the timetable having to wait for their advertised path. Meanwhile in Ticino other improvements indirectly linked to the tunnel will include a major rebuilding of Lugano station, and another major project starting next year at Bellinzona.

Good news on the existing Gotthard

At long last TrenItalia has replaced its Class 470 Pendolini, which have up to the last caused so much grief to operators and passengers alike. They were replaced at the December 2015 timetable change by Class 610 units. The last Euro City workings (train Nos.153 and 158), using loco-hauled conventional stock, were also taken over by a Class 610. The SBB's Class 470 that were withdrawn in May were delivered in November 2015 to Thommen in Kaiseraugst to be scrapped.

Brig – SBB hand over signalling to BLS

Brig has for some years been a place to see signalboxes. They were wooden cabins, five in total (three at the station), and some still had some manual operation. After a serious freight train accident some four years ago, their shortcomings were severely criticised, and now they are finished. On 25th October the BLS took over from SBB responsibility for all signalling in Brig, when they commissioned Switzerland's biggest electronic signalling installation built at a cost of CHF67m. A new two-floor building houses the electronic control of some 180 points, 130 main signals and 200 miniature (shunting) signals. This installation, and all train movements around this busy location, are now controlled by the BLS Control Centre in Spiez. By 2022 all BLS train movements will be controlled from Spiez, while SBB will have just four control centres at Lausanne, Olten, Polleggio (Biasca) and Zürich Flughafen.

Accident between Yverdon and Ste Croix

A serious accident occurred on this metre-gauge line, part of the TRAVYS group, on October 2nd, when an empty and crewless train ran away on the upper part of the descending 4.4% (1: 24) gradient, travelling several Km. downhill out of control and finally derailed down a wooded hillside. The train was composed of a driving trailer and Be4/4 No.2. It had left Ste Croix at 07.45, and came to a stop 370m into the section, after an automatic emergency brake application had occurred. The driver, searching for an explanation, climbed out. After some minutes the train began to move on its own; the driver got on board, but found he was helpless to control it, and

jumped out. At Km 17, after crossing one train in Trois-Villes, the train derailed. What had happened is still not clear as this is written in December. The driver had properly warned by telephone, the control office, who had (as reported) then cut off the power. This however might have rendered a part of the braking system inoperative. The rest is a matter for the inquiry. It is likely that No.2 will have to be withdrawn. It was a miracle that no one was hurt; those who know the YStC will imagine how a collision might have been.

Tariffs and tickets

In November 460,000 GAs (General Abonnements - System Passes) were in use, along with some 2.2m Half-Fare passes. These are being integrated progressively, on their renewal, into the new red Swiss Pass - as described in the last *Swiss Express*. There were some teething troubles, some involving the scanning device that Conductors have to call up the details of the card, not otherwise visible, but which are needed to endorse the validity. This did not always work; a software problem was quickly spotted. More serious is that this process, safer when it works properly, is inevitably slower, as Conductors were quick to identify, and is obvious to interested passengers as the train crew move along a busy coach.

Rigi Record

During 2015 the RigiBahn (RB) carried a record 785,000 passengers, up 20% (or some 130,000) on the previous year, itself an all time record. Some 70% of those who used the system were Swiss and the Rigi, as one of the nation's favourite destinations, could be seen on its busiest day ever. This was the 12th July when 8,000 people used its trains on the occasion of the Rigi Wrestling Festival. Good summer and autumn weather, with some 5,000 people travelling on the 1st November, another record, also boosted the high numbers. The acceptance by the RB of the GA and SwissPass was also a factor.

Zürich Tramway Extension

On 22nd November the Zürich electorate voted in favour of a CHF750m project promoted by the VZB to construct the new Limmattal tram line. This will run from Zürich through Altstätten to the west, serving a dense and still growing quarter of new business and industrial development.

Brien-Rothorn Bahn – Steam Repairs in England

The boiler and firebox of BRB steam loco No. 7 built by SLM at Winterthur in 1936 is currently in England having major work undertaken on it by LNWR Heritage Company at Crewe. The 80 year old boiler was in need of a full refurbishment and the firebox was especially in need of treatment. This was originally of riveted construction although a welded replacement had been fitted some 40 years ago. The BRB wished to return these components to their original form of construction and after a Europe-wide search they chose the workshops at Crewe to undertake this task. Since its arrival in Cheshire over a year ago, the specialists have discovered other deep-seated faults that will need to be tackled, thus extending the period the assembly will be in their workshops and No. 7

will be out of service. Normally the BRB can manage most of its engineering work in-house, but the scope of the work needed on this locomotive required them to go to an outside contractor, and it appears that LNWR HC is apparently one of the few organisations still with the skills available to replicate riveted construction of this type of equipment.

LEB improvement plans

The metre-gauge line of Chemin de fer Lausanne-Échallens-Bercher (LEB), running from Lausanne 23 km northwards to Berchre in Vaud, has submitted an application to the Federal Office of Transport to build a 1.4 km long railway tunnel under Avenue d'Échallens in Lausanne. The current single line runs along a busy street and there have been frequent collisions between the train and cars and cyclists. The line in the tunnel would be doubled as far as Chauderon, from where a double-track to Flon is already in place. Although improving safety this will result in the closure of the Montétan stop. Planning consent is expected in 2017 with the tunnel ready in 2020. As a temporary measure to improve safety, buses will no longer run in the same lane as trains. In 2015 it is forecast that LEB will carry 3.6m passengers – an impressive 53% increase in ten years. The growth has not been without drawbacks; there are regular complaints about overcrowding and impolite personnel. According to a union spokesman, some of the employees have not taken well to the transfer of the LEB to the overall control of TL, which happened in 2013. To improve the frequency and the capacity of the passenger service some CHF300m is being spent on the line over the next five years, half of which will be spent on the Ave. d'Échallens tunnel. Some of this investment has been in constructing the viaduct at Cery - Fleur-de-Lys at Prilly that was opened in October 2015 enabling the removal of a level crossing. A further bridge replacing a level crossing will be commissioned in 2017 at Lussex. Also between Ripes and Etagnières a passing loop will be built to extend the four trains an hour service to Échallens. Currently 'La Brouette' ('The Wheelbarrow' as the LEB is sometimes referred-to) runs every 15-minutes to Cheseaux, with every second train running to Bercher. Ten new trains are also to be acquired by 2025.

Genève Tram Line 15, extension to Saint-Julien-en-Genève

Line 13 of the erstwhile CGTE tram system ran from Genève across the border to Saint-Julien-en-Genève in France until 1938. In recent years there have been several steps forward, and many backwards, to restore the tram connection to cater for the ever growing number of 'frontaliers'. There have been communiqués signed by the local communities and by Berne and Paris, about making the Genève Region truly integrated, but getting things done on the ground has often been slow. In November 2015 Canton Genève announced that it would not be in a position to finance projects in France anymore, thus risking blocking the budget set-aside by the Confederation. However, in December it was announced that an agreement in principle has been found between all the parties, to extend the TPG Line 15 to Saint-Julien-en-Genève, subject to the formal approval process that is expected to be completed by the summer of 2016. In 2019

trams would continue from Line 15's current terminus in Palettes to Plan-les-Ouates, and in 2023 to Saint-Julien-en-Genève. The budget for the project is CHF235m.

Cornavin Extension

An important document signed in Genève in late 2015 was an agreement to build the two underground platforms planned for the redevelopment of the City's Cornavin station. The existing station will soon run out of capacity with the coming of the '*Leman Express*', together with the planned increased services under the '*Leman 2030*' proposals, eastwards towards Lausanne and westwards towards La Plaine. The current capacity of Cornavin is 20 trains/hour, increasing with these additional two tracks to 28 per hour. First it was proposed to build additional platforms above ground on the north side of the station, but this was strongly opposed by local residents, as many buildings would have to be demolished. The City and Canton then agreed to pay the additional costs of the underground option, but there was a funding gap that is now finally closed. The budget is CHF1.6 billion, with CHF1 billion coming from Berne. The CFF/SBB was against the underground option because it is more complex to construct and takes much longer. The construction is planned to start in the next few years and to finish 2031, much later than needed for the planned additional services.

CEVA - Open Days, Delays and Security

Some 32,000 visitors took the advantage to visit eight different construction and exhibition sites of the CEVA project in Genève, during 'Open Days' over the weekend of 26th - 27th September 2015. In addition to the representatives of the project organisation, contractors, CFF, TPG, and local authorities, there were several local organisations ranging from food producers to theatre groups present. To complicate even further the already delayed CEVA project, the commune of Lancy has launched an appeal against the construction of the Lancy-Pont-Rouge station, as a tactical move to pressure the Canton on a separate planning issue adjacent to the future station. If there is no compromise, the appeal then risks delaying the construction of the station (and also the doubling of the service between Coppet and Lancy-Pont-Rouge) by one year to 2018. This however should not further delay the overall CEVA project which is two years behind the original plan, due to unexpected challenges in constructing the Champel tunnel. On the positive side, there was a breakthrough in the first of the CEVA tunnels - Pinchat - in October 2015. Although the opening of the '*Leman Express*' service is still almost four years away, a French-Swiss joint committee to manage the security and the customs procedures on the line has already been set up.

New CEO for the RhB

The Board of Directors of the Rhätische Bahn have elected Dr. Renato Fasciati as the organisation's new CEO, with his appointment taking effect from Summer 2016. Dr. Fasciati is a 40-year old economist who has been the successful head of Zentralbahn since 2011. He grew up in the Engadin and his CV notes that he has been interested in railways since his childhood. He will succeed Herr Amacher who is seriously ill and sadly had to relinquish his post in the autumn of 2015.

The resignation of Herr Amacher was a serious blow to the RhB as he was really getting hold of the company, which is a mixture of public institution, private undertaking and instrument of political policy. It has a considerable number of stakeholders, all with their own agendas, and it is in the middle of a major modernisation.

Rochers de Naye joins the GA

From the introduction of the national timetable change on the 16th December 2015 the Rochers de Naye Mountain railway, now part of the MOB/MVR group, marketed as the 'Goldenpass' system, will join the General Abo (GA) network. It is assumed that their management has seen the surge in passengers choosing to travel on the Rigi Bahn once it began to allow the GA to be used on its routes.

Appenzeller Bahnen

Two of the Swiss Express editorial team were visiting North East Switzerland in early November, only to find that their scheduled journey on the Strub-rack equipped line from Altstätten Stadt to Gais was not provided a train, but a bus! It was a beautiful ride climbing out of the foggy Rhein valley along quiet country roads into gorgeous late autumn sunshine, but they had intended otherwise. The 'bustitution' lasted 3-weeks, from 24th October to 17th November and resulted from the discovery of hairline cracks in the axles of both BDeh 4/4 railcars Nos. 16 & 17, dating from 1993, that are specific to this section of line. Whilst en-route it became apparent that the AB had taken advantage of the unexpected closure to do maintenance work on some lineside facilities, including grade crossings. The comfortable high-floor coach that substituted for the train was not very user-friendly for some of the less-able local people who had turned-up clutching their weekly shopping, or for the passenger with his cycle.

Gotthard Derailment

At 19.25 on 18th December the two leading wagons of a freight train were derailed (for reasons unknown at the time of writing), in a tunnel between Bodio and Lavorgo. Various freight and passenger services were cancelled or stopped, including ECs between Milano and Zürich. Although bus substitutes were quickly organised long delays occurred. The weather was fortunately good. At 09.15 the following morning SBB announced that the line was again open.

NStCM improves its service

With the December 2015 timetable change the Nyon-St-Cergue-Morez (NStCM) metre-gauge line in Canton Vaud made a significant increase to its service – roughly 40% more train km. There are now four trains an hour, two from Nyon to Genolier Monday to Friday, and two trains an hour to St-Cergue, with one continuing to the end of the line at La Cure on the French border. At a time when train companies elsewhere are removing First Class accommodation either due to lack of demand; for ideological reasons; or to increase capacity, NStCM has reintroduced First Class seating to improve its service. It is available in both the brand new Stadler ABe 4/8 and in the older refurbished units, except in the early

morning La Cure to St-Cergue services where a second unit is coupled on the way to Nyon.

All-change on the AOMC

The Transports Publics du Chablais (TPC) line between Aigle, Monthey and Champéry (AOMC) is to be closed between July and October 2016 with the re-opening planned for early November. This is to enable reconstruction of the line involving two main elements; converting the Strub rack-and-pinion above Monthey to the Abt system, already installed on the Aigle – Leysin (AL) and Bex-Villars-Bretaye (BVB) sections of the TPC, and converting the operation from 850V dc to 1500V dc, the voltage used on its AL and the Aigle-Sepey-Diablerets (ASD) lines. After completion, the whole TPC system can be operated by standard rolling stock. Seven GTW Beh 2/6 units, Nos.400 to 406, are now being built by Stadler. The old rolling stock will all be withdrawn, with two exceptions: Beh 4/8 Nos.591-592, built in 2001, will be modernised and converted to Abt rack operation. Later, further new trains for the BVB will also be obtained. At least one withdrawn power unit will survive. Of the former BTB/BLT Be4/4 units Nos.101-105, bought second-hand when the BLT was totally renewed in 1982, some are already out of use. One unit will be selected for return in late 2016 to Basel-Land, to be given to Pro-BTB, the preservation society of the Basel – Rodersdorf line.

Off the BLS beaten track

It is understood that the 8.57km long Weissenstein tunnel on the heavily loss-making Moutier – Solothurn secondary line through the Jura is to receive a minimal repair to maintain services up to 2020. The costly serious renovation of the tunnel, and rebuilding measures required for safety at stations on the line, will now be suspended awaiting a decision on the long term future of this route. Possibly another line that should be travelled before it is too late. Economic basket cases are no longer sacrosanct in Switzerland.

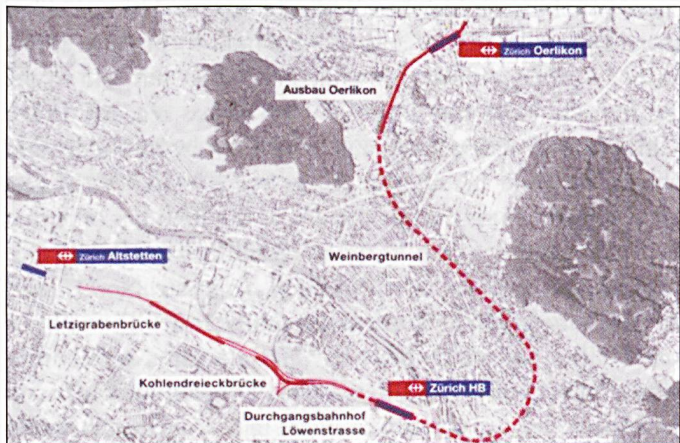
Potential Fare Increases

According to Swiss Public Transport Association (the VöV) spokesman Ueli Stückelberger SBB train fares are expected to increase by around 3% at the end of 2016, although a definite decision has not yet been made. However Stückelberger shares SBB's CEO Andreas Meyer's concerns that permanent price increases may make travelling by public transport less attractive, and also could result in the railway losing more long distance passenger traffic to the recently liberalised Express Coach market.

Zürich Durchmesserlinie

Stage Two of the Zürich Durchmesserlinie (DML) cross-city link was formally inaugurated on 26th October by BAV (Federal Office of Transport) Director Peter Füglistaler, Canton Zürich Councillor Carmen Walker-Späh, and SBB's CEO Andreas Meyer. The 9.6km link across the centre of Zürich then came into full commercial operation on the 13th December timetable change - the most comprehensive new timetable since 2004. The new link has enabled the

introduction of a third hourly long-distance service from Zürich to St Gallen as well as changes to various S-Bahn operations giving a potential frequency of 24trains/hour. In addition to its long underground section the DML includes two major new structures: the 394m long Kohlendreieckbrücke and the 1156m long Letzigrabenbrücke. This offers spectacular views across the city from its highest point. Stage One of the DML opened last June and included the new Löwenstrasse station situated beneath the existing Hauptbahnhof. The total cost of this major addition to Zürich's rail infrastructure, that took some eight years to complete, is some CHF2.1 billion, with the BAV funding 2/3rds and the Canton 1/3rd. There is still some upgrading work to be finished at the Oerlikon end of the new line. This should be completed in 2017.



Map from SBB

Older readers may recall that Kohlendreieck - literally 'coal triangle' - was the corner of Zürich's Loco. Depot where the C5/6s and E3/3s and others, were serviced in the open; tenders filled with the coal and were stabled. A vantage point to photograph them was always on the left side of a departing Schaffhausen train, but that was also in the days of heads out of open windows. Now the Kohlendreieck Bridge goes across this location. It is pleasing that SBB have not forgotten.

Basel Trams - Crossing Frontiers

November saw the 'first sod' ceremony to build the 3km extension of BVB Line 3, from Bourgfelden Grenze (on the French frontier) to St-Louis SNCF station. This should be complete with two years. The extension of Line 8 from Kleinhüningen to Weil am Rhein, in Germany will carry 2.8m passengers in its first year, over half of whom are new passengers. There is however a snag as only 10% of these are commuters from Weil and district into Basel, the main justification for building the line. Absence of the promised, but unrealised Park-and-Ride facility in Weil am Rhein is partly the reason for this. The success includes, somewhat embarrassingly, a substantial number of Basler who are using Line 8 to reach the almost North American-style shopping centres on the German side. The already tempting price differences accentuated by exchange rate shifts and refunded value added tax, have generated a trade that has seriously hurt Swiss shops. At least the trams are full of people who might (as many others do) use cars, which would have made the current situation worse, but some fear the point is being missed somewhere. Operations are also disturbed as

cars and trams in Weil do not mix; trams are delayed, often being cut short in Basel (usually at Bahnhof SBB) to get back on schedule. That however means that the southern end of the route, serving busy residential districts, gets an unpredictable service. Although the overall service frequency has been increased in an attempt to resolve the situation these problems have yet to be resolved. Given that prices in France are also considerably lower than in Switzerland this could be a problem-in-waiting for the Line 3 extension.

Stadler expands

Even before the ink had dried on Der Beobachter's article in the December Swiss Express, which commented upon the problems in some sections of the European rolling stock building industry, it was announced that Vossloh had agreed to sell its Valencia, Spain-based Rail Vehicles operation to Stadler for €48m, with the Swiss company also expected to take over debt liabilities amounting to €124m. The Rail Vehicles business makes both locomotives and trams and is supplying seven tram-trains for use on Sheffield's Supertram network. Having already supplied trams to London's Croydon Tramlink this will be the second toehold that Stadler will have in the UK rail equipment market. Stadler already has a successful range of tram equipment available so it can be expected that there may be some rationalisation in that area. However Stadler has never previously been in the standard-gauge heavy locomotive market so its move into this area will be interesting.

More frequent wheel checks

SBB has announced that it is to examine the wheels of its trains more frequently and bring in quicker replacement of those damaged by wear and tear. Trains will be monitored while travelling and any defective wheels replaced/repaired during regular maintenance every two weeks, rather than every four months. This action is linked to SBB's plans to install monitoring devices on its lines to facilitate better planning, in order to avoid units potentially being out of action for a long period of time. The devices will cost several hundred thousand Swiss francs per installation.

A 'Warn-App' for Train Drivers

Readers will recall that several accidents have occurred in recent years, where a driver has left a station although the signal for the move was at danger. There are various reasons why this happened, and not all signals are so protected that an unauthorised move is automatically stopped in time to avoid danger. A measure now introduced should reduce this potential problem. It is a 'Warn-App' installed on the officially issued Tablet device of the driver, which takes a signal from the Rail Control System of the automatic signalling. When this detects that a driver is making an unauthorised move, it sets off an audible and visual warning. The system only functions in automatically controlled stations. It is not a 'signalling system' and does not interfere in the train movement, but warns the driver that they need to think again. The official Tablet already includes details of working timetables; speeds and limits; other rules, and is fed continuously with train speeds, accelerations and braking, this data all being used to prepare a warning signal to the driver.



'd/s St Urs' on a misty Aare.

Photo: Mario Gavazzi

Historic Steamship on the Aare.

During the period of Solothurn's Christmas Market last December, one of Switzerland's oldest steam operated ships 'd/s St Urs' was operating on the River Aare far away from its current home on the Urner See, the southern arm of the Vierwaldstättersee. The tiny two-cylinder screw-driven ship was built in Hamburg in 1889 originally for service on the Aare. As it is in private ownership it is not licenced to take fare-paying passengers, but was giving free rides in anticipation of possible donations to the Winterthur Steam Centre. The ship is like a cat surviving nine lives, as it started life on the Aare and the Jura Lakes, then moved to other locations including Luzern and the Sarner See, where it was converted to operation and re-named 'Volta', used as a tow boat, and passed through many owners before becoming derelict. Although the original engine and boiler of the 9m long, 2m wide ship was long-since lost, Thomas and Antoinette Schmid-Blösch from Solothurn, and Esther and Martin Schmid-Gall from Luzern, took on the task of almost complete renovation. They managed to source equivalent replacements (the 'new' engine being built by Samuel Whites at East Cowes, IoW, in 1898) as well as finding essential plans, drawings and other documents associated with the original build. The ship's second maiden voyage took place in 2006.



Old BLT Tram out of service at Rodersdorf. Photo: Bryan Stone

BLT trams for Serbia.

Seen on December 30th, on a spare track at the BLT's Line 10 Rodersdorf terminal, were recently withdrawn trams Be4/6 Nos.106 and 115 being prepared for dispatch on 4th January

to Belgrade. These units were part of a batch built by SWP between 1971 & 1976 originally for the Birseckbahn. That night they travelled to the Dreispitz Depot where they were loaded on to rail wagons for the trip to Serbia.

Brienz-Rothorn Bahn – Diesel Locomotives

Although the BRB relies upon steam locomotives to handle regular operations, its three diesel locomotives also work hard. They are used on duplicate/overload trains on the good weather days when crowds turn up, or they handle trains in exceptional conditions like locomotive defects. It is then that they are unloved as most people go to Brienz for steam, although there are many passengers who don't mind as they come for the view. The diesels also power the works trains, and you will usually meet one of these somewhere on the mountain. The two oldest diesel-hydraulics Nos. 9 and 10 were built by Steck in Bowil in 1975, along with the erstwhile No. 8 that was sold to the Rochers de Naye line in 1996. No 10 has recently had a CHF600,000 general overhaul, carried out by its builder and should be good for another 30 years. Whether No 9 gets similar treatment is not yet decided as the BRB has other big expenses pending, such as the overhaul of steam loco No.7 detailed above. There is a third diesel-hydraulic, No.11, built in 1987 also by Steck, which is also on the roster. I saw No.11 on one hot and memorable day at Rothorn Kulm with a generator car, when the power system of the summit restaurant had failed and the guests were there in force. Of such is also the mountain railway way-of-life!

Eurovapor Sulgen

'It never rains but it pours' sometimes seems an ironic truth. The frames and running gear of the restored 2-10-0 C5/6 No.2969 were severely scorched in the Ballenberg (Interlaken) Depot fire in November 2013, when they were almost ready to be returned to Sulgen for reuniting with the boiler. Through a lot of dedicated work that incident had been overcome and the locomotive was well in hand for the fitting of a number of carefully prepared smaller parts. Then on 14th June 2015 a severe thunderstorm caused the usually harmless Wiesenbach to burst its banks resulting in the Sulgen workshops having 17cm of flood water, mud and refuse deposited in them. The prepared components were then back to zero, with some going for scrap, although others could be reworked. Fortunately, the loco itself escaped further damage, but it was a heart breaking moment for the Sulgen Eurovapor team. Another financial appeal, more hours of hard work, and it now looks as if a first steaming in mid-2016 can still be achieved.

Connections and punctuality

We all know the problem. An advertised connection (clearly shown in the Swiss timetable) means that a waiting train is held for a delayed arrival, on another platform. Loudspeaker apologies are made. Those arriving are happy. Those waiting are less so. The waiting train may then start late and be further delayed. Carefully planned crossings on single-lines are disrupted. The ripples spread across the railway pond, until many trains, far afield, are all delayed. PostAutos wait, passengers miss their trams, or even flights and so on. Who

decides what's best? In fact, there is a laid down set of instructions, but finally decisions have to be made. In 2014 the SBB assured 97% of booked connections. A result was that 12% of SBB passengers had more than 3 minutes delay. The position is deteriorating as SBB has a widely dispersed schedule of track work demanding single-line working and speed restrictions. A possible solution is to break, deliberately, connections where alternatives are present, such as half-hourly (or more frequent) services. This would annoy some passengers much more, but would improve the performance for all of the others. It's a play-off. To begin with in the new December 2015 timetable some vulnerable services will be getting more running time. However, in the triangle Bern-Zürich-Basel, where there are frequently several trains per hour on each route, a controlled experiment took place in the period up to the mid-December change, of letting trains depart on time regardless of delayed connections. The object was to achieve a better overall performance and it will be interesting to learn the outcome and reaction to this. Guaranteed transport connections have almost been written into Swiss law in the past!

Changes in user charges

In December 2015 the Swiss Parliament announced that it is planning to decrease infrastructure access charges for passenger traffic in order to encourage more rail transport. However, from the beginning of 2017 the distance-based heavy goods vehicle transit fee will be increased, in order to compensate for this decrease in infrastructure charges for passenger trains.

Switzerland – Belgium Nostalgia


With the opening of the LGV between Baudrecourt – Vendenheim on the 3rd April, completing the TGV Paris Strasbourg route, the last two express trains between Brussels and Basel will disappear. This was a classic historic European route with night sleeping and couchette trains, at least two daily trains, and for many years also two TEE services. At the Swiss end they went on to serve Zürich, Interlaken, and Brig at different times. The SNCB always tried to hijack the trade with Britain, with lower fares from Oostende rather than direct via Calais or Boulogne and through France. After the use of the line through Delle fell away, Thionville-Strasbourg-Basel was also the routing of the Calais – Switzerland day and night trains. With seasonal extras it was very busy. Now Luxembourg-Brussels-Oostende, once the home of Flamme Pacifics on the 'Trains Suisses', remains a Belgian main line; and Basel-Strasbourg is a Region Alsace fast shuttle service. The new TGV will however give a new fast route between London and Switzerland, with changing stations in Paris via a short walk between Nord and Est perhaps being less disagreeable than Nord to Gare de Lyon by overcrowded RER.

Jungfrauoch hits 1 million in 2015

For the first time in its over 100 year history the Jungfraubahn carried over 1 million visitors to the Jungfrauoch in one year. German tourist Franziska Voigt became the millionth person to be carried to Europe's highest station in 2015 on the morning of 30th December. As she disembarked from the 08.00 from Kleine Scheidegg she was met by Urs Kessler the JB's CEO and was presented with a lifetime pass for the JB Group.

Thoughts on privatisation

Last November Switzerland held its 4-yearly national elections. Party shifts included one or two changes favouring the conservative right wing, at least in the lower house. The Ständerat, the upper house, was virtually unchanged. One fringe effect was that certain peripheral lobbying interests again spoke of the potential for railway privatisation. *Swiss Express* readers should be under no illusion, this is not a serious theme, and will not be one in today's Switzerland. Although there are many 'independent' railways in Switzerland, except in some mountain resorts, few are truly private but are owned by Cantonal or other public bodies and the Confederation pays a large part of the infrastructure costs. The last *Swiss Express* contained my note that Federal transport policy now has no interest in separating track and operations for SBB's vertically integrated business. For those operators such as SBB and BLS with transit and national obligations, open access for freight traffic already allows independent freight operators to run their own services under track access arrangements. There is no chance at present of the necessary obligatory public vote allowing part or whole privatisation of SBB or BLS. Privatisation, as took place in Britain, is still broadly regarded in mainland Europe as a public warning to others contemplating such action, and the Swiss have little interest in allowing 'open access', franchised or concessionary passenger services. A case might be made for SBB Cargo International, but one notes that among its competitors DB-Schenker is dominant, but this organisation is firmly in German government hands and is actively buying up 'independent' freight operators where it can. As for the infrastructure, even the president of the main Conservative party has confirmed his view that rail infrastructure is a 'natural public monopoly' and must remain a federal responsibility.

Swiss News is compiled by Bryan Stone and includes input from, Michael Donovan, s'Murmeli, Mario Gravazzi, Ilkka Huotelin, and others. 

 **Swiss Tip: Good ideas and information about Switzerland from travellers.**

FOR anyone on holiday in the Jungfrau Region contemplating the walk from First to Grosses Scheidegg, a 'package ticket' is available from the Firstbahn station in Grindelwald. This covers the Firstbahn cable car one-way and the bus back from Grosses Scheidegg. You get 50% off with the Swiss Travel Pass, the reduced price in 2015 being CHF27.40. 