

## THE GLACIER EXPRESS

### **A sinuous train journey from St Moritz to Zermatt.**

*(The Sunday Telegraph, 2003)*

To a non-skier, the names St Moritz and Zermatt are rich with glamour and reproach. In theory, yes, you could pitch up at either and jostle with the downhill racers for glasses of gluhwein; but without being able to brag about black runs and off-piste mayhem, you are going to feel pretty small. What you need is an excuse to be there – one which sounds, in its own way, rather quirky and buccaneering; and the Glacier Express supplies this. Mention casually that your seven-and-a-half hour journey between the two resorts will take you across 291 bridges and through 91 tunnels, and you may find Jean-Claude Killy buying you a drink.

If the route were operated by a British company, it would be a genuinely harrowing experience, involving several days stranded in a mountain pass with only a triangle of Toblerone between you and starvation. But Swiss railways are such a different proposition to our own that, when you travel on them, you half believe you have been abducted by aliens. The staff are friendly and multilingual; the windows are so clean that they might have been fitted that morning; the trains, miracle of miracles, run on time.

St Moritz in summer may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it is a very agreeable one. The only people hurtling downhill are mountain bikers; the swanky shopfronts – Prada, Armani, Bulgari – doze in the sunshine, dreaming of Marbella and St Tropez. At the five-star Suvretta House hotel, the views of the mountains and Lac Champfer are startling even without the snow, and a shining period charabanc stands ever ready to ferry guests to and from the railway station.

Waiting for the Glacier Express to depart, I watched the mist slowly clear from the neighbouring mountains in an early-morning dance of the seven veils. Japanese tourists filed between the tall stacks of luggage to board a jazzy Pullman coach which they had ingeniously commandeered; the rest of us divided ourselves between the standard and the panoramic coaches. Before long we were admiring the blackness of the Albula Tunnel, three and a half miles long and – at almost 6,000 feet – the highest in Switzerland.

In an age when Kilimanjaro and the Himalayas beckon across the shrunken world, it is too easy to be blasé about the Alps. The advantage of a railway journey is that you can dwell on their grandeur, and marvel at them much as travellers on the Grand Tour did 200 years ago. As the train slalomed downwards, we gawped at rough-hewn peaks, teaming waterfalls, giddy glacial ravines, and palisades of rock that nudged the clouds.

The remarkable thing about the Swiss, of course, is the obsessive neatness that they bring to their immediate surroundings, in instinctive defiance of this anarchic terrain. The villages we passed were models of civic order, their red-tiled roofs clustered around picturesque churches with pencil-sharp steeples; the meadows were immaculately mown, as if expecting a visit from the *Sound of Music* Appreciation Society.

Between the end of the Albula Tunnel and Bergün, the line drops 400 yards in the space of three miles, and every kind of stratagem – loop tunnels, bridges, viaducts – is used to overcome the gradient as the tracks twist and turn back upon themselves. By the end, you have some idea of blueberry muffin's feelings as it makes its way down your lower intestine.

The journey is punctuated with announcements over the train's PA system, pointing out places of interest and explaining trifling delays.

('We are waiting at this crossing for another train to pass; thank you for your patience' – can you imagine hearing that in Britain?) After Thusis we entered the Domleschg Valley 'with its many little castles and strongholds' – and there indeed was one of them, perching on an apparently unassailable rock as if posing for a Durer print.

The single annoyance of the trip was being dragooned into the dining car for lunch at 11.30; but whenever you eat, it is important not to scoff too much, otherwise you may doze off and miss some of the most beguiling scenery. While others devoured their chicken curry, I feasted my eyes on the confluence of the upper and lower Rhine, and watched the broad, rock-rippled waters race along the ensuing gorge.

At Dienstis we paused by the enormous Benedictine monastery – the Wembley Stadium of Swiss baroque – take on an engine better equipped to deal with the even steeper slopes ahead. It hauled us gamely up to the Oberalp Pass, the highest point of our journey, past music-box chalets and banks awash with wild flowers.

At the top – 2,000 metres above sea level – we found a long, narrow lake dotted with fishermen, and followed a meandering mountain stream until the gentle slopes opened up into the Urserental Valley. As we began the spectacular descent to Andermatt, a herd of Alpine cattle monitored our progress, with bells the size of tea-cosies clanking at their necks.

One of the agreeable things about the Glacier Express is being able to open the windows wide to breathe the mountain air. This can, however, have its disadvantages, as I discovered when my window met the trajectory of a powerful sprinkler which was arcing over a field. In the best slapstick tradition, the water sailed straight into the carriage and soaked me to the skin.

After the nine-mile Furka Tunnel, the train wound down towards the Rhone Valley, entering rougher country where cruel escarpments –

crowded with broken silver birches and ragged pines – slid down to the boulder-strewn river. At Brig (whose seventeenth-century palace, the Stockalper, is considered the finest in Switzerland) the final leg of the journey began: leaving the valley with its neatly terraced vineyards, we climbed steeply upwards along the Saastal Gorge towards Zermatt. This was a landscape worthy of Turner, with plummeting waterfalls, grey wastes of broken rock, and glaciers to the left and right. The Dom, the highest mountain in Switzerland, loomed in the distance – and then at last the Matterhorn, with that distinctive twist to its silhouette, like the Scottish Widow looking coquettishly over her shoulder.

After such a journey, you feel that you deserve a reception committee, so I took it as my due that a horse-drawn van and liveried coachman should be waiting to carry me off to the luxury of the Grand Hotel Zermatterhof. (Motor vehicles are not allowed in Zermatt – which is not to say that you do not stand a good chance of being knocked over by one of the electric trucks which whiz stealthily up and down the tourist-thronged streets.) That night, as I lay in my four-poster bed, I felt smugly one-up on the friends who had braved blizzards and crevasses over the years to bore me with their skiing photographs; and I dozed off wondering where on my car my ‘St Moritz – Top of the world’ sticker should be displayed for maximum effect.