

TRANS EUROP EXPRESS

Charlotte de Gohan

The Grey Mouse is a star again.

Following an eight-month renovation the museum train is once again fully in operation. The European luxury train from the 1960s is resplendent in original radiance and glamour.

Zurich

The chance to experience a trip in one of the grandest and luxurious trains came unexpectedly. The cause: A letter sent by RailAway. Ruedi and myself being avid train travellers naturally thought the idea of doing a trip that combines nostalgia and luxury would be an ideal way to spend a day. It meant taking a day off from work and I definitely needed to have a break from writing my next novel. Ruedi is on a pension though he still keeps very busy. A further reason is that we've been on organised train trips with RailAway before and have always enjoyed them. The letter states that we will have a Swiss train history experience. The comeback of the legendary TEE – Trans Europ Express Gottardo.

Weather-wise the forecast for today is for the hottest day in the long history of Switzerland. We have to be at the Zurich Main Station by 09.00. At 0830 we arrive. A new Italian coffee bar, *Spettacolo* is at the head of the platform where we drink a surprisingly tasty coffee. Soon more activity is on the platform. Musicians arrive with their instruments. A red carpet is placed on the ground at the entrance to the platform. A man sweeps it for no less than a full ten minutes! He could probably give a few people a lesson. By the time it turns 09.00, it looks like official visitors or someone famous is expected. The TEE arrives at 09.09. René Kamer the Marketing kingpin for RailAway welcomes us first. He's a good friend of ours. I receive the customary three kisses from him and Ruedi a hearty handshake. While we walk over the red carpet a camera is trained on us. I feel my confidence showing with a wide brimmed black hat on my head, wearing a black and white sleeveless dress, white sandals and a white handbag is hanging from my shoulder. A little further on a waitress offers us an exotic fruit drink. By now persons mill around the platform amongst photographers and staff. Some of the passengers started the journey in the TEE in Berne early this morning. The remaining ones in Zurich. The atmosphere is easy to analyse. Smiling eyes looking forward to the day, voices chatting, bodies simply circulating or standing still with the fruit drink in their hand. Most people are

over sixty, fewer over thirty. The way people dress has always fascinated me. So it isn't unusual for me to describe the clothes that today not surprisingly go from casual, sportive to reasonably elegant dresses, suits and ties. If the weather forecasters were right how long will the ties stay on? Evergreen tunes fill the air. Photographers naturally do their job. One is photographing people while they pose in front of the shining engine in the original designed colours of cream and strawberry. The whole train is in the same colour scheme. A man approaches us. We find out from him that today his function is the treasurer, comparable to the Master of Ceremonies and that this particular trip is organised in conjunction with RailAway and the historical section of the *SBB* (Swiss National Railway) where he works in Strategies / Marketing / Communications / Events.

According to the program the TEE will leave Zurich at 09.40. The doors have remained open since the arrival of the train. Ruedi has already deposited his briefcase on our reserved seats. On one of these trips you never know whom you will meet. It's still early so we relax and walk the length of the TEE. The carriages include the restaurant with a bar, a piano lounge and three first class passenger carriages. The musicians stop playing. One after the other passengers climb the two steps at the carriage door, disappearing inside. René Kamer comes to talk to us while we wait the few minutes it needs until there is a break in the line. The musicians carry their instruments along the platform to another carriage.

We require no effort to feel the comfort of our seats. The TEE is known to be famous for its luxurious service. From other experiences with RailAway I'd be amazed and also upset if today turned out any different. Movement of the train is a sign that we are leaving the station. Through the loudspeaker a man's clear voice welcomes us on board, then he tells us we will be travelling mostly on the track used by the goods trains, what special scenery we should look out for coming up soon and that in the restaurant and bar coffee and croissants are being served. Ruedi and I make our way through the restaurant to the next section, the bar. Here the musicians are playing reputable tunes. We stand at the bar drinking fruit juices and listening to the pleasant music. Now and then I glance at the musicians. They're obviously enjoying themselves. The TEE accelerates its speed. Immediately the vibration, the rocking is felt that makes it necessary to hold the brass rod attached to the outer side of the bar. Our drink glasses are thankfully empty. I tell Ruedi we should go back to our seat. In the restaurant a table is occupied by René Kamer and his team. René introduces us to the three people, all women. Hands are shaken together with it's a pleasure to meet you, or it's good to see you again. Eventually we take leave and end up in our seats. The Master of Ceremonies is in the carriage distributing nametags to everyone. Minutes later a tall, thin, curly blond haired brazenfaced man decorated in

an unusual one-piece overall in white breezes into the carriage. An old brass alarm clock is attached to his right shoulder. When he speaks a perfect sounding Dutch accent comes through clearly in his German. A nameplate gives us his name as Goegi. Ruedi is never shy to ask where a person comes from. Goegi's answer gives me something to think about. What I end up deciding is that he must be an actor. I'd first noticed him and his obviously actress companion on the platform before the TEE left Zurich. Her getup has me tickled pink. It reminds me of what a clown might wear. A crazy conglomeration of colourful clothes, feathers stuck to her even crazier hairstyle that bob up and down as she moves. They are present to make sure the passengers are kept happy and good-humoured. From what I've witnessed so far, they are both doing a good job.

Ruedi takes a postcard from his briefcase. It's a postcard that one can speak a message instead of simply writing one. A tiny microphone makes it possible. He informs me he is going to Beatrice Schertenleib with the postcard and will record what he intends to say in her presence. Beatrice is the person who contacted us about the trip and is part of René Kamer's team. I use the time he's away to check out the scenery. Sunshine is bathing everything in a bright light. Paddocks filled with black faced sheep or black and white *Fribourgeois* (a bilingual Swiss state) black and white cows munching fresh looking grass. Green is present everywhere I look. Mountains grace the background. The TEE moves fast to its next stop called *Erstfeld* 80 kilometres from Zurich. It's probably due to the fact that we are on the goods trains track and there isn't the same amount of traffic as on the normal tracks. At least I haven't spotted any trains going in the opposite direction.

The grin covering Ruedi's face tells me that his postcard was a total success. Now it's my turn. In my bag I have a copy of my novel 'Terminal Baden' that I intend giving to René Kamer. It's because of his special friendship he has continually shown us over the years. I write a special dedication to him on the first page. René and his team are still sitting at the same table in the restaurant. René smiles as he sees me coming. Without making a fuss I present him with 'Terminal Baden.' René looks surprised, then pure delight appears. 'Why thanks very much, Charlotte.' I plan to leave when René says still looking at me. 'You look fantastic today. Like always.' During those few minutes the eyes of his team are fully trained on me. All this sudden unexpected attention gives me a demure feeling. I don't like feeling that way, so I do the next best thing. I thank him and escape back to my seat.

As soon as I'm seated I start to feel much better. I can never understand why I have to go through this silly and unnecessary emotion. After all I've presented so many readings for up to 100 people. So why do I feel embarrassed in front of 4

people, who were clearly impressed with how I look and my clothes? I guess it comes from my childhood days when I was for most years totally alone.

Erstfeld 1102

All passengers leave the train to climb into a vintage 2-carriage shuttle that has no windows. It looks like one of those shuttles that the men who work on the railway lines use to move from place to place. Minutes later down the line the shuttle stops. One person after the other climbs mostly backwards down the 3 steep steps and in the rising heat walk the short distance along a very wide concrete path that runs between train tracks to a huge locomotive depot. At the entrance the TEE restaurant staff that work for the well known Swiss *Mövenpick* restaurant chain are gathered behind a table covered with champagne glasses and different hors d'oeuvres on a white table cloth. Here we are shown how well trained the waiters and waitresses are. One waiter opens one bottle of champagne after the other. As second waiter takes the bottle and pours the clear frothing fluid into each glass. The full glasses are then placed on trays by several waitresses who circulate around the groups of passengers. There are naturally other drinks available for non-drinkers.

We'd already be told before our arrival that we will see the re-inauguration of the TEE Gottardo and can indulge in champagne and canapés as it was in the 1960s (the TEE commenced operating in 1961) and listen to the anecdotes about the luxury train. An obviously very old steam train is on one side of the locomotive depot. Many of the men present inspect the grand old lady. It's much cooler inside the building. Outside 2 photographers position movie cameras opposite to where everybody is standing. Behind them is another huge building. It looks like a further locomotive depot. To the left of the photographers a black curtain covers the entrance to that building. A microphone has been erected further to our left. Behind it is a man who is introduced as Mr Erwin Moron the Manager of the *Stiftung Historisches Erbe der SBB* (The Heritage Foundation of Swiss Railway). Amongst other things Mr Moron tells us that the earlier mother of Zurich, the politician Emily Lieberherr was born in *Erstfeld*. After his interesting speech the black curtain opens and the TEE rolls out in all her glory. Three passengers all who had their birthday on that day christen the TEE with champagne.

Time is moving. We are back on the TEE in the restaurant helping ourselves to some of the buffet's many plates. The train travels further to Switzerland's sunny corner. All meals and drinks are included in the price of the ticket. And there is so much to choose from that nobody has a chance of staying hungry or thirsty.

We stop at *Faido* (a town) to photograph the wonders of the area. Back in the train I spend some time sitting near the train driver. We speed through a long tunnel

when I feel a hand on my leg. I know who it is and it's not the train driver. If it'd been Ruedi doing that, it would have been different. Even though it makes me feel uneasy, I make no attempt to stop him. In the daylight his hand leaves my leg. I stay on guard. The next tunnel. Immediately his hand is caressing my leg again. This time slightly higher. Ok I think, wait until we come out of this tunnel. Only the darkness seems to go on forever. There are also other people waiting to take a seat. At long last I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. Happy to escape I make my way back to my seat and enjoy being alone for a while.

Capolago is a delightful Swiss Italian speaking town on the southernmost bank of *Lugano* Lake and belongs to the district of *Mendrisio*. Overlooking *Capolago* is Mount *Generosa* (1701 metres above sea level). We leave the train to be welcomed by a local group playing local music especially for us. We've hardly listened to the music for a couple of minutes when a fairly tall slim woman in a white dress strolls towards us. Ruedi opens his arms wide to welcome our dear friend Susanne. We knew we'd be seeing her, but not here. The surprise is perfect. Susanne and I get on extremely well and naturally our warm greeting is sincere. Ruedi can't refrain from commenting about black and white as in Scotch. It doesn't take Ruedi long to clip his arm in Susanne's. Before I get left behind René Kamer is at my side. I thank him for quasi rescuing me.

'I couldn't leave you to fend for yourself, while your husband is busy,' Always the gentleman, René says.

We literally promenade the picturesque main street to the ship arm in arm discussing my next book project.

On the ship we are directed to sit in a designated area out of the sun. René accompanies me and Ruedi takes the opportunity to introduce Susanne to him and ask if she can travel with us as far as *Lugano* as a blind passenger. No problem.

Sixteen minutes it takes the ship to reach *Morcote*. At this stage we have an hour to discover the sights of the pretty village. As the weather is well over 30 ° C it's quickly decided to find a shady spot. The top deck of the ship is far too hot to stay. Ruedi is by now having problems with the heat. We escape downstairs out of the sun. The hour it takes the ship to land in *Lugano* while Ruedi is resting, I utilize the time to catch up with Susanne.

Finally we arrive in *Lugano*, the largest town in the area situated at the other end of the *Lugano* Lake. Here Susanne bids us goodbye. We have the opportunity to go by taxi the short distance to the *Lugano* train station, which I welcome. Ruedi is better, but I don't want to put his health at risk. The few minutes to reach the train station has me wondering if my researching around the station for one of my books is

still correct. It has to do with an important opening scene. I'm very glad to find the details still look exactly the same.

The air-conditioned cream and strawberry TEE is a welcome sight. As soon as we are on board we commence the last section of our day. The time is 1805. We don't have much time to study the sights as we are being served the beginning of a five-course meal in the restaurant. The atmosphere is relaxed. Most if not all must have had a good day. It was unavoidable. One course after the other is served over a period of three hours. One has the opportunity to really enjoy the cooking ability of the chefs. Between courses we often take a break to check what's happening outside. The sun is sinking in a light red ball. Not long afterwards I notice lightening. We must be back in the German part. The sunny corner of Switzerland we have left behind us.

On time 3 hours and 8 minutes we pull into the same platform we left from this morning. The weather is finally cooler. René Kamer and Eugen Gäumann are on hand to wish us a good homecoming. The Master of Ceremonies hands me a beautiful dark red rose nicely decorated with extra thin stripes of red folia, green leaves and wrapped in clear paper. Ruedi is given a paper bag full of memories of a day we won't forget in a hurry. After giving me the customary three kisses René Kamer wishes us all the best and me fast success with my writing projects. Viva la Suisse !



Charlotte de Gohan has had short stories published in German. Her first novel in English, *TERMINAL BADEN*, a psychological thriller is now available in all good book shops. Charlotte spent her childhood in Australia. Her adult life is being experienced in Switzerland.