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RHAETIAN RAILWAY IN THE ALBULA/ BERNINA LANDSCAPES

“In many natural landscapes we discover ourselves again [...]. How happy the man who has that feeling must be [...] in this October air, constant and sunny [...] in all its pretty and serious character of hills, lakes and forests of this plateau which is set out [...] next to the horrors of the eternal snows.”

Human, All Too Human, Friedrich Nietzsche

The Bernina Red Train, which from Tirano goes to St. Moritz, is one of the two historic stretches of railway that were combined in the Rhaetian Railway; the other is the railway of Albula, opened in 1904 which, wholly in Switzerland, connects Thusis with St. Moritz. Built between 1906 and 1910, the Bernina railway was one of the first in Europe and, with a maximum altitude of 2253 m above sea level, one of the highest too. It is also one of the first to have been designed with electric traction, supplied by the lakes which lap the rails, as well as one of the few with stretches of mixed-use railway, when in Tirano it slips into the roads and crosses Piazza della Basilica diagonally. The railway is also a list of superlatives: those describing the engineering works that made it possible and the fire-engine red carriages which in winter are the only note of colour against the whiteness of the snow, but also those describing the landscape which is revealed through the windows: the terraces planted with vines in the Valtellina, the zigzag climb in the middle of fir and larch forests, the glaciers of Piz Palù, the highest station of Ospizio Bernina, the lakes and the Glacier of Morteratsch, and then Pontresina and St. Moritz, the heart of the Engadin. The mystical beauty of these landscapes has infused in writers and philosophers such as Thomas Mann, Dino Buzzati, Eugenio Montale, Herman Hesse, Marcel Proust, Stefan Zweig and Friedrich Nietzsche, the *dàimon* which has given rise to some of the most famous pages in European literature.



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“The fundamental concept of the work, the thought of the eternal return [...] belongs to August 1881 [...]. This is noted down on a piece of paper, at the bottom of which it says: ‘6000 feet beyond man and time’. I was walking that day along the lake of Silvaplana through the woods; near a mighty rock that rose up in the shape of a pyramid, near Surlei, I stopped. And that thought came to me.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, who spent seven summers in Sils-Maria, a few kilometres south of St. Moritz, thus describes the genesis of the thought that inspired *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. There was a particular attraction between the landscapes of the Engadin and the intellectuals of the early 20th century: “I liked those names with a strange sweetness, both German and Italian, Sils Maria, Silvaplana, Crestalta, Celerina”, Marcel Proust wrote in *Pleasures and days*. Proust also says, of the places around Silvaplana which inspired Nietzsche, “The sun gave the water all its different nuances and our soul all the pleasures”. St. Moritz became the beacon for society life: the elite of the cultural society of the time would meet here, season after season.

Nietzsche loved his small house in **1 Sils-Maria**, which is now a museum. At “6000 feet above sea level”, as he wrote in his papers, landscapes opened up that gave rise to his manifesto: the **2 rock** that inspired *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, the **3 Chastè Peninsula**, where the verses of Zarathustra have been engraved in his honour, the **4 Val Fex** and the **5 glacier of Corvatsch**. Herman Hesse, on the

other hand, chose the prestigious **6 Hotel Waldhaus**, built in the woods above Sils-Maria in 1908, following the taste for castle-like hotels. Families of the upper bourgeoisie would spend the whole season in its luxurious suites, accompanied by an army of nannies, housekeepers and ladies of company. The Waldhaus was greatly loved by intellectuals and stars: its registers are full of famous names like those

of Thomas Mann, Alberto Moravia, Marc Chagall, Theodor Adorno, Albert Einstein, Richard Strauss and Vivien Leigh. The painter Giovanni Segantini lived in **7 Pontresina** for the last five years of his life, enchanted by the lights and the intense colours of the Engadin. St. Moritz has dedicated a **8 museum** to him; the curved walls of the interior house the largest collection of his paintings in the world.



THE AIR OF ST. MORITZ

“I have never loved the mountains much / and I hate the Alps. [...] Only the electric air of the Engadin / won us over, my little insect, but we were not / so rich that we could say hic manebimus.”

Sorapis, 40 anni fa, Diario del '71 e del '72, Eugenio Montale

Eugenio Montale also loved the Engadin and spent long holidays in St. Moritz. In particular he loved its “electric air”, the benefits of which Proust and Nietzsche had also noticed. In an article published in *Il Corriere della Sera* on 1 July 1949, the poet wrote of a “vision of the world” linked to St. Moritz which he perceived as lost forever: “It is difficult to make a

youngster of the new generation understand what St Moritz, and the Engadin in general, meant to the men of culture who preceded them by twenty or thirty years. [...] The trouble is that behind the world that used to go to St. Moritz there was a conception of life, a Weltanschauung (probably the reflection of an economic situation) which today is disappearing and now this unequalled village in the Engadin [...] is losing its most typical and most natural clients [...]. They were, obviously, rich clients, but rich not only in money. The men, just so you know what I mean, and the women we meet in the diary of Maria Baskirtseff and in the novels of Henry James and his follower Maurice Baring. The pre-war world which has made a last attempt to reappear in the years which go from 1927 to 1930 and which then faded away after the collapse of Wall Street and the advent of various totalitarianisms.”



'HEIDI SAT DOWN NEXT TO PETER AND LOOKED AROUND. THE VALLEY EXTENDED FAR BELOW, ENVELOPED IN THE MORNING LIGHT. OPPOSITE THERE WAS A LARGE, WHITE SNOWFIELD, WHICH STOOD OUT AGAINST THE DARK BLUE OF THE SKY; ON THE LEFT, AN ENORMOUS ROCKY MASS ROSE UP, FLANKED BY HIGH PEAKS [...]. THE LITTLE GIRL STAYED SEATED THERE, AS MUTE AS A FISH. THERE

WAS A DEEP SILENCE ALL AROUND HER: ONLY THE WIND PASSED LIGHTLY OVER THE BLUEBELLS. HEIDI HAD NEVER FELT SO GOOD AND WANTED NOTHING ELSE EXCEPT TO STAY LIKE THAT FOREVER.'

The famous character of this passage is Heidi, a little girl who, following a series of unfortunate events, ends up living with her grandfather and discovers a paradise; before she had lived in the Canton of the Grisons, not too far from the station of St. Moritz. The mountain

landscapes she loved must have been very similar to those passed by the Bernina train. You leave the **1 station in Tirano** and the train travels down the streets of the centre on tram-like tracks. The first panoramic stop is that of the **2 Alp Grüm**, where the train stops in front of the glacier of Piz Palü, at 2091 m. Here you can get off and have a walk, waiting for the next train, but we advise leaving immediately for the next two stations, which are the most spectacular ones: **3 Ospizio Bernina** and **4 Diavolezza**. From here onwards, you will really perceive the emotion produced by this engineering feat: a train in the middle of glaciers. You can get off at Diavolezza and take a cable car which climbs up to 2978 m above sea level.

At the top, you can walk in the summer, ski in the winter and have lunch sunbathing on the terrace of the **5 Berghaus Diavolezza**. If you don't want to stop here, waiting for the sun to set the mountains ablaze at dusk, you can take the cable car again to the station and board the next train. You are half-way on your journey. When the climb is over, the descent begins. The speed is always low because, if on the way up the engines have to pull the weight of the train up the long slope, it is now the brakes that have to work. The final destination is **6 St. Moritz**, in the top ten of the most luxurious tourist destinations in the world. At this point, dribble the groups of Japanese, all smiles and chatter, make your assessments and decide which shore of the lake to choose: the northern one, where the town extends and where the majestic luxury hotels full of Belle Epoque elegance stand; or the southern shore, where green meadows and woods full of curious squirrels, not at all frightened by human presences, alternate.



KIDS



THE BERNINA LANDSCAPE in books

Reading suggestions to discover the places the Bernina Red Train goes through.

• **Thus spoke Zarathustra**, Friedrich Nietzsche (1883-85). This is the work of the Engadin par excellence. The German philosopher had the intuition of the theory of the eternal return in 1881, while walking in the mountains, and recalled the circumstance a few years later in *Ecce homo* (1888). The landscape of the Engadin had already been an idea for reflection in *Human, all too human* (1878), due to its particularity of an "intermediate place between ice and the South".

• **Pleasures and days**, Marcel Proust (1896). A collection of prose poems and short stories including *Real presence*, the story of an idyllic stay in Engadin, in the company of an imaginary love.

• **The magic mountain**, Thomas Mann (1924). For Mann, Davos was a "place of the soul", to the point of inducing him to choose the Schatzalp Hotel as the setting for *The magic mountain* which in the first pages sees the young hero Hans Castorp on a train from Hamburg crossing the Engadin, on a long and laborious journey: "Near Rorschach, in Swiss territory, you take the train again,

but only as far as Landquart, a small Alpine station, where you have to change. Here, after a long and windy wait in a spot devoid of charm, you mount a narrow-gauge train, and as the small but very powerful engine gets under way, there begins the thrilling part of the journey, a steep and steady climb that seems never to come to an end".

• **Gli invisibili compagni d'ascensione**, Dino Buzzati (1935). This was an article published on 15 January 1935 in *Il Corriere della Sera* and which became part of the collection *I fuori legge della montagna* (2010). Buzzati's pen transforms a news item (four hikers swept away by an avalanche on Piz Corvatsch) into a piece of great literature: "The law of the mountains is hard, it is men with the gift of life who have made their glory and their greatness".

• **Diario del '71 e del '72**, Eugenio Montale (1973). In the poem *Sorapis*, 40 anni fa, the poet recalls his late wife (nicknamed "little insect" because she wore glasses) and a walk 40 years earlier in her company to the lake of Sorapis. The article *Non i pazzi ma i ricchi scarseggiano a St. Moritz*, published in *Il Corriere della Sera* on 1 July 1949, is included in the collection *Fuori di casa* (1975).

• **The Post Office Girl**, Stefan Zweig (1982). In 1918, a few weeks after the end of the Great War, Stefan Zweig visited St. Moritz and wrote a bitter article about it, which suggested the prediction of the end of the "world of yesterday" and old Europe. "No, here the carefree are not bored. Trained for decades to be idle with distinction, a triviality such as a world war cannot distract them from their leisure [...]. they meet again for tea, flirt and laugh, a couple of dancers spring into action and twirl to the melody of a tango. Ah, but wherever can the war be? Where is the overwhelmed and sleepless world? A tender waltz at tea time, and smiles and looks that flash." Zweig will remember this experience when he decides to set some episodes of *The Post Office Girl*, written between 1931 and 1938 and published posthumously in Germany in 1982, in Engadin.

Children's books:

• **Heidi**, Johanna Spyri (1880). One of the most beloved children's books; through the eyes of Heidi, it describes life in the Swiss mountains at the end of the 19th century.

• **Il treno del Bernina**, Paola Pianta Franzono (2015). A children's book which poetically and charmingly narrates the story of the Red Train. The book comes with an audio CD.