ISSUE 002

A PUBLICATION BY JUST IN ENGLISH

JUST MAGAZINE

BERNINA

THE TRAIN THROUGH WINTER

THE BERNINA EXPRESS — FROM GLACIERS TO PALM TREES

THE BIG STORY
A TRAIN LIKE NO OTHER

LIFE
WINTER IN THE ALPS

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A Train Like No *Other*

Some train journeys are only about arriving. This one is about everything in between: glaciers, frozen lakes, impossible bridges and a small red train that climbs like a mountain goat. The Bernina Express crosses the Swiss Alps from north to south — and in about four hours, winter slowly changes into spring.

> *“It is not just a train ride. It is a journey through a World Heritage landscape.*



The Bernina Express crossing the snow near Lej Pitschen, on the high Bernina plateau.

144 KILOMETRES • 196 BRIDGES • 55 TUNNELS • ABOUT FOUR HOURS

FROM CHUR TO TIRANO

The journey begins in Chur, in Switzerland, and ends in Tirano, in Italy. In between lie 144 kilometres of mountain railway — with 55 tunnels and 196 bridges and viaducts along the way. Two lines, the Albula and the Bernina, carry the train over the Alps.

HIGHER AND HIGHER

The train climbs from 585 metres at Chur to 2,253 metres at Ospizio Bernina, the highest railway crossing in Europe. And it climbs by adhesion alone — with no rack railway, no cogwheel and no cables to pull it up.

A WORLD HERITAGE JOURNEY

In 2008, UNESCO added the Albula and Bernina lines to the World Heritage List, as one masterpiece of engineering and landscape. These trains have connected the Alpine valleys for more than a hundred years.

The Route, *South to Italy*

One line, two countries, and a drop of more than 1,800 metres. These are the six stops that tell the story of the journey.



The Landwasser Viaduct: 65 metres high, finished in 1902 — and still the postcard of the line.

1 CHUR

The journey starts in the oldest town in Switzerland, 585 metres above the sea. The little red train leaves the city almost like a tram. Chur calls itself the oldest town in Switzerland — people have lived here for more than 5,000 years.

2 LANDWASSER VIADUCT

Sixty-five metres above the valley floor, the train crosses the great stone curve — and drives straight into a tunnel cut into the cliff. Its builders finished the great curve in 1902, in less than two years.

3 OSPIZIO BERNINA

The roof of the line: 2,253 metres, beside a milky-white lake. The highest point any adhesion train can reach in Europe. In winter, the temperature here can fall below −20°C — and the trains still run.

4 ALP GRÜM

The train pauses in front of the Palü Glacier. Below the station, the green Val Poschiavo opens its way down toward Italy. The station restaurant is famous: lunch in front of a wall of ice.

5 BRUSIO

A complete circle of stone: the spiral viaduct turns the train around itself, losing height slowly, gracefully — like a staircase. Look back from the window, and you can see the whole circle below you.

6 TIRANO

Four hours after the glaciers: palm trees, Italian voices and just 429 metres above the sea. Winter has become spring. Its great sanctuary church has watched travellers arrive for five hundred years.

Life Along the *Winter Line*

For the people who live along this railway, the red train is not a tourist attraction. It is the bus, the post van and the school run — the connection that keeps tiny mountain villages alive through the hardest months of the year.

2,253 m	7%	1,824 m
the summit at Ospizio Bernina	the steepest climb — with no rack, no cables	the drop from the summit down to Tirano

A LINE THAT NEVER SLEEPS

In winter, snow can bury this line metres deep. Special rotary snowploughs — some of them more than a hundred years old, and still working — throw the snow off the tracks so the trains can pass. Drivers say the line feels different every single day: fog, ice, sun, storm.

CHRISTMAS AT THE TOP

In December, the villages along the line light their windows and markets. St. Moritz, near the Bernina pass, fills with skiers and Christmas lights — and the little red trains keep arriving through the snow, decorated by winter itself. Some passengers ride on Christmas Eve just to watch the snow fly past the panoramic windows.

THREE LANGUAGES ON ONE LINE

The journey also crosses languages. Around Chur, people speak German and Romansh — a mountain language that comes directly from the Latin of Roman times, and that children still learn at school today. Cross the pass into the Val Poschiavo, and the station signs change to Italian. Same red train, same narrow valley — another world.



Winter on the high plateau, near Lej Pitschen.

The Language Edit

Real words from a real journey. Here are some key words from the story, with simple meanings and examples.

journey *(noun)*
a long trip from one place to another
The journey from Chur to Tirano takes about four hours.



railway *(noun)*
the system of tracks and trains in a country
This railway crosses the Alps.



viaduct *(noun)*
a long, high bridge that carries a road or railway
The Landwasser Viaduct is 65 metres high.



tunnel *(noun)*
a long hole through a mountain or under water
The train passes through 55 tunnels.



glacier *(noun)*
a very large, slow river of ice
You can see the Palü Glacier from Alp Grüm.



summit *(noun)*
the highest point of a mountain
The summit of the line is 2,253 metres high.



steep *(adjective)*
rising or falling quickly; difficult to climb
The track is so steep that normal trains cannot climb it.



border *(noun)*
the line between two countries
The train crosses the border into Italy.



panoramic *(adjective)*
with a very wide view of an area
The train has panoramic windows.



arrive *(verb)*
to reach a place at the end of a journey
We arrive in Tirano in the afternoon.



LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

along the way • from north to south • in between • at the top of — patterns from this issue's story.

Five Things *You Didn't Know*

The red line across the Alps keeps surprising even the people who built it. Here are five things most passengers never hear.



Clearing the line: the railway fights the snow all winter so the trains can pass.

1 It climbs without help

Most mountain railways use a toothed rack or cables to climb. The Bernina line climbs gradients of 7% with smooth wheels on smooth rails — adhesion alone. It is one of the steepest adhesion railways in the world.

2 The bridge that ends in a wall

The Landwasser Viaduct does not end in a station or a road. Its 65-metre curve finishes directly at the mouth of a tunnel, cut into a vertical cliff of rock.

3 A circle to go down slowly

At Brusio, the line needed to lose height in a very small space. The engineers built a spiral: a circular viaduct where the train turns a complete 360 degrees and passes under itself.

4 Glaciers at breakfast, palms at lunch

No other train in Europe connects two worlds so quickly. In one morning you can photograph a glacier, cross a white plateau — and finish among the palm trees of Tirano, 1,800 metres below.

5 Protected by the world

Since 2008, the Albula and Bernina lines have been a UNESCO World Heritage Site — only the third railway in the world to receive that honour.

THE LINE IN TIME

1904	1910	1943	2008
The Albula line opens	The Bernina line is completed	The two lines join one railway	UNESCO World Heritage

THINK ABOUT IT

This line was built for local people, not for tourists. Does a journey change when the whole world wants to ride it?

Your Perspective

Now it's your turn. Read, think, speak and write about the journey.

READ & THINK

1. How long is the journey from Chur to Tirano, and how many bridges does the train cross?
2. How does the train climb 7% gradients without a rack or cables?
3. What can you see at Alp Grüm, and at Brusio?
4. Why is this railway on the UNESCO World Heritage List?
5. Which fact surprised you most?

SPEAK

Discuss with a partner:
• Would you prefer this journey in deep winter or in summer? Why?
• Is a slow train better than a fast plane for a holiday? When?
• Describe your dream train journey. Where does it go?

SPEAKING CHALLENGE (60–90 seconds): present the Bernina Express to a friend — Point – Reason – Example – Point.

WRITE

Write a short paragraph (100–120 words):
Imagine you are on the Bernina Express. Describe the moment the train crosses the Landwasser Viaduct, high above the valley. Start with: “The train slowed down, and suddenly we were flying…”

Word bank: journey • railway • viaduct • tunnel • glacier • summit • steep • border • arrive



The high Bernina plateau in winter — Lago Bianco, the ‘white lake’, beside the line.

REFLECT

In your country, is there a journey that is more famous than its destination?
What makes a journey unforgettable: the places, the weather, or the people you travel with?

EDITORIAL SOURCES

UNESCO World Heritage Centre — Rhaetian Railway in the Albula / Bernina Landscapes: whc.unesco.org/en/list/1276
Rhaetian Railway (RhB) — Bernina Express and line history: rhb.ch • Switzerland Tourism: myswitzerland.com
Photographs: Wikimedia Commons contributors (Landwasser Viaduct, Alp Grüm, Brusio Spiral Viaduct, Lago Bianco, Lake Poschiavo).

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