

SWITZERLAND – A SAFE COUNTRY?

The Editor tells a cautionary tale and gives some travel tips.

You get on the waiting rolling stock forming the 11.40 from Leeds to Manchester, or perhaps it could be the 14.34 from Reading to London. Would you chose your seat , put an obvious camera bag on the adjacent one, hang your jacket with all your personal documents and cash in it on a nearby hook and then spend your time waiting for departure time in the door vestibule watching the trains on the adjacent track? Probably not. Actually. Definitely. Not!

So why, when visiting Switzerland, do some members of the SRS and others interested in that nation's excellent transport system, often do just that? Do they see Switzerland as a crime-free haven in a potentially risky Europe? Why? It is a modern country with all the problems that any other nation state has. The Swiss may have the worlds best transport system, and they probably manage their economy and other issues better than most, but they still suffer from crime in the same way as other countries.

As editor of *Swiss Express* I have recently learnt about the experience that one of our members had. His travelling companion settled themselves into a MOB train at Montreux and whilst concentrating on the activity on the station noticed three people slowly make their way through the coach. After departure the usual ticket check took place. Going to the jacket that had been left hanging by the seat in order to retrieve the necessary travel documents, the person discovered that train tickets, airline tickets, passport and cash were no longer there. The train crew called ahead and the Police met the person at Zweisimmen where the theft was duly reported. The Police noted that this was far from a one-off incident involving tourists, with Montreux station being notorious for similar crimes.

Any one who has been to Lausanne station recently will have heard the repeated warnings about pickpockets operating in the area, whilst my contacts inform me that such crimes, along with bag snatching and baggage theft is apparently becoming commonplace on many of the busier stations in Switzerland. A razor soon gives access to a modern fabric-sided suitcase whilst any bags put down in order to take photographs, or ask directions, or buy a coffee, can very quickly go missing. Tourists are seen as soft targets and it is apparently known by the Swiss Authorities that well organised gangs of criminals, often from the Balkan states and SE Europe, many of whom who have gained illegal entry to the country, are generally the culprits. Neighbouring Italy has suffered similar problems for some time, Milan Central Station being one of the worst locations, but these people now seem to have moved north of the Alps in the face of a crack-down by the Italian Authorities.

Apart from the loss of cash, along with tickets that had to be expensively replaced, plus the hassle of cancelling credit cards, etc the individual we know of also had an unscheduled trip to the British Embassy in Bern to get an emergency passport – at SFr118! Theirs was a holiday spoilt by a moment's inattention.

As someone who travels far too much on business I always try to keep all my personal documents about my person - literally. I have invested in jackets, trousers and more casual clothes, with both zipped and "secret" pockets for passport, cash and cards. A good source is Rohan, a great British company. See www.rohan.co.uk for details of their range of excellent kit. Attempting to move around with masses of cases and bags is both an encumbrance and also flags you up as a tourist. I have learnt to travel light (again using Rohan and other appropriate clothing) with one briefcase-style carry-on bag that I can easily keep an eye on, rather than the plethora of luggage that some people seem to need even for the shortest trip. I can easily survive a week that way, but if I have to check baggage it is always just one "hard" bag with secure locks. You also learn to try in other ways not to look like a tourist - criminals know that their minds will be on other things. Believe me it is difficult to blend-in in Seoul, but it should be relatively easy in Solothurn or Schaffhausen.

Try not to leave bags unattended, and certainly not open, even on the train. Also having thousands of pounds worth of camera equipment around your neck is asking for trouble in many locations. OK on the Jungfrauoch - not so good in the less civilised areas that even some Swiss cities unfortunately have. Modern pocket-sized digital equipment is far less obvious and for most people it can take just as good shots. Many of the photographs in *Swiss Express* originate from such small cameras. Professional photographer Tom Ang has produced an excellent series of guides on how to maximise the scope of such equipment. Seek them out.

Take heart. Go to Switzerland – it is far safer than most other countries, but do not let your admiration of its trains lead you to thinking that it is crime free. Sadly it is not, and keeping alert at all times, along with taking sensible precautions, is the key to a safe trip and a successful holiday.