

By cable to Grutschalp

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BY CABLE TO GRÜTSCHALP

Kälti



The Swiss have done it again! In less than eight months they have removed a 115-year old funicular and replaced it with a cable car system - and it opened on schedule on Saturday 16th December!

The Bergbahn Lauterbrunnen-Mürren (BLM) has operated as two sections since opening in 1891, the first being a funicular from the valley floor at Lauterbrunnen to Grütschalp climbing 685 metres over a distance of 1421

metres. The two carriages, travelling at a speed of 10 km/hr could each carry up to 80 passengers. Once at Grütschalp passengers and cargo continue to transfer to the conventional metre gauge railway that climbs another 147 metres to Mürren. Single unit railcars are used, normally hauling or propelling a small wagon.

The funicular section has for a long time been affected by a major geological fault, a slip area, which has meant constant monitoring and realignment of the track. After consideration of three options the Jungfrau Bahnen (JB), under whose control the BLM operates, have chosen a reversible-action single-track aerial cableway which spans the main slip, with one cabin taking up to 100 passengers. The cableway is 1431.50m long with an average gradient of 54.56% and the four intermediate masts are sited along the axis of the original funicular. With a journey time of four minutes (compared with eleven for the old funicular) the capacity is expected to be 500 passengers an hour. This can be increased to 600 at times of pressure if no freight is carried; the maximum freight load is 6 tons.

The cableway and panoramic cabin were built by two firms with names that sound as if they should be in a children's fantasy story – Garaventa and Gangloff!

One alternative considered was to build a



All photographs from the JB website which has many more views of the demolition and construction.

reversible aerial cableway from Stechelberg (the bottom of the James Bond route to the revolving restaurant at Schilthorn) to Mürren itself, without having to take a train ride as well. The cost of this option was estimated as SFr 27.5 m, though a major reason for its rejection was the effect it might have on tourism in the Lauterbrunnen valley and traffic problems in the village itself as all visitors to Mürren would have to transfer to Stechelberg by road. I'm sure that most members of the SRS will be glad that the attractive little line with wonderful views of the mountain peaks has been saved.

An alternative, that apparently was not considered, would have been for the JB to extend the BOB line from Lauterbrunnen towards Stechelberg, and there is no mention of this in the official document. Another idea was to build a new winch-drive funicular from Lauterbrunnen to Grütschalp at a cost of SFr 29.5 m, as against the total cost of the new system at SFr 23.4 m.

The old funicular closed on 23rd April. From information and photographs kindly passed on by my long-time correspondent Colin Pearson-von Allmen, who works at Grütschalp station, the last rites followed the pattern of branch line closures of the Beeching era, including an elegy in the form of a farewell poem and a special headboard.

Prior to closure some materials had been brought up on the funicular and demolition had already begun. The bottom station at Lauterbrunnen disappeared quickly; the two cars were brought to the bottom and removed by crane. Colin and other staff not required to run the limited train service from Mürren to Winteregg and Grütschalp turned their hand to helping with the construction of the cable car, proving how flexible Swiss railway staff have to be. During the closure period all traffic used the Stechelberg-Schilthorn aerial cableway, adding two hours a day to Colin's journey to Grütschalp.

Test runs with the new cable car began, as programmed, in November, including setting, testing and tweaking operations like the braking. Finally, all was declared in order and the first passengers could be carried in good time for the main 2006/7 skiing season. Another Swiss

achievement! The accompanying photographs are just a few of those to be found on the JB website (www.jungfraubahnen.ch/galleries).

From the point of view of the collectors of Edmondson card tickets one disappointing development is that Grütschalp will lose these traditional tickets. However, it remains to be seen if the JB decide the comparatively small number of passengers who buy their tickets at Winteregg (the one intermediate station on the railway between Mürren and Grütschalp) when the station is staffed in the winter will justify installing a computer. For our sake let us hope not!

