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The “New” Pranzaira – Albigna Cable Car

Glyn Jones

The dam as seen from the valley floor. This photo was taken in June 2012 when there was much more snow than this year.

Photos: Glyn Jones

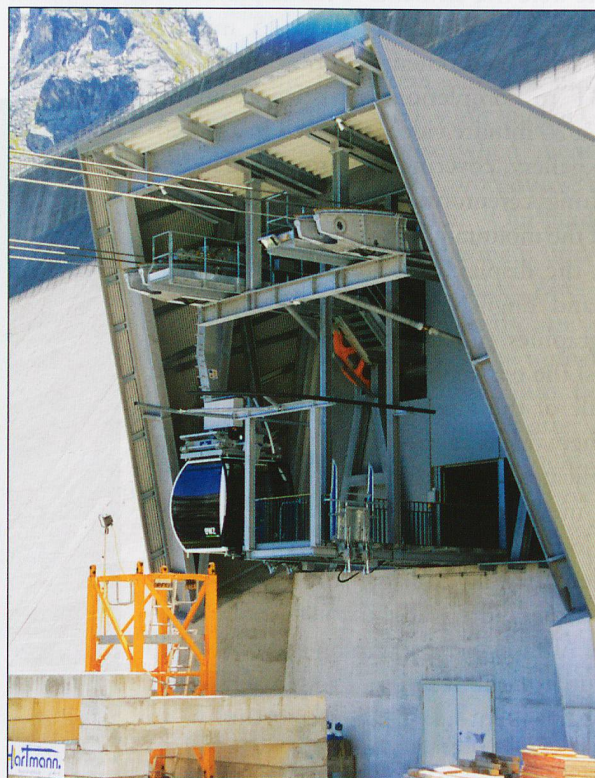
As we all know, Switzerland is full of quirks and idiosyncrasies, so I will start this article with a few questions that help to illustrate this. What is the connection between the Electricity Supply and Generation Company of Zürich (EWZ) and the canton of Graubünden, and why do they operate a cable car half way down the Maloja Pass and decide to spend CHF15m rebuilding it? I hope to answer all of these questions (and more) over the next few

paragraphs.

SRS Members may be aware that I have more than a passing interest in the Val Bregaglia region of Graubünden, being the owner of a RhB HOm model railway, ‘Maloja’, which I am in the process of extending to include the first part of the Maloja Pass as far as the village of Casaccia. During our holidays to Graubünden we always spend a day visiting some of the villages that are situated on the Pass and we have

There is still a lot of work to do but the new cable car did open on time and was very busy in the afternoon.

This is the upper station which has been built really close to the dam wall. You can see the remains of the ubiquitous tower crane which had been used in the construction.



often passed by the base station of the cable car situated next to a hotel a little way above Casaccia. This is the Pranzaira – Albigna cable car that goes up to a dam high above the pass. We had planned to visit it this year as part of our modelling research, and also to give Martin Fisher a report on it for his new book on *“Swiss Mountain Climbing the Easy Way”*. Pre-holiday, a look at the Kursbuch (Route 2958) stated the cable car was open mid-July to October. This was strange as it usually opens at the beginning of June; more research was called for - this led to the answers to the questions I posed at the start of this article.


The majority of the electricity consumed by customers of EWZ is generated by the company using hydro-electric facilities in the Canton of Graubünden, where they have thirteen such installations linked to Zürich by power lines. They also have the concession to supply electricity to the Graubünden valleys over which they have transmission rights. The 115m high and 759m long Albigna Dam is one of these installations. It was constructed between 1955 and 1959 at a height of 2163m above sea level and the cable car was originally built as part of the construction project. The dam is not only used for the production of hydro-electricity but also as a safeguard against flooding during heavy rainfall. The cable car is the only conventional means of access to the dam and its installations (apart from a three and a half hour climb from the valley!) and as it did not meet current standards, it was decided to completely replace of it. The original installation closed midway during the summer of 2015 and was completely demolished. To our amazement the complete new installation was scheduled to open on Friday 15th July, which happened to be during our holiday in Filisur. We decided it would not be a good idea to go on the opening day, but as we had other things planned for the weekend, it had to be on Monday 18th as we were returning home the next day.

Fortunately Monday was a “blue sky day”, and whilst I do have faith things happen in Switzerland when they should, I still confirmed with the PostAuto driver at St. Moritz Bahnhof that the cable car had opened on schedule. As we got off at the Pranzaira bus stop, we could see that whilst the cable car was open, it certainly wasn't finished and there was plenty of cosmetic work still to do including signage as we had difficulty finding the way in. Eventually, with help, we found the brand new cash desk and machine room. The return fare is CHF22 (no reduction for Swiss Pass), with the two new cabins seating 8 people. The new installation was constructed by the Swiss company Garaventa from Rotkreuz and the journey time has been reduced from 15 to 11 minutes for the 2.4km journey, which has a rise of 900 metres. The new upper station is built directly at the base of the dam wall and the cable car passes over a very deep ravine just below the summit. The dam is surrounded by granite peaks, with the



valley floor a long way below. The setting is very spectacular. There were no other visitors walking around but we could see and hear climbers nearby. There is a mountain path up to the dam wall where we saw fishermen, whilst the Albigna Mountain Hut is a 45 minute walk away. There were no other facilities, apart from the toilets in the upper station.

The cable car stops for an extended lunch break from 11:30 until 13:15 - this is Italian-speaking Switzerland after all! The upper station is unmanned and over lunch automatic shutters prevent entry to the building but these opened promptly at 13:15. There were CCTV cameras to monitor the area. The downward journey commenced after a bell rang and the car doors closed. By this time, there was a considerable queue waiting for the ascent and as we waited for the bus to take us back up the Maloja Pass, the cable car was in continuous operation. For members interested in visiting the dam, there is a CHF12, two-hour guided tour every Tuesday at 09:00. I do not know what languages these tours are conducted in.

This area is very picturesque and the views are stunning with a marked Italianate feel, very often missed by those who do not travel beyond the end of the rail line at St. Moritz. How different this might have been had the planned ‘Begellerbahn’ RhB extension been built through this area, but access is easy as there are two PostAutos every hour during the day from St. Moritz via the Maloja Pass to Chiavenna just across the Italian border. 

ABOVE: View from the top. There is still much cleaning up to do. You can see the remains of the dismantled upper mast on the right hand side and the spectacular scenery in the distance.

RIGHT: Close up of the new gondola “parked” over lunch at the upper station.

