Paris-Geneva-Rome via the Mont Blanc Tunnel

PARIS—GENEVA—ROME VIA THE MONT BLANC TUNNEL.

Drilling has now officially begun on the French and the Italian sides of the Mont Blanc tunnel. The longest piece of engineering work ever undertaken for the purpose is finally becoming a reality.

When completed, the tunnel will be 11 kilometres 600 metres long. The entrance to the tunnel on the French side will be at an altitude of 1,274 metres; on the Italian side it will be at 1,381 metres, and its highest point will reach 1,395 metres, giving a gradient of 24 per thousand on the French side and 2.5 on the Italian side.

Before considering the economic and touristic advantages, here are some of the technical features: The tunnel is, in fact, three tunnels superimposed, the whole together being practically circular in section. The middle tunnel — for road traffic — is the largest of the three, and measures roughly 8 metres in width and 5 metres in height; over this tunnel is the airway tunnel, the lower tunnel being for the evacuation of vitiated atmosphere and subterranean water.

Some measurements: width of the roadway, 7 metres; 70 cm. pavements on either side; headroom 4.80 over the 3 metres wide centre, and 4.50 metres over the lower sides.

As a precaution against breakdowns, every 300 metres parking places will be available, 20 metres long, 3 metres wide and 4.50 metres high. On the opposite side of the roadway recesses will permit oncoming cars to pass any obstruction. Finally, at intervals of 50 metres, recesses with service stations and personnel complete with telephone and emergency equipment will be provided.

The air conditioning installation and extraction of foul air in a tunnel of this length carrying a steady stream of traffic — 400 vehicles an hour on an average, rising to 600 in peak periods — called for special study, as also did lighting, which necessarily requires vehicles to run with their own headlamps. The engineers are providing against dazzle when motorists suddenly come out into daylight — a danger on a long straight road. Entrances and exits will be approached on a curve, thus affording the maximum of protection against dazzle.

Whose are the master-minds behind this colossal undertaking? Franc's? Italy's? As a matter of fact private companies were formed in which both countries were partners together with the State and City of Geneva. It was, too, in Geneva that the Syndicate for carrying out researches on drilling was set up, clearly an indication that here in Geneva interest in the project was in no way less than that in the Savoy Départements and the Val d'Aoste or northern Italy.

Although the idea of drilling a tunnel under Mont Blanc dates back over a century, it was not until 1946 that an Italian engineer, Cte. Lora Totino, cut a hundred or so metres into the rock just above Entrèves to prove that it was anything but a Utopian idea. Time has proved the project more than justified, rallying partisans on both sides of the Giant of the Alps until, finally, France and Italy signed in Paris on 14th March 1953 the Convention for the construction and exploitation of a tunnel under Mont Blanc.

The importance for Europe of such an undertaking is obvious when we look at the map of western Europe. In the first place, it is the great Paris-Rome Axis already so well known on its Paris-Geneva-Chamonix section by the name of the Route Blanche, because it leads to the highest snow peaks in the Alps, to the winter sports centres now so popular.

Work has now begun, and it is estimated that it will take about thirty months to complete — so that the tunnel is likely to be in service by the end of 1961.

North of the great Alpine barrier Geneva holds a key position; on a railway system it would be called a turntable. Geneva, in fact, is the spot where the main international highways meet, where the traffic radiates over the Great West Axis — the Paris-Rome route. Bordeaux and Geneva are thus in direct liaison with Clermont-Ferrand and Lyon; another route comes from Nantes and the region of the Châteaux de la Loire via Nevers and Mâcon; via Annecy to Grenoble either by the route des Alpes for the Côte d'Azur or by the route Nationale 5 towards Languedoc and Spain.

Via Lausanne, Berne and Basel it is the direct line to north Germany, and the Netherlands, Denmark and the Scandinavian countries via Zurich to Austria.

Go through the tunnel, down the Val d'Aoste and take the first fork direct to Turin, Nice or Genoa, or the other fork to Milan, the city which, in northern Italy, plays the rôle on that side which Geneva holds on the other side of the Alps; the road then branches off towards Rome via Genoa or Florence, to the Adriatic coast or towards Venice, Trieste and Yugoslavia.

At either end of this great west axis are two cities powerfully polarized — Paris, with its open door to the North Sea and the British Isles, and Rome with its roads leading to Brindisi, Sicily and the whole of the Mediterranean. The centre of attraction is Geneva, international city, unique in its way, in an admirable setting, intensely intellectual and artistic in its everyday life, particularly distinguished in the sciences and their application to industry, but also a city of sport, famous since Horace Benedict de Saussure for its alpinists, climbers and champions in mountaineering.

In combining the possibilities which the Mont Blanc tunnel will provide with those of the intercontinental airport at Cointrin, Geneva, from the international as well as touristic point of view, is well on the way to becoming the most important centre of western Europe interest.