

# Catastrophe in the south east

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## Catastrophe in the South East

*The flooding and landslides that followed the exceptional rainstorms on 25/26 September received only a small amount of coverage in the British press, and most attention was given to the admittedly worse troubles in Italy. Switzerland did not escape and, thanks to Member's help, we are able to bring you details of the disaster that struck Brig, a location well known to most of us.*

**Over the weekend** of 25/26 September 12993 catastrophe struck much of the south eastern corner of Switzerland and nearby parts of Italy. Torrential rain falling continuously swelled the Rhône and its several tributaries.

Brig was the focus for many of these rivers and it is understood that the Saltina burst its banks, flooding the whole of the town centre, its shops and banks to a depth of over 5 metres. Worse still was the thousands of tonnes of silt and debris which filled the streets up to the first floor. There are many pictures to show this.

For the railways, especially the BVZ and the FO, it is a disaster of considerable magnitude.

Brig station was totally flooded, up to the top of the ground floor, a depth of some 14 feet. Even the new connecting tunnel did not escape. Silt covers the whole of the BVZ/FO station and the old depot.

The Swiss Army is in charge of the clear-up operations and armed soldiers prevent access and photography. At present (early October) it is known that the FO and BVZ between them have 56 coaches and locomotives damaged.

BVZ trains terminate at Visp, the FO operates from Naters. The SBB and BLS got off comparatively lightly and although some roads in Italy were swept away, the standard gauge railways are in full operation. Passengers alighting at Brig and not changing trains have to establish their need to enter the damage zone. The only uncontrolled exit from the main line station is through the subway towards Naters.

Even on 4 October another train of heavy earthmoving equipment was on its way through Thun to Brig to help remove the debris which in places is over 3 m deep. Well over 100 commercial enterprises are buried in the mud

of this disaster, the cost of which will be, according to some estimates, as much as SFr.1900 million! A special fund has been set up to provide help.

Alan Pike.

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**On my holiday** in Zermatt this year I encountered torrential rain, which continued over several days from Wednesday 22 September. This resulted in a massive disruption on the BVZ, culminating in the complete closure of the line a couple of days later. On Thursday 23 September, from mid-morning to late afternoon the railway service between Zermatt and Täsch was replaced by taxis due to damage on the line. Far worse was to follow; for both the railway and road were completely blocked in the area north of St.Niklaus. This was further compounded by the flooding of Brig, with up to 2 m depth of mud and debris deposited over the FO/BVZ station.

On Saturday 25 September, the only way in and out of Zermatt was by helicopter to Visp and then only when the cloud ceiling permitted this to be done with safety. Baggage was carried in a rope container slung under the helicopter. At 09:10 on Sunday 26 September rail services recommenced from Zermatt to St.Niklaus, from where passengers were transferred to coaches to continue the journey to Visp. The link between here and Brig was by the SBB standard gauge line.

On my return home on Wednesday I saw BVZ steam locomotive No.7 *Breithorn* in full steam at Visp, coupled to an HGe4/4<sup>1</sup> with the letters VZ on its side. Notices on Visp station stated that only residents were being allowed into Brig, due to the catastrophic flood damage to the town.

The BVZ has, in recent years, had more than its fair share of trouble. Work is still in progress on the stretch of line cut by the massive 1991 avalanche at Randa (See *Swiss Express* 3/3, September 1991), and it is to be hoped that, in this case, trouble will not come in threes.

John W. Rogers