

Glacier Express : the success story of a unique railway link across the Alps

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal**

Band (Jahr): - **(2005)**

Heft [1]

PDF erstellt am: **08.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854816>

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Rico has translated a recent information leaflet released by the RhB & MGB outlining the history and some of the initiatives behind the phenomenal success story that is the Glacier Express and which is celebrating its 75th Birthday this year

GLACIER EXPRESS®

St. Moritz / Davos – Zermatt

1930 – 2005

THE SUCCESS STORY OF A UNIQUE RAILWAY LINK ACROSS THE ALPS

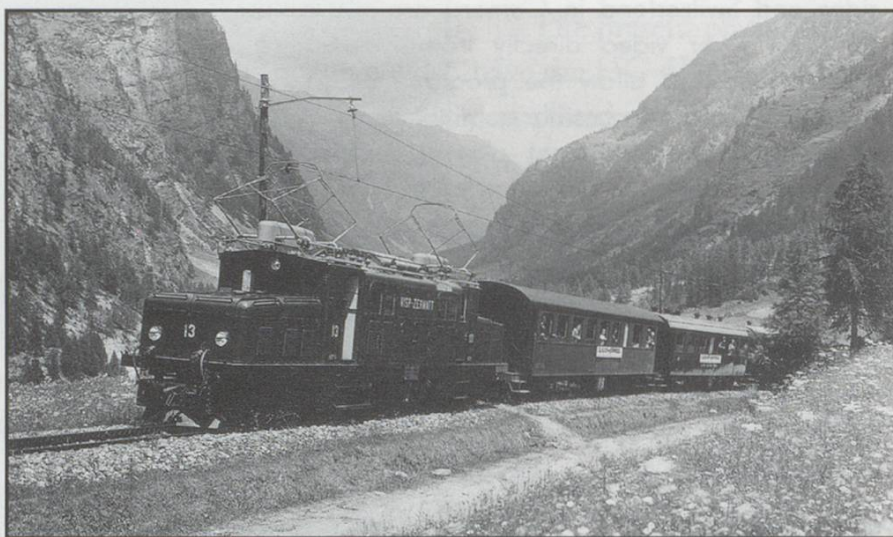
The Creation of a Continuous Rail Network across the Alps

On 18th July 1891 the electric rail line Visp-Zermatt was inaugurated. From 10th July 1904 one could travel from Chur to St. Moritz by rail, and on 1st August 1912, the line between Chur and Disentis was completed. But it only became possible to travel on the metre gauge from Visp to Brig from 5th June 1930. The completion of this line had been keenly awaited and on 22nd June 1930, the Glacier Express went into operation linking Zermatt to St. Moritz.

The three railway companies, Brig-Visp-Zermatt-Bahn (BVZ), Furka-Oberalp Bahn (FO) and Rhätische Bahn (RhB) deployed their finest rolling stock: the RhB used their Abs C 4ü 61 (still operating today as Saloon Carriage AS 1161), one 2nd/3rd class carriage type 604-607, the BVZ a 1st/2nd class carriage with saloon compartment, and from the FO a C4ü 260. In addition there was the MITROPA Dining Car, ordered specially from Neuhausen (today's *Gourmino* carriage 3812).

The journey from Zermatt to St. Moritz took from 0730 until 1820 and in the other direction from 0815 until 1855, i.e. around 11 hours. On the sections Zermatt – Brig and Disentis – St. Moritz the Glacier Express was operated by electric trains from day one, but between Brig and Disentis the track was not

Both photographs on this page are courtesy of MGB and were supplied by Gabriela Zuber; many thanks Gabriela. The lower photograph was taken at the departure of the very first Glacier Express



electrified until 1st June 1941.

The train was very popular and carried about 20,000 passengers during the operating season between July and September. During the 2nd World War the operation of the Glacier Express was suspended between 1943 and 1946.

Year-Round Operation since 1982

In 1980 – two years prior to the opening of the Furka base tunnel – Helmut Klee, Director of the Swiss National Tourist Office in the USA recognised the enormous tourist potential of the Glacier Express. He encouraged the Tourism Director of St. Moritz, Dr. Hanspeter Danuser, and the three railway companies to re-launch the Glacier Express – ideally co-ordinating it with the opening of the Furka tunnel in June 1982. This re-launch was finalised at a legendary meeting in Zurich attended by the railway companies BVZ, FO, RhB, the Swiss National Tourist Office, the tourism directors of St. Moritz, Zermatt, Zurich and Geneva, as well as representatives of SBB and Swissair.

The 26th June 1982 saw the opening of the Furka base tunnel which enabled the year-round connection of the Valais and the Grisons by the Glacier Express.

The Glacier Express was re-discovered. A report by Roman Brodman about the world's slowest express train on ARD (German Radio) on Easter Monday 1983 resulted in an unprecedented demand for information. All those responsible for the Glacier Express issued publicity material virtually overnight and Roger Jungo, director of the Swiss National Tourist Office in Frankfurt and his staff, supplied this information to thousands of interested and more importantly travel-hungry people within days.

The successful running of the Glacier Express was ensured by the collaboration of the three railway companies concerned, BVZ, FO and RhB. In order to ease the decision-making process each of the three companies

nominated a product manager who, together with the company directors, formed the management team of the Glacier Express.

In 1983, to supplement the Glacier Express, a second train formation was created, a new "Rhine-Rhone" Express but, alas, this met with little success – people wanted to travel on the Glacier Express.

From January until October 1983 the passenger numbers were around 73,200. Every year from 1982, Hanspeter Danuser and Walter Nowak, a St. Moritz hotelier, presented the Glacier Express at the yearly conference of the German travel agents and thus to thousands of travel professionals.

To alleviate problems at departure, as from 3rd June 1984 individual seat reservations were made possible – an innovation in Swiss domestic traffic. As there was no connection to an IT-system, the reservations and confirmations were done by either telephone or postcard. Instrumental in bringing this new system was, amongst others, Helmut Klee of New York who always conveyed customer wants and suggestions to the management teams and so helping to improve the quality of the product. In 1984 the number of passengers rose to 89,360.

On one occasion alhorn blower and St Moritz tourism director Hanspeter Danuser gave a recital on the New York Empire State Building, thus gaining access to the American TV studios.

1985 saw the introduction of two further Glacier Expresses in both directions, with the same logo, in order to satisfy the great demand during the summer months. 40 prominent committee members of the "Association of American Travel Writers" and including some of the most important US travel journalists were invited by the four luxury hotels in St. Moritz to spend a week in the Engadin. Their stay was rounded off with a journey on the Glacier Express. The main success of this venture resulted in a story being published

on the front page of the daily "New Yorker", featuring the famous tilted drinking glass.

Starting in summer 1985, in addition to the main St. Moritz – Zermatt service a service operated to Davos. In 1985 the number of passengers rose to 184,000 persons. To complement the marketing, engineering innovations were always being introduced. For example to ensure the running water supply during the winter months, the Glacier Express carriages were fitted with heated water inlets and the static water supply in St. Moritz was fitted with a special heating system.

In 1987 the dining cars 3813 and 3814, originally built for the Bernina line, were withdrawn and replaced by the new double dining car 3816/17 – the longest one in Europe, nicknamed "Jumbo". This carriage was also fitted with a rack brake. However due to its weight it could not be used on the Disentis – Andermatt link and operation was therefore restricted to the St. Moritz – Disentis section.

The Forces of Nature

In July 1987 the Rhine flooded the track near Trun as well as two tunnels. The Glacier Express operated on the one side from St. Moritz to Tavanasa and, from the west, as far as Disentis. In between, postal coaches maintained the service. Railway workers helped with the luggage transfers and seat reservations were dutifully maintained on the connecting trains. All main and auxiliary stations were equipped with fax machines to maintain the reservations system. The break of service at Trun lasted until September 1987. Overall, between July and September, a total of 48,000 passengers were conveyed by postal coach and thousands of items of luggage transferred. Due to these disruptions, the number of passengers declined to 149,000.

On the 24th August 1997 an avalanche of sludge flooded Andermatt station. Once again, passengers were able to circumnavigate

Hinterrhein Bridge at Thusis
Photo: © RhB - Photographer P. Liaci





An evening train leaves Andermatt for Disentis.
Nov. 2004 Photo: Roger Phelps

the problem by postal coach and the tour operators' programmes went ahead as planned. The Glacier Express once again stood this test brilliantly.

On the 27th February 1990 Glacier Express No. 904 was blown over by hurricane Viviane on the Oberalp Pass. Luckily, none of the passengers were hurt; however, they had to spend a reputedly boozy night in army barracks. In spring 1991 a landslide at Randa destroyed the track between Brig and Zermatt. Once again passengers could bypass the affected area by coach. On the rest of the network the Glacier Express operated according to timetable. In September 1993 Brig was severely flooded. The Glacier Express almost escaped, but could not operate through Brig. Passengers had to change trains between Naters and Visp.

Increasing the Appeal of the Glacier Express

In 1991 the Glacier experience was improved by taped commentary in English, German and French. In 1992, the number

of passengers rose to 237,000 persons. Though the Glacier Express rolling stock was continually being adapted to passenger needs, further innovations were needed. As a trial, FO introduced a panoramic carriage, which, to start with, was allocated to groups on request.

From 1993 the panorama train pairs 903/905 introduced a new age. Each of these trains had 5 panoramic coaches from the FO or BVZ and, between St. Moritz and Brig, an RhB dining car using refurbished veteran coaches which had a timeless quality. The design firm of Pininfarina created the new panoramic carriages which were then constructed by Breda in Pistoia (Italy).

In 1994 passengers carried reached 252,000 persons. From the 26th June 1982 until 31st October 1996 a total of 2.75 million passengers had used the Glacier Express which had become the most successful and famous tourist train throughout the world. Today, the Glacier Express can be booked on all five continents.

The Glacier Express has become the blueprint for other – nowadays also famous and successfully launched – express trains,

such as the Bernina Express. Journeys on the Glacier Express are easily combined with the Bernina Express.

On the 1st January 2003, BVZ and FO merged and became the Matterhorn Gotthard Railway (MGB). As from this date the Glacier Express has been administered by this company and the RhB.

The Glacier Express Experience is being enhanced by a Nostalgic Train

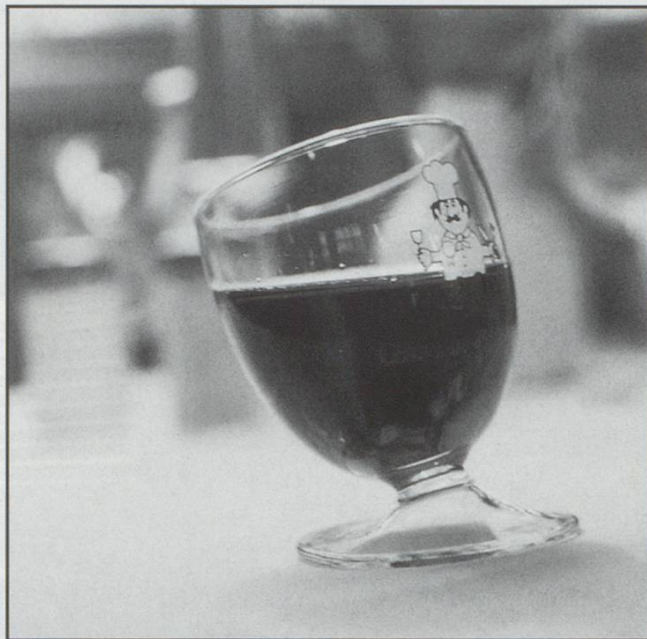
Since summer 2000 a Glacier Pullman express has operated between St. Moritz and Zermatt. A journey in "Twenties" luxury – with the renovated RhB-Pullman carriages and the matching nostalgic Dining Car Gourmino of RhB. The original Glacier Express is celebrating a renaissance after some 68 years!

2005: Jubilee Year

On 22nd June 2005 the Glacier Express will celebrate its 75th birthday. This jubilee will be extensively commemorated during the summer months. On weekends from June till October 2005, the Panorama Glacier Express will operate at a Jubilee Price. Apart from the journey in the 1st class Panorama carriages, passengers will be served a complimentary aperitif and, in the Dining Car, guests will be served a special Jubilee Menu. Further surprises are planned during the journey.

The Alpine Classic Glacier Express – the Orient Express of the Alps – with its historic Pullman and Gourmino carriages will link the world-renowned resort of St. Moritz with the Matterhorn village of Zermatt on various dates. Travel in style as in the Golden Twenties!

The Nostalgic Glacier Express will allow passengers to relive travel from the past in the 3rd class vintage rolling stock of the Matterhorn Gotthard Railway, the Furka steam mountain section and the Rhaetian Railway on a journey of discovery using the original track of the Glacier Express! A two-day journey with an overnight stay in the Heart of the Alps.



The famous tilting wine glass. I bought one of these for my wife Deb as a present, she likes wine. My daughter Kate, then aged about 18, looked at it for a moment, then at me and in all seriousness said, after I had explained to her why it was so shaped, "but what happens when the train goes in the opposite direction?"

Photo: ©RhB

... as from 2006: Into the Future with a Totally New Glacier Express

Towards the end of the '90s it was recognised that the rolling stock and catering no longer met with the high expectations of passengers, or customers/clients in the new vernacular. 1st class Panoramic carriages and conventional carriages with 1st and 2nd class will re-launch the appearance of the Glacier Express. As well as this not all potential diners can be accommodated in the Dining Car, and meal times are restricted.

To maintain and enhance the sophisticated Glacier Express image it was agreed to purchase a total of 24 1st and 2nd class Panoramic, plus bar and catering carriages. A new catering concept should create a stir: the established, tried and tested formula of freshly cooked meals will be maintained but the food will be brought to passengers' seats. The budget for these innovations is around SFr60 million and will be borne by the partner railways. The new and eagerly anticipated and awaited Glacier Express will operate between St. Moritz and Zermatt from summer 2006.