

Gotthard Base Tunnel - 1st June 2016 : some personal thoughts from your Swiss news editor

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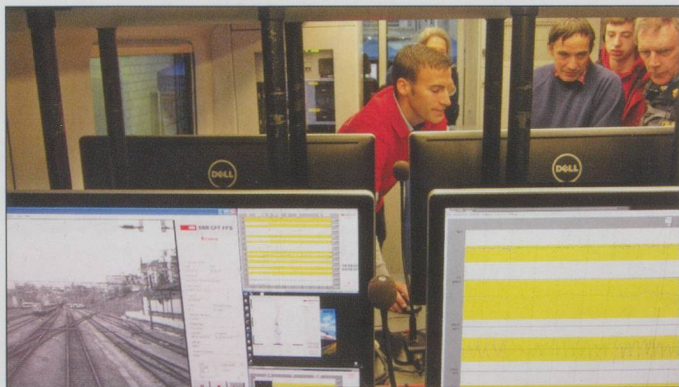
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ABOVE: A tour inside the SBB Diagnostic Vehicle at Erstfeld.



LEFT: The Pollegio control. From here the operations and the safety of the tunnel are controlled.

air conditioning systems boosted to cope with both the heat (up to 45°C) and the humidity of the tunnel, and of course the ETCS 2

installed as there are no optical signals. For a regular traveller on the route the new tunnel saves a lot of time and is more comfortable, but the tourist will still prefer the old mountain route for its great views with its twists and turns.

The Mountain Route

SBB expects the number of passengers to drop dramatically on the old Gotthard route and from the 11th December timetable change there will just be an hourly RE (meaning no conductor on board) operated by a TILO Flirt (RABe 524) travelling the old route. It is great that a frequent service is retained, but comfort of course will not be the same on a train designed for short trips, compared with the long distance trains, some with panoramic coaches. It will be interesting to see the planned 'Gotthard Panorama Express', which will run at weekends from Easter to October replacing the 'Wilhelm Tell Express'. Both SBB Historic and Club del San Gottardo plan to run more heritage trains over the mountain line next year, as there will be a lot of spare capacity.

On the whole, it was a truly well organised and memorable event, with so much to see that one had to be choosy. It was a pleasure to see how much pride the Swiss take in their railways and in connecting both sides of the Alps smoothly. 🇨🇭



Gotthard Base Tunnel – 1st June 2016

Bryan Stone

Some personal thoughts from your Swiss News Editor

Along with millions of other Swiss I watched the opening ceremony of the Gotthard Base Tunnel on television. Only the great-and-the-good, and a few lucky citizens, were present at the event. It was more than moving, and more than historic. Yes, we know the statistics: 57km long - a world record; 125,000 tonnes of steel arches; 28.2m tonnes of excavated material (some used to make new islands in Lake Luzern); 4m cubic metres of concrete; 3,200 km of copper wire; 2,600 workers and 16 years building time. The cost, CHF12.2 billion and, sadly nine people dead. We know that it was finished a year early and substantially below budget. It is an extraordinary work, the greatest step in 100 years, and not only for railways.

Magnificent as it is, that is not what it is about. It

represents much more.


It is an outstanding project for European unity and coherence, but also an endorsement from the start, of faith in rail, passenger and freight, for the future. It reflects, of course, Swiss compromise also towards the EU, as SRS members will realise. Switzerland is not an EU member, and thus it was most significant that Federal President Schneider-Amman made two things clear at the opening. First, Switzerland is a part of Europe, and second, Switzerland has built the new Gotthard Tunnel for Europe. This is the more striking when considering that the entire NEAT (New Rail Alpine Transversal) project, including the funding of the Gotthard and Lötschberg Base Tunnels, was voted by the Swiss people in a 1992 public referendum. This was in full

awareness that the vocation of the Gotthard is that Switzerland's business is international trade. The Swiss are visibly proud that they are reliable partners: despite the ups-and-downs of European political relations; economic cycles; differences of opinion; even their own opinions on European affairs, and that the real objective of a better functioning Europe in the common interest has not been lost from view.

Transport Ministers in Switzerland are senior politicians with a high profile who sit in the 7-person Federal Cabinet. However, the real heroes of the work are Federal Councillors Adolf Ogi and Moritz Leuenberger, both now retired, but very present on June 1st. Ogi set it up, created a sense of vision and vocation, and ensured that the votes were positive. Leuenberger kept the faith, ensuring that the work could progress as promised. Inevitably there were some objections from the start, especially from the political right that suggested that the EU could build its own tunnels; France was promising a Mont Cenis base tunnel; Austria a Brenner base tunnel, and it is also striking that neither of these has made any significant progress. Today highway traffic is a serious European problem. Curiously, the Gotthard is not the main problem, as traffic is only really seriously delayed at peak holiday weekends or when incidents occur. However, 70% of goods transiting the Swiss Alps is on rail, the remainder being around 1m Heavy Goods Vehicles annually. That this should shift to rail is declared policy, and the Gotthard should help. In addition, much highway freight uses other trans-alpine routes. That too offers new potential for Gotthard Base Tunnel rail services. Just going faster is not the only attraction; passengers will from December save some 30 minutes to Lugano, and when the Monte Ceneri Base Tunnel is complete

in 2020, up to an hour. It is likely that as with the Lötschberg, completely new travel and tourism habits, and new economic hotspots, will emerge. But for freight, time saved is real money, and the base rail line means no more bankers on a 1 in 38 grade; more heavier and longer trains; higher productivity from staff and equipment, and a new pipeline effect supporting logistic efficiency.

European leaders made clear what they had come to see. For Angela Merkel this was a great European day, and she had come to join in celebrating. François Hollande said that in Switzerland a European dream had become reality and he 'bowed' to the Swiss. Italy's Matteo Renzi thanked the Swiss for the clear signal they have set. This was the tone very widely, and even the British 'Guardian' newspaper found a similar note of praise, and although other British newspapers reported the opening, its European significance was lost. The BBC were there, and though their correspondent was clearly baffled by the symbolic figures at the opening - mountain regions have a lot of legends - she did let her enthusiasm bubble over. Not all Swiss shared the party mood. The grumpy minority that likes roads and trucks; excessive private wealth; resents Europe; does not believe in major public projects, and dislikes railways in particular, is licking its wounds.

The British quandary about Europe, which has so crippled serious partnership, leaves your correspondent wondering what do those British politicians currently in office think of all this - if they think about such Pan European projects at all? And Switzerland cannot simply expect its EU relations in all their complexity to be resolved with the NEAT as a magic wand. But the pattern has been set. We are a European nation. 



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Stamp News

Michael Farr

From time to time I report on new issues of Swiss stamps with a transport theme and I have to admit I missed the double CHF1 stamp issued in May to mark the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel. It and the related merchandise, including a multi-language 37 page book at CHF39.90 should still be available from stamps@post.ch

or www.postshop.ch. In the past I have often referred to the magazine 'Focus on Stamps' published free of charge by SwissPost. Unfortunately they have decided to no longer print an English version of the journal, although it will continue to be available online. Subscribers have been asked to choose if they would like the printed magazine in German, French or Italian, or if they will continue to read it online. The German magazine is called Die Lupe, the French La Loupe and the Italian La Lente. 