

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Mobility in the Alps : multi-lane snarl-ups
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907637>

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Multi-lane snarl-ups

BY HANSPETER GUGGENBÜHL

Since 1970 road traffic in Switzerland has doubled in volume. At the same time the Swiss remain European champions in rail travel.

DISENGAGE CLUTCH, set gear, drive fifty meters, engage clutch, first gear, stop. This was part of a motorist's normal workday in 1970. At half past seven in the morning car commuters from the right-hand lakeshore would build up congestion heading into Zurich's Bellevueplatz. At the weekend the situation would be reversed: city-dwellers heading off to spend the weekend in the country or the mountains would create early-morning congestion heading towards Lake Walen. If an initiative had been launched in 1970 asking the electorate whether they wanted to double motorised road traffic by 2000, this totally unreasonable proposal it would almost certainly have been rejected.

Disengage clutch, get into gear, inch forward. Engage clutch, disengage gear, stand still again. This is the situation in the year 2000. Tens of thousands of motorists experience the same frustration day after day, with queues building up to the Baregg Tunnel near Baden, the Brütiseller cross-roads north of Zurich or at the Gotthard. Those at home are kept informed by half-hourly traffic reports by Radio DRS.

More cars, less efficiency

So has there been no change in the traffic situation for 30 years? Not quite: in the 1970s congestion was limited to one or at

most two lanes. Nowadays traffic jams take up three lanes, as motorway sections like the Baregg Tunnel force traffic in both directions from three to two lanes. The traffic jam is the downside of the car's success. Yet so far traffic jams have no more halted the mobilisation process than the oil crisis of the 1970s, the threat of forest degradation in the 1980s, or warnings of climatologists in the 1990s. This applies equally to Switzerland: the European leader in rail travel, and the "green" model country which is continually preaching environmentalism and introduced rigorous emission restrictions for vehicles and industrial plants earlier than any other European nation.

Between 1970 and 2000 the number of private cars in Switzerland rose by a factor of 2.5. Today there are 3.5 million cars to 7.2 million residents. During the same period the number of kilometers travelled by road (vehicle mileage) also doubled, and carrying

capacity, measured in kilometers per person (Pkm), increased by an estimated 70 percent. These statistics point not only to the massive rise in road traffic, but also to its decreasing efficiency. The average car now covers fewer kilometers per year and transports fewer persons than in 1970; yet has grown larger and more powerful. Rail traffic has also grown since 1970 but less strongly. The proportion of passenger transportation (in Pkm) accounted for by rail dropped from 16 to 13 percent. Despite this, with approximately 1800 kilometers per person per year, Switzerland is second only to Japan when it comes to rail travel.

Going round in circles

In recent years there has been a close correlation between transport, settlement, economic structure and road construction. The spread of the car has allowed employers and retailers to concentrate their production

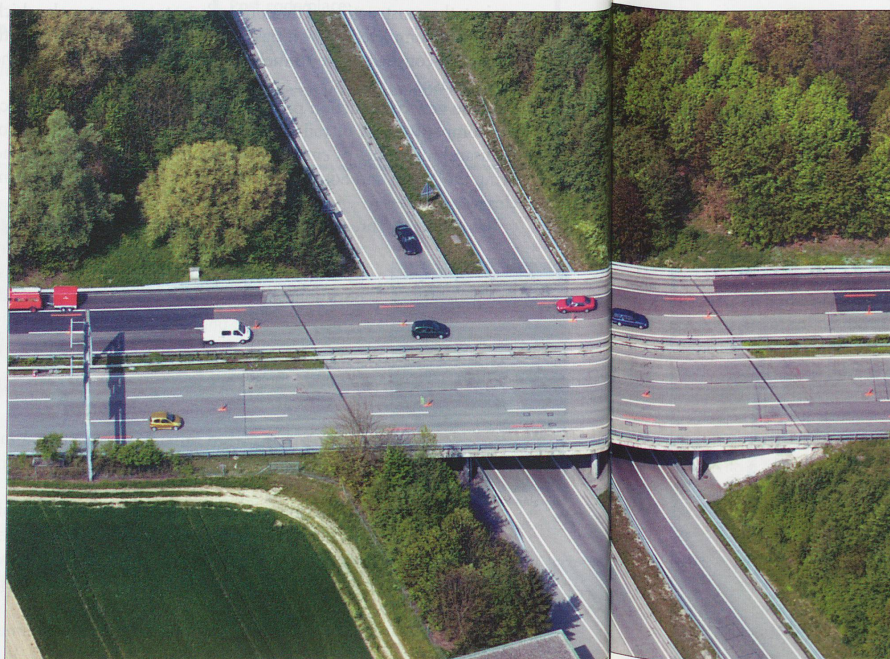


Photo: Markus Seim

plants, offices and shops far from residential areas and railway stations. And the growing distance between place of residence, work and shopping area has swelled the volume of road traffic. To escape the noise and stink of traffic in suburbs, people are spending their free time further and further from home. And because they do so by car, they are also congesting holiday resorts.

The growth in traffic to work, shopping centres and leisure destinations necessitated more roads. The construction of four- to six-lane motorways, and the widening and upgrading of cantonal roads have changed the landscape of Switzerland as drastically as the growth of housing settlements have changed the face of cities and villages. More

roads in turn generate more traffic and longer traffic jams. More traffic soaks up more petrol and means more fuel tax for the public purse. With more fuel tax, which in Switzerland must be spent on roads, the government and cantons must build more roads, which will generate more traffic and cause more jams. The spiral is never-ending. For some years now the government has been promoting rail transport with the aim of taking the strain off congested roads. New rail routes are under construction in the Mittelland for "Bahn 2000", as well as two new alpine rail transversals (Neat) through the Gotthard and Lötschberg. The Swiss government, cantons and communities invest CHF 6 to 7 billion a year on constructing and extending the Swiss traffic infrastructure.

Stop-and-go politics

There has never been a lack of political moves to put a brake on traffic growth. Countless initiatives to limit national and cantonal road construction or introduce car-free Sundays or holidays have been proposed, heatedly discussed and usually resoundingly defeated in the long run.

Only the alpine initiative, which called for all heavy goods vehicles transiting the Swiss Alps to be transferred from road to rail by 2004, found majority approval in 1994. But traffic overruled the wording of the Federal Constitution: since 1994 transalpine heavy goods traffic has again increased and will continue to grow until 2004.

In the 1990s a radical turnaround was attempted by a group of young people calling themselves «umverkehR». To protect the environment and eliminate traffic jams, they called for a halving of motorised road traffic. In the spring of 2000 the Swiss electorate rejected this initiative by a 78 percent majority.

While it was difficult for people in 1970 to imagine doubling what they already considered to be high traffic volumes, they now appear to regard halving the volume to the 1970 level as inconceivable. The rolling stone of traffic appears to have gathered no political moss.

Switzerland has perfected the art of motorway construction, and its highways have long been the most expensive in Europe. Year after year CHF 1.5 billion is invested in them.

More cars, less transport efficiency

Number of cars as well as vehicle and transport mileage on the road from 1970 to 2000

All indexed: 1970 = 100

