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Along the mule trails. A hiking trail from the alpine north to the Mediterranean south winds its way from the Urnerland to Ticino. Notes on the history and culture along the former mule track over the Saint Gotthard Pass. By Rolf Ribl



An historic train combination puffs its way across the Wassner viaduct on the line between Erstfeld and the Ticino on 1 June 2007, the 125th anniversary of the Gotthard railway.

It's a hot day in August, with temperatures above 30°C in the shade. Most of the St. Gotthard trains take a short break at Flüelen station on Lake Uri. At the port, the old steamship Schiller casts off. Here stands the enormous iron "Rütlichwur" sculpture from the 1964 Swiss Exhibition. And here too is where the "Swiss Path" from Rütli has passed since the celebrations marking the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation.

The Reuss Canal from Flüelen to Attinghausen was once one of the greatest achievements of the new Swiss state in 1848. On the floor of the Reuss valley, we are reminded of the disaster of 1987. In the night of 25 August, torrential rains in the St. Gotthard region caused the river to breach dams in three places. The mass of water engulfed railway lines and washed away entire houses. The muddy flows drenched Flüelen, Seedorf and Attinghausen, flooding 270 hectares of land and drowning 800 farm animals (though luckily no people). The motorway, the most important link between north and south, was partially or completely blocked for weeks.

We wander on upstream, constantly in view of the mighty Birstenstock. Shortly before Erstfeld we come across heavy iron gates embedded in rock; a military no-go area where in the past we prepared for war during our national service, producing newspapers, radio and TV programmes deep inside the mountain. Since the opening of St. Gotthard railway in 1882, Erstfeld has been a railway village. A mighty Krokodil CE 6/8 locomotive from 1919 stands on the Swiss Federal Railways site.

Soon we reach the village of Silenen, which has served as a base for mule packers and pilgrims since the 13th century. The "dörfli" (little village) in Obersilenen is famous. This hamlet of national importance contains the ruins of a five-storey tower built in 1240 and a splendid warehouse where mule packers reloaded their goods. A few steps further on, you enter another era: shortly before Amsteg, we find the huge construction site of the Gotthard base tunnel. It is here that Alp-Transit Gotthard is drilling the world's longest railway tunnel on behalf of the Swiss government and the federal railways, a near-flat

track stretching 57 kilometres between Erstfeld and Bodio.

Famous St. Gotthard hiker

In Amsteg we spend the night at the historic Hotel Stern & Post, which was an inn at the foot of the Gotthard Pass trail as early as 1357. The mule track passed by, there was a warehouse for reloading packs and feeding the animals, and tolls were levied. The owners have a guest book dating back to 1833. The most famous contemporary, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, passed through in the late 18th century on his three trips to St. Gotthard. "On 20 June 1775, we left Altdorf for Amsteg, where they prepared tasty baked fish for us", the poet wrote in his diary.

Heavy, grey clouds hang in the sky. We follow the marshland path upwards and cross an area at risk from avalanche on the Birstenstock. A few sun-bleached 16th- and 17th-century wooden houses on stone foundations still dot the marshland, with arcades and many flowers.

We reach the village of Gurtellen along the cantonal road. It's cold and wet, so we retreat to the small Hotel Gotthard, where for years four sisters have been serving customers and earning heaps of praise from gourmet guides.

Alpine spectacle

An hour's walk further on, we approach Wasen and its pretty little hilltop church. The village is at the intersection between three alpine roads: the Oberalp leads into Bündnerland, the Furka into Valais and the Susten Pass into the Bernese Oberland.

The path up St. Gotthard now follows an old mule trail. After crossing a wooden footbridge over the Reuss (by the hamlet of Neiselen), we find ourselves on ever-steeper terrain and have to watch our footing. After that the path is clear to Göschenen, the famous village on St. Gotthard's northern gateway. On this cold and wet day, the highest parish in Uri's Reuss Valley appears deserted, grey and gloomy.

The new day is just as rainy and cold. The path through the old part of the village leads past the well-preserved former tollgate. We climb up to the Schöllenen turning. After the Häderlisbrücke, a faithful copy of a 17th-century bridge over the Reuss, the mountain pass, railway tracks and hiking trail are squeezed between ever-narrower walls of sheer stone. A sign warns us about falling rocks.

The Teufelsbrücke legend

Suddenly it's there: the legendary narrowest part of the Schöllenen Gorge. We walk over the bridge which opened up the ravine to stagecoaches in 1830 and later to motor vehicles. Far below are the remains of the old Teufelsbrücke (Devil's Bridge) built around 1220. It was along this foam-sprayed foot-bridge without railings that intrepid mule packers, shepherds and pilgrims traversed the raging Reuss.

The cold wind sucks the fog patches from St. Gotthard through this bottleneck. In the inn by the bridge we remember the legend our parents told us about the Teufelsbrücke: the people of Uri wanted to build a bridge in the Schöllenen Gorge, but no-one knew how. So the devil offered to build the bridge on condition that he could have the soul of the first person to cross it. When the wise people of Uri chased a billy-goat across first, the devil flew into a rage and picked up a house-sized rock to smash the bridge to pieces. But on his way he encountered an old woman who scratched a cross on the rock, whereupon the devil ran away, leaving the rock and the bridge. (The "devil's rock" now stands in front of the north entrance to the road tunnel).

Aside from the Teufelsbrücke, there is another very special monument: a 12 metre-high carved granite cross with a Cyrillic inscription. The cross is dedicated to the Russian general Alexander Suvorov and his fallen soldiers in honour of their tremendous achievement in crossing the Alps on 24 September 1799. French emperor Napoleon had set up the Helvetic Republic in the then Swiss Confederation, but Russia and Austria wanted to kick the French out. So Suvorov headed across the St. Gotthard Pass from northern Italy with 21,000 soldiers. A bitter battle ensued in the Schöllenen Gorge, where the French had holed up. Despite suffering heavy casualties, the 70-year-old general emerged victorious and headed on towards Altdorf. Pursued by the French, the remaining 14,000 men left Switzerland on 11 October.

Gold fever in Andermatt

Contemplating such reminders of days gone by, we wander into the cheerful Urseren valley. Andermatt and its centuries-old barrier woodland lie in the background. The narrow road in the well-preserved old part of the village is cobbled in natural stone and has two lanes of tiled granite, testimony to the age of the stagecoach. The lovingly furnished Tal-museum is located in one of the prettiest houses in the entire valley. Even General Suvorov spent the night there.

Andermatt has the same problems as all the other villages in the Reuss and Urseren valleys: the economy and tourism are under threat, young people are moving away, and the army and the national railways are withdrawing from the canton. So plans by a rich Egyptian investor to build an 800-bed luxury holiday resort in Andermatt – complete with wellness spa and sporting facilities such as a golf course – seem like a gift from the gods. Not surprisingly, the village has been struck by gold fever.

Hospental lies an hour's walk away in the middle of the Urseren valley. The medieval tower looms over the village, set out across 1500 square metres. The lovely baroque Hotel St. Gotthard stands along the old mule trail by a Roman bridge over the Reuss. It was here that General Suvorov set up camp on 24 September 1799.

The mule trail along the fledgling Reuss leads straight up below the mountain pass.

The most beautiful building by the Gottharthospiz and its little lake is the "Alte Sust", built at an altitude of 2114 metres in 1847. Ticinese architect Domenico Fontana designed the square building, whose gate on the main façade gave it a Mediterranean character. Its large roof once sheltered not only a hotel and post office but also a coach and sleigh house, and stables for horses and oxen. Since 1986, the building has housed the Gotthard Museum. "God and the devil faced off on the path to St. Gotthard," the Museo Nazionale del San Gottardo proclaims to visitors. It graphically illustrates

Man's arduous battle with the forces of Nature, the life of the mule packers and postmen, the courage of winter travellers, the stagecoach era and the battles for control of the pass.

In the "Valley of Trembling"

The next morning we leave the Albergo San Gottardo Ospizio in thick fog, and therefore choose to descend to the old road rather than taking the mountain hiking trail. The mountain pass in Val Tremola ("Valley of Trembling") was built in 1830 and gradually improved from 1935 onwards. This light-brown granite road winds down into the valley through 24 well-developed hairpin bends. The early morning hike in this lonely alpine landscape, with its marmots and splendid views into the Leventina and Bredretto valleys, is a real adventure. The nascent River Ticino bubbles cheerfully down into the valley. Unfortunately, the Tremola is now also open to traffic. It seems almost a miracle that the coachmen of the nostalgic St. Gotthard postal service from Airolo to Andermatt managed to control their team of five horses on this precipitous route.

After a two-and-a-half-hour walk we reach Airolo, the centre of the upper Leventina. The 3000-metre-plus peaks of the Rotondo group rise up to the west. A bronze sculpture at the station pays tribute to the miners who died during the construction of the railway tunnel. Nearly all were Italian guest workers.

We've crossed the Gotthard! We continue our hike from the alpine north to the Mediterranean south on the Strada alta Valle Leventina. This upland trail about 1000 metres above sea level connects the villages on the sunny, left side of the Ticino Valley. They are charming little hamlets with lovely old churches and houses with slate roofs. The popular upland path can be traversed in three days: to Osco, then on to Anzonico and finally down the valley to Bisaca and – if you so desire – to Bellinzona, the capital of the Ticino.

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