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All aboard the Lötschberg Express. Starting in December, goods and passenger trains will travel through the 34-kilometre base tunnel from Frutigen to Raron, marking a milestone in Swiss transport policy. Yet the Lötschberg is only the first, relatively minor, section of the new AlpTransit rail link. Only when the Gotthard and Monte Ceneri rail tunnels are completed will there be an end-to-end flat-rail link between North and South. By René Lenzin



The AlpTransit construction site in Mittholz (left). The portal construction site by the Rhone at Raron in the Valais (centre). The official opening on 15 June 2007, also in Raron (right).

The Lötschberg Base Tunnel was officially opened on 15 June this year, but is scheduled to go into full operation when the rail timetable changes in December. Among the many national and international VIPs who attended the opening ceremony was Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger. "Aside from the astonishing technical feat and the achievements of everyone involved, the Lötschberg tunnel is much more than a grandiose hole through the mountain," said Switzerland's transport minister. It embodied "the consistent implementation of Switzerland's road-to-rail transport policy, which is regarded as exemplary throughout Europe."

Indeed, by expanding the capacity for transit traffic through Switzerland, the tun-

nel represents an important step towards the aim of shifting road traffic to rail, which Switzerland has enshrined under law with a view to reducing the number of heavy-goods vehicles crossing the Alps to 650,000 per year.

More than 16 million excavated

The construction project boasts some impressive technical statistics. The twin-bore tunnel runs a length of 34.6 kilometres, with 104 cross-galleries between the two bores. The construction of the tunnel and rail infrastructure took eight years. During the most intensive phase, 2,600 people were employed on the construction site, including 2,000 miners. 16.6 million tonnes of material

were excavated. At 1998 prices, the final cost of the tunnel was CHF 4.3 billion: a billion more than planned. Including inflation, interest and VAT, the cost has risen to CHF 5.3 billion.

The Lötschberg is the first section of the New Railway Link through the Alps (NRLA) or AlpTransit line, the concept for which was drawn up in the late 1980s. The first ideas for a base tunnel through the Alps were published directly after the Second World War. Even as late as 1983, the Federal Council believed that there was no urgent need for such a tunnel, three years after the relevant department of the Ministry of Transport was commissioned to draw up a list of variants. After this, however, things happened fast:

WHITHER THE ROUTE SOUTH?

The Gotthard axis of the NRLA is scheduled for completion by 2020. However it's not yet clear what will happen south of the two base tunnels. An agreement signed between Switzerland and Italy declares that our southern neighbour will create the necessary capacities to tackle traffic volumes on the Gotthard and Lötschberg axis. But in reality Italy has made little or no moves in this direction.

This summer, a high-level official of Italy's state railways caused a furore when he declared the

Ceneri tunnel superfluous. Italy, he claimed, wants heavy goods traffic to by-pass Milan to the west, i.e. either on the Lötschberg-Simplon route or through the Gotthard and then along Lake Maggiore on the as-yet single-track line. This statement provoked an angry reaction, particularly in Switzerland, which died down only when Italian Transport Minister Antonio Di Pietro intervened, assuring the Swiss that the Gotthard axis was a priority for Italy. He went on to say that his country would expand the Como-Milan line to

four tracks end-to-end, and in so doing strengthen the historic Gotthard route via Lugano, Chiasso and Como. Where exactly the money for this is to come from is far from clear. After all, given the desolate nature of Italy's state finances, so many infrastructure projects are in the planning stage that some painful cuts will be unavoidable.

But Switzerland, too, needs additional funds. Not only are the base tunnels more expensive than planned, but enormous additional investment will need to be made on the section between Lugano

and Chiasso if the Gotthard line is to be a fast through-route. The current route, more than a hundred years old and with quite a few twists and turns, travels via the Melide dam. The Federal Office of Transport has commissioned a study to examine and compare the four options for a new high-speed rail route. All options require an underwater or above-water crossing and several tunnels. The costs are likely to hit the CHF 3 billion mark. This sum is not accounted for in the budget for major construction projects for public transport.

In 1990, the Government approved the Gotthard and Lötschberg concept, which Parliament adopted in 1991.

Swiss voters gave a clear thumbs-up to the NRLA in two referenda. In 1992, they voted in favour of the two-tunnel option. And in 1998, after the original ROI analyses for the NRLA had been declared completely unrealistic, they approved a financing concept for major public transport construction projects. The concept envisaged a fund made up of revenue from statutory levies (VAT, performance-related heavy-goods vehicle tax and a mineral oil tax) and refundable loans and advances. But the new calculations also proved too optimistic. In recent months there has been a growing acceptance that the railway will only be able to recoup part of the construction costs. The Federal Council and Parliament have therefore converted the loan of some CHF 2.5 billion, which matured at the end of 2004 into an advance payment.

One track only

To date, opinions in Switzerland have been divided on whether two base tunnels are really needed and which of the two axes is the more important. As part of the financial compromise reached at the time, it was decided that the Lötschberg tunnel would initially be constructed with only one track. This limits its capacity and hence also its potential for shifting transportation from road to rail. Yet a full-blown Lötschberg would only be of limited use for international transit traffic, since its southward continuation through the Simplon tunnel to Domodossola remains an alpine rail section. For heavy goods traffic this means two locomotives, lower speeds and shorter trains.

Daniel Nordmann, Head of SBB Cargo, made his position clear in a recent interview: "Nothing much would change for heavy goods traffic because the Lötschberg is not a base tunnel. The difference in height will remain the same. It links the Bernese Oberland with

the Upper Valais and not the Mittelland with Domodossola. Only the Gotthard base tunnel will increase productivity significantly." Similar sentiments were expressed at a seminar held by Hupac, a company with 40 years of experience in combined transport. Only the route through the Gotthard and Monte Ceneri, which is scheduled to open between 2017 and 2020, will be an end-to-end flat-rail track.

Yet these reservations do not appear to be dampening enthusiasm for the new Lötschberg tunnel. For passengers at least, it will result in vastly shorter travel times, cutting journeys from Basel and Berne to Milan by almost an hour. From a purely Swiss perspective, the main benefit is that it brings the Valais closer to German-speaking Switzerland. For residents of the Upper Valais, the capital will be within commuting distance. People in the north and south of Switzerland are hoping that the faster link will increase tourist numbers. It remains to be seen how justified these hopes are.

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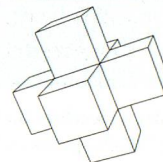
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