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Breakthrough in the world's longest railway tunnel. The 57-kilometre Gotthard tunnel is the centrepiece of the new flat rail link through the Alps. The breakthrough in the east tube was achieved in October, while the same stage is expected to be reached in the west tube by April. Trains will be running through the Gotthard by 2017 at the latest. By René Lenzin

Switzerland was celebrating a world record on the Gotthard in mid-October with the breakthrough in the east tube of the new railway base tunnel. This is a superlative feat as, at 57 kilometres, it is the world's longest tunnel. The breakthrough was achieved on schedule, 30 kilometres from the south portal in Bodio (Ticino) and 27 kilometres from the north portal in Erstfeld (Uri) with a minor deviation of eight centimetres horizontally and one centimetre vertically. The Gotthard base tunnel consists of two parallel, single-track tubes, which are connected by 40-metre intersections every 325 metres. The

total length of the tunnel system, including all the shafts and galleries, is 151.8 km.

The excavation teams from the north and south should also be able to shake hands in the west tube this April. Installation of the tracks and railway technology has already begun in the excavated tunnel sections. The first passenger and freight trains will hurtle through the tunnel, designed for maximum speeds of 250 kilometres per hour, by 2017 at the latest. However, the Gotthard line will only become a continuous flat rail link when the 15.4-kilometre base tunnel in Monte

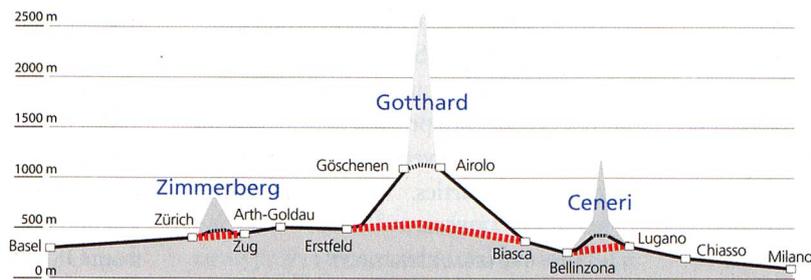
Celebrations at the Gotthard breakthrough last October.



Ceneri is opened. This section between Bellinzona and Lugano, which also has two tubes, is set to open in 2019.

Together with Lötschberg, opened in 2007, Gotthard and Ceneri will make up the New Railway Link through the Alps

(NRLA), which the Swiss people approved in principle in 1992. Six years later, they voted in favour of a financing proposal that earmarked a total of 30 billion Swiss francs for major railway projects. Just under half of that amount has been allocated to the NRLA project. The estimated final costs for the Gotthard section amount to 12.25 billion Swiss francs, with 2.42 billion being spent on Ceneri.



NRLA is the cornerstone of Swiss transport policy, which aims for rail to handle as much freight transport through the Alps as possible. NRLA is also part of the European railway corridor from Rotterdam to Genoa. However, it now looks as

though this line will not be fully completed when NRLA opens. Switzerland has had to make cuts to the access lines to the base tunnel for financial reasons, and neighbouring countries, Germany and Italy, are unlikely to complete the access links to the north and south before 2019.

For more information, visit www.alptransit.ch

Trains will travel to and from Italy through this giant hole from 2017.

