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Switzerland's biggest aerial transport network

Mountainous Uri has more originally designed, small cable cars passing over gaping precipices than any other canton. Once a crucial link to the outside world for remote mountain farms, they now serve sustainable tourism as well.

JÜRG STEINER

Eggenbergli is a small plateau high up on the steep, shadowed flank of the deep Schächental valley stretching from the cantonal capital Altdorf to the rocky wilderness of the Klausen pass. As regards vehicle access, only the mountain farmers with their local knowledge can reach Eggenbergli by off-road motorcycle, but there are also two 1,500-metre-long wire cables stretching from Weiler Witterschwendan up to the Klausen pass road. They are crucial as they enable a mode of transport that is both historical and innovative.

The two small cable cars, constructed in 1953 and painted green to match the woods and meadows, look like lovingly restored exhibition pieces from a vintage museum. Up to four people can fit on the two benches; the luggage is kept in an outside holding compartment. A double-sided mechanical grip, as thin as spaghetti straps, connects the cabin to the four wheels on the cable. The passengers start the cable car by inserting a token and pressing a button. When the electrically powered cabin starts to glide down the steep valley, it tilts sharply forwards, taking the passengers' breath away, albeit only briefly.

Connection to civilisation

Then the passengers glide serenely in a type of suspended 2CV, the cult two



horsepower Citroën, over open farmland: meadows often at a dizzyingly steep angle, islands of bright-green livening up the sombre mountain forest, houses scattered over the hillside and farmers applying straw blowers to the dried hay. The mountainside is inaccessible by road.

Cable cars seemingly lost in time like the one at Eggenbergli are inextricably linked to the landscape cultivated by the Uri mountain farmers. "The cantonal land improvement de-



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. Today: a visit to the region with Switzerland's densest cable car network

partment supported the construction of many small cable cars in Uri after the Second World War," says historian Romed Aschwanden. He is head of the *Kulturen der Alpen* (Cultures of the Alps) institute, which is an outpost of the University of Lucerne in Altdorf and researches, *inter alia*, the cable car culture in Uri, including some quite original projects. For example, musicologist Michel Roth records the sounds of the swaying cables in the Schächental valley so he can make



a composition out of the archived sounds.

The historian Aschwanden, on the other hand, is more interested in the cable cars' social impact: small cable cars were as important to the mountain community in Uri as more traditional land improvement measures, such as drainage or correcting the water table in flat land. They facilitated the cultivation of agricultural land and improved its economic viability by providing a connection to civilisation. The cable car connection to outlying settlements allowed children to attend school and gave parents improved access to their second jobs in the valley.

The "Niederberger Schiffli"

The terrain in the canton of Uri is highly contorted and steep, hence its uniquely dense network of cable cars, 38 of which are still licensed for transporting people all over the canton. A ride in the small, open cabin from Bristen in the Maderanertal valley to Waldiberg or from Musenalp down to Chlital in Isenthal is as spectacular as that to Eggenbergli.

Remigi Niederberger, an industrial pioneer from Nidwalden, invested heavily in the cable car boom. He was a blacksmith who recognised the inherent potential of cable networks as a mode of transport around the turn of the century. He and his sons developed, as Aschwanden recounts, their own model designed precisely for the rugged mountain terrain: a very small cabin, reduced to the bare essentials while offering protection from the weather, with short grips compatible with low pylons. The "Niederberger Schiffli", which are still used at Eggenbergli, are now part of the rich history of cable car design.

Public transport into the heights

A small gondola goes up, via a mid-way stop, from Schächental valley to the high Ruogig plateau with its pastureland. There are small farms spread out over a wide distance from the Mittelstation (half-way up) and the Bergstation (at the top), they are connected to the main axis via smaller goods cable lifts. Milk and hay are gathered and dispatched to the valley using this method and daily necessities are dis-

The Eggenbergli "Niederberger Schiffli" looks like it belongs in a vintage museum.
Photos: Uri Tourismus



Passengers need to work out for themselves in the "Niederberger Schiffli" cockpit how to get it moving.
Photo: Jürg Steiner

seminated to the farming families in the same way. "The Uri cable car culture is not just about the main route, but also the myriad micro connections to the far-flung settlements," says the historian Aschwanden. It is, in effect, an aerial, vertically-oriented public transport network.

The curious aspect of this system is its inability to cover costs. "The many small, low-frequency connections can't really be profitable," confirms Toni Arnold, head of the Uri cable car association. This is due in no small measure to growing security requirements. Even if the small lines look like badly maintained temporary measures at first glance, according to Arnold they undergo regular checks as prescribed by law. Every line is officially tested annually and the cable is X-rayed using a special procedure. The only accidents in the past few decades involved goods cable lifts carrying people, which is not allowed.

Roads as an alternative

Arnold hopes the growth of outdoor tourism will make the small Uri cable cars more economically viable,



particularly as most of them are now equipped to carry mountain bikes. At the same time, Arnold is aware that the road network will increasingly encroach on the traditional cable car routes in the medium term. Although "the road is not better than the cable car in every way", as Arnold notes. Nonetheless, access by road is more

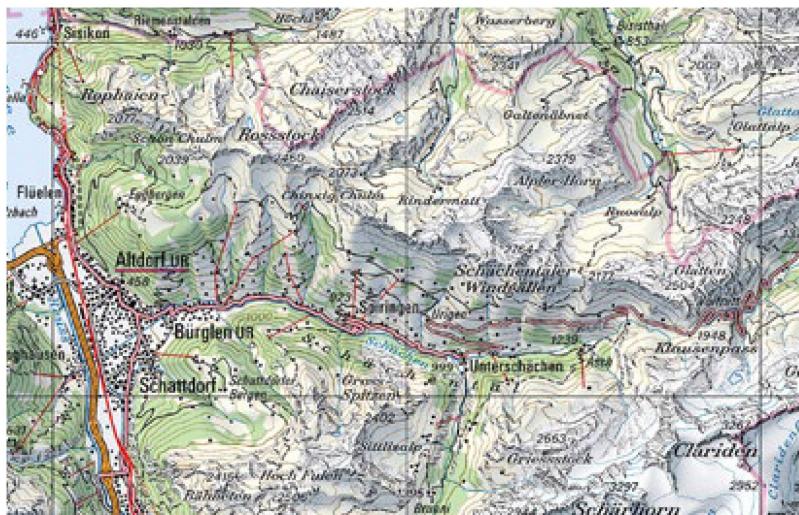
convenient and less complicated. Then again, cable cars are preferable during the winter when the roads are icy. Furthermore, their limited capacity acts as a barrier against mass incursions and ensures gentle, ecological tourism, which is currently in demand. The cable cars are especially useful in winter as they can take

Left: The Amsteg-Arnisee cable car covers 790 metres in altitude. **Right:** Cable cars on the Hofstetten-Wilerli line are open to the elements.
Photos: Uri Tourismus

touring skiers to off-piste slopes when there is an increased avalanche risk higher up.

Farmer Martin Gisler is not a tourist; however, he is still against building a road in the area. He is in charge of operating the cable car from Witterschwanden to Eggenbergli that provides a valuable service as a public transport option. All five pylons are also stops at the press of a button. Five families live on the slope below the cable car all year round and each stop serves a house. Gisler lives at the fifth pylon. He particularly values the aerial transport during the snowy winter, when it takes the whole day just to clear the path to his house.

The local business development association recently discussed building a road to replace the old cable car, but decided against it. And not only for cost reasons. The inhabitants of Eggenbergli just cannot imagine living without a cable car.



The Schächental (Schächental valley) in the canton of Uri has a plethora of cable cars. These are marked as red lines on the map.
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