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Autor: Herzog, Stéphane
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In the shadow of the largest railway tunnel in the world

The Gotthard Base Tunnel links Erstfeld (UR) and Bodio (TI) and stretches for 57 kilometres. It is the longest railway tunnel in the world. Its inauguration, in 2016, turned the spotlight on the two municipalities at either end. But the anticipated economic boom never arrived. Report.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Erstfeld: Pia Tresch-Walker, president of Erstfeld municipality (above left) believes Erstfeld has gone back to being a provincial village since the tunnel opened. Admittedly, it wasn't exactly vibrant on the day of our visit.

Bodio: Stefano Imelli (left), the president of Biasca, wants to see at least some fast trains stopping in the municipality. The working day of train driver Cédric Jacob (below) still centres on the tunnel: he transports the maintenance staff to the tunnel tube at night.

Photos: Stéphane Herzog

As they exit the little station of Erstfeld, visitors step out onto the historic road of the Gotthard Pass. On the left, the SBB staff canteen, which used to be open 24 hours per day. On the right, the Frohsinn hotel. At one time this hotel recorded 12,000 overnight stays per year, but nowadays it is closed to travellers. There is nowhere to stay overnight in this little commune of Uri, which saw the growth of a village of labourers and railway workers during the construction of the first Gotthard Pass railway tunnel, opened in 1882. "Erstfeld steht und fällt mit den SBB" – the commune lives and falls with the SBB – says Pia Tresch-Walker, the mayor. "I had no doubt that the opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel posed a risk to us. We have lost almost everything now. The number of jobs has fallen with the opening of the tunnel and Erstfeld has ended up a provincial town once again." What's more, the SBB's hold on the commune's land has restricted its real estate development, a situation that Erstfeld is trying to change by negotiating with the SBB with support from the canton.

Before 2016, the first year of the Gotthard Base Tunnel, Erstfeld and its large train depot welcomed over 600 SBB employees. Today, the centre for maintenance and security for the tunnel employs 80 people and the station only around 50. The commune has witnessed the closure of several of its restaurants and shops. The former mayor of Erstfeld, Paul Jans, knows this story off by heart. In 1949, his father bought the Frohsinn hotel; Jans went on to manage it himself until 2014. The Gotthard Pass line saw 300 trains go by per day. "The opening of the first tunnel brought running water and street numbering," recalls Jans. There was at least one SBB employee in every family. The engineers who came to live in Uri took up roles in the communal council or on the school boards, contributing

their skills to the communities. "Today, the SBB doesn't accept apprentices in Erstfeld," laments Pia Tresch-Walker, whose husband is a train driver.

An invisible tunnel

At Erstfeld, the northern gate of the construction is blocked by barriers. Paul Jans takes us to visit it. From a distance, we can make out the sharp angles of the concrete opening designed by Ticino architect Flora Ruchat-Roncati. In fact, it is also possible to go to see the trains pass by from an access gallery located in Amsteg, which houses a special windowed area. But Covid-19 has put the brakes on this tourist activity.

In all honesty, hopes of prosperity for Erstfeld were extinguished from the moment the construction site was opened for the base tunnel by Alp Transit, a subsidiary of the SBB. Engineers and workers were grouped together in a space located outside the commune, further north. "It was like a sort of barracks, with 350 beds and a canteen. The workers, some of whom came from Austria, worked flat out for four days, then returned to their homes to rest," explains Paul Jans. All Erstfeld received from this presence was a share of the withholding taxes taken from the workers' salaries.

What's more, the new railway line through the Alps does not even connect Erstfeld to Ticino. To get to Bellinzona, you first have to travel back towards Flüelen. But this doesn't stop mayor Pia Tresch-Walker from using the connection approximately 15 times per year. On Sunday, the town's inhabitants also head to Bellinzona to make the most of a low-cost buffet on offer there. The train takes them there in just 36 minutes.

What changes beyond the tunnel? "The mentality is more relaxed, the food is good, and the wine, too," says the mayor, who also likes to take



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful?

In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. Today: at the entrance to the world's longest railway tunnel.

the “Bergstrecke”, the historic route and its 15 km alpine tunnel. She finds the people of Ticino more combative than on this side of the Alps. “In Ticino, there are strikes. Here, we wait.” Nevertheless, thanks to negotiations with the SBB, the mayor seems confident things will change. An agreement would allow the commune to win back the SBB land. It notably has plans to construct a bed & breakfast in Erstfeld station, and guarantees on maintaining SBB jobs are also up for discussion.

Bodio would like to see the train stop at Biasca

In Bodio, the shutters of the Albergo Stazione are lowered. “I close them to keep out the carbon dust,” explains Tiziana Guzzi-Batzu, the manager, pointing towards a nearby factory. We can hear the continuous whistle of heavy goods vehicles moving along the A2 motorway. Here in the Leventina, the arrival of the “Alp Transit”, as the locals have named the base tunnel, sparked hope. The construction was to help in the uphill road to recovery after two economic setbacks: the inception of the Gotthard motorway in 1980 and the closure in 1994 of the Monteforno steel plant. “But there was no upturn,” states Stefano Imelli, mayor of Bodio since 2016, who nevertheless has fond memories of the celebration for the tunnel’s inauguration attended by François Hollande and Angela Merkel.

The construction site for the base tunnel worked like a ghetto, recalls Marco Costi, the mayor of Bodio from 2000 until 2016. “We received very little. The municipality had to give up several hectares of land to the Confederation. There was smog, dust and noise.” During this period two bakeries closed. Long gone is the time when the commune boasted the highest number of restaurants per inhabitant in Ticino. The only positive point is that the pollution and noise levels have dropped. Imelli remembers the traffic on the Gotthard Pass. Three walkways allowed children to cross the stream of cars to go to school. There are many factory workers in the industrial park just above the village. They come

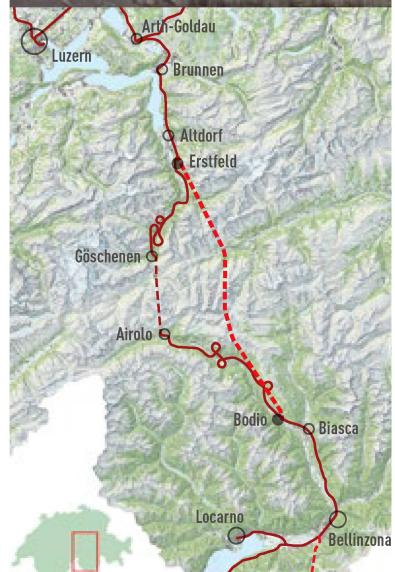
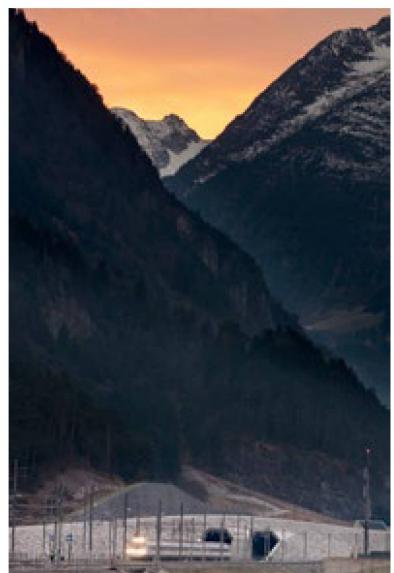
from northern Italy and Sardinia. Their life is punctuated by the events organised by Catholic associations, scouts and the football club. So, life in the commune is flourishing. “I have never heard people talking about us and them,” underlines the mayor.

The absence of a tunnel symbol

Bodio, the town which already had to fight for its station to be reopened (which happened in 2018), is now asking for the SBB to permit certain high-speed trains to stop in Biasca (and no longer only Bellinzona). “As soon as there is a station, something happens,” explains Marco Costi. Interest in the north seems low amongst the people of Bodio. Imelli does not even know the mayor of Erstfeld. Has the base tunnel attracted tourists? “What is lacking is a symbol for this tunnel,” opines Costi, who mentions the abandoned project of an arch which would have overlooked the motorway and the railway.

For some, the tunnel is part of daily life. Take Cédric Jacob for example, an SBB train driver who transports technical employees to the heart of the two tracks that make up the base tunnel. His train, 22 metres long, holds an air-conditioned living unit, with a refectory, a coffee machine and a WC. There is also a workshop and a crane. Maintenance is done during the night. The workers and engineers work in temperatures ranging from 32 to 44 degrees, depending on the season. And the humidity levels are very high. Because of the risks everyone has to be on the alert. “SBB professionals have developed skills here that are unique in the world,” considers Jacob. Having lived in Ticino since 2016, this native of the canton of Valais has a good understanding of his adopted region. “The locals are mountain people. They have learnt to live in an environment which can be harsh and where space is limited.”

The north portal of the 57 km long Gotthard Base Tunnel at Erstfeld, with the Alps towering above. Photo: Keystone



— Old Gotthard railway track
- - - New base tunnel