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"Top of Europe" aims high with quick lift

Tourists visiting one of Switzerland's most popular Alpine destinations - Jungfraujoch in the Bernese Oberland - may be able to reach it much faster in the future.

The Jungfrau Railways has announced it is looking into installing a fast lift to add to the attraction of the cogwheel railway that has been transporting people to the "Top of Europe" for nearly a century.

However, the futuristic lift or cable railway, which would shorten the journey time up to the Jungfraujoch station at 3,454 metres to about 20 minutes, came up against scepticism from some environmentalists. The current journey time from Lauterbrunnen to the Jungfraujoch is at least one hour and 40 minutes.

Management of the Jungfrau Railways said that the idea for such a tunnel connection from the Lauterbrunnen Valley climbing 2,600 metres was futuristic, but realistic. The length of the tunnel would be about six kilometres.

Estimated costs are put at up to SFr200 million, but depend to a large extent on the results of a geological survey.

The Jungfrau Railways said the new fast access would release growth potential and strengthen the touristic attractiveness of the Jungfrau region without adversely affecting the high Alpine landscape.

A statement from the Jungfrau Railways said the touristic and historic attractiveness of the cogwheel railway would be boosted, as guests could use the fast lift for the uphill or downhill journey.

The trip to the Jungfraujoch - Jungfrau saddle - could also become a half-day excursion, it added. The total journey time would be 50 minutes with a stop of about eight minutes.

The planned additional access would feature the world's longest tunnel-lift system in the world.

The statement said the railways management had now given an engineering firm in Bern the task of carrying out a feasibility study to show if and how such a new tunnel link could be built without disturbing previously untouched areas of the high Alps. Geological surveys had to be carried out in close cooperation with the authorities, environmental organisations and land-owners.

However, there are quite naturally concerns about the health of people who travel 2.6 km up or down in just 20 minutes.

JUNGFRAU RAILWAY

Swiss engineer Adolf Guyer-Zeller put forward the definitive idea for the Jungfrau Railway in 1893 but the plans go back to about 1870.

In an age of steam engines, Guyer-Zeller decided that his railway had to be powered by electricity. The railway to the 3,454 metre-high Jungfraujoch was completed in 1912, nine years later than originally planned. The costs were SFr14.9 million.

The cogwheel railway leaves the Kleine Scheidegg and goes into a tunnel through the Eiger and Mönch up to the Jungfraujoch station. The train travels about nine kilometres and climbs about 1,400 metres. The line to the "Top of Europe" has been in increasing demand since its opening, except during the First and Second World Wars. Last year a record 703,000 tourists travelled up the line.

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Sleeping ammunition allowed to lie

Thousands of tonnes of ammunition dumped in Swiss lakes in the last century will not be recovered, the defence ministry announced.

Most of the items were dumped in the lakes of Thun and Brienz in the Bernese Oberland, and in two parts of Lake Lucerne.

Experts found that the ammunition contained eight potentially harmful substances for the environment, including TNT, mercury and lead. But after examining the movement of water and sediment, they concluded that the ammunition was unlikely to corrode. They believe instead that the sediment will cover it, preventing contamination.

The only way to recover the ammunition would be to use a dredge which would stir up the sediments on the lake bed and have a serious impact on the ecosystem. There could also be a risk of explosion during the course of handling.

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