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The Gotthard through the ages

Today's travelers have different ways of getting from one side of the Gotthard Massif to the other: they can either follow the old Gotthard Pass road, as our forebears did, or they can travel through the world's longest tunnel, the new Gotthard Tunnel.

In the Middle Ages, the journey by mule track from Basel in the north of Switzerland to Chiasso in the south of the country took at least six days. It was an arduous journey for travelers and pack animals alike. Guilds of mule drivers held a monopoly over the transport of goods and levied tolls from merchants to pay for the upkeep of the route.

The journey was physically demanding and the route was perilous and full of pitfalls. Nevertheless, residents of the canton of Uri regularly took this road to transport livestock and foodstuffs from Milan and other towns on the southern side of the Alps. It therefore became imperative to improve the passage from north to south.

In 1830 the road was made accessible to horse-drawn carriages. The Gotthard Mail Coach, a three-horse carriage that would become the stuff of legend, cut the journey down to a mere three and a half days. The journey was now considerably shorter but, as we know from the personal accounts of merchants, scholars, ambassadors and travelers who crossed the Gotthard Pass by mail coach, it was still arduous.

The first Gotthard railway line was opened 52 years later, in 1882. The Gotthard Railway, which boasted automatic brakes, four-axle carriages, and salon coaches, was the pre-eminent, most modern and most technically advanced private railway at the time. The Gotthard Railway grew from strength to strength and would eventually transport hundreds of thousands of passengers a year.

A hundred and thirty-four years later, in 2016, Switzerland has inaugurated the longest rail tunnel in the world. The epic tale of the construction of this transport axis, which took on Mythic proportions over the centuries, will thus culminate in a marvel of technology.

A journey back in time and a leap into the future

There is no better way to see how far we have come than to retrace our ancestor's steps and make the journey from the north to the south of the Alps on foot. The hike takes twenty hours and provides ample opportunity to appreciate the magnitude of the construction project, admire sun-bathed

summits and learn about local legends and lore. This slow pace affords the traveler plenty of time to take in this fascinating landscape, which witnessed the dawn of time, in all its majesty.

www.houseofswitzerland.org/swissstories

The recently opened Gotthard Tunnel is also featured on our "Swiss Records" page.
-Editor



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