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Historic Furka Steam Train and Mountain Line



The Furka Cogwheel Steam Railway is a largely volunteer operated heritage railway which operates a partially rack and pinion-operated line across the Furka Pass from the small village of Realp in Uri and Oberwald in Valais. At 2,160 metres above sea level is the old mountainous section of the Furka Oberalp Bahn that was abandoned after the construction of the Furka Tunnel. It has been gradually brought back into service by the Verein Furka-Bergstrecke with the use of only steam locomotives, with the entire line completed in 2010. The Furka Railway is the second highest rail crossing in Europe, after the Bernina Railway. The Uri side of the line also constitutes the highest railway in Central Switzerland. The organisation is currently restoring 2 HG 4/4 "D" Steam Locomotives. These 0-8-0 locos were built in Switzerland for use in Vietnam, and were repatriated along with locomotives from the Furka Oberalp Bahn that had been exported to Vietnam after their use in Switzerland. Every year, 30,000 passengers enjoy this tourist attraction when it's open between the end of June and the beginning of October.

Annual Line clearing

Armed with chain saws, shovels and snow ploughs, it takes 15 volunteers three weeks to clear the snow. Here's how they do it.

In Realp, at the canteen belonging to the Furka mountain line association 2 of the 15 volunteers strap avalanche detectors onto their chests and apply sunscreen to their faces ready for another day of work. They all work for 3 weeks clearing the snow, repairing the rails and putting everything in order.

The locomotives leave the depot to the clearing site while the 2 people responsible for avalanche monitoring head off by car; they'll spend the day above the clearing site observing the snowpack and watching for avalanches so they can warn the rest via walkie-talkie.

The rest of the volunteers continue their ascent with "The Strawberry", a very small red locomotive, leading the way, followed by a large diesel locomotive. The convoy slips through snow walls and passes through a tunnel decorated with thousands of icicles. It's forced to stop in the next tunnel because the exit is completely blocked. The team needs a ladder to reach the surface of the snow, which is 16 metres high in some places because of the avalanche flow. They attack it by hand using shovels and two chainsaws. The diesel locomotive also has a snow plough at the front to clear a path through the tracks, but this doesn't work with snow deeper than 1.5 metres.

The volunteers divide themselves into small groups and get straight to work. Patrick the geophysicist has been in the club for many years: "Becoming a locomotive driver was a childhood dream that came true here at the Furka," he confides. Robert discovered the steam train last summer as a passenger and now helps with the annual clearing. He took three days off from his paid job as a Zurich optician and is delighted with the experience: "Here, it's another dimension. There's so much snow!"

A little higher up, access to the third tunnel is completely blocked. The snow is so packed down that the volunteers need a mechanical shovel to clear it. They manage to get inside and try to open the upper door. Closed all winter long, it keeps snow from invading the gallery. The metal posts that support the door are removed one by one and the sides open to reveal a wall of snow as hard as concrete. Now the volunteers will attack it from both sides. Alexander, the Zurich-area retiree, has worked with construction equipment all his life, and has been involved in snow removal for four years. "I want to keep the Furka steam train alive," he explains. "It's fun to still be able to operate machines and talk to people. Everyone helps each other."

One of the most difficult points of the excavation work is the Steffenbach Bridge, located slightly higher up. Built in 1925, it can be folded; during the winter, its parts are tucked away for protection. The volunteers have to free them of snow and unfold them in order to connect the rails. In early 20th century there was a stone bridge here but it was washed away by one of the avalanches that regularly descend the mountain.

The snow is so compact under the bridge that the team works with a chainsaw to cut away blocks of ice. Jenny, a nurse in her 30s is from Munich and has a lot of fun being active in the snow. This is the fifth year in a row that she has come to help.

"I already knew the area from summer visits, and wanted to discover it in the winter," she says.

Clearing ends at 2.00pm when the danger of avalanches is too great. Everyone goes home for the rest of the day with a smile on their face. They love their volunteer work.

Swissinfo.ch Marie Vuilleumier (text) and Thomas Kern, (photos)
En.wikipedia.com

