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THE GREAT ST. BERNARD ROAD TUNNEL IS OPEN

The first road tunnel through the Alps, the Great St. Bernard Road Tunnel, was opened to traffic on 19th March.

This tunnel, which has cost about 130 million Swiss francs, will undoubtedly be of the greatest importance to trade, cultural relations and the tourist industry. Not only will it connect the motorway networks of Scandinavia, Germany, the Benelux countries, France and Switzerland with that of Italy, but it will also afford easy access to three of the most delightful parts of Europe — Lake Geneva and the Valais in Switzerland and the Aosta Valley in Italy. It enables motorists from Great Britain to drive direct from the Channel ports to northern Italy at all times of the year, taking the usual route to Switzerland: Paris-Dijon-Vallorbe or Rheims-Besançon-Pontarlier-Vallorbe and continuing via Lausanne along the shores of the beautiful Lake of Geneva to the well-known resorts of Vevey and Montreux and then through Martigny up a picturesque mountain road to the Great St. Bernard tunnel. This route, which passes through the heart of the Lake of Geneva Region, is one of great scenic beauty and, after one or two days of hard driving, motorists on their way south will be glad to break their journey in this tourists' paradise and linger a few days before continuing towards Italy via the tunnel.

British United Air Ferries are operating daily car-ferry services from Southend and Lydd to Geneva which is only a three hours' drive away from the northern entry of the Great St. Bernard Road Tunnel, thus enabling British motorists to travel from London to the Mediterranean in one day.

The covered galleries on the northern entrance are three and a half miles long, and on the southern entrance six miles long. The tunnel is situated 6,230 feet above sea level. It is four miles long and thirty feet wide and will shorten the winter route from Martigny to Aosta by forty-three miles and provide an easy trans-alpine link throughout the year. It is estimated that annual traffic will be in the region of 300,000 vehicles.

The decision to build the St. Bernard tunnel was taken more than ten years ago, although plans had originally been made in the last century, and the ones at present in use date back to 1936. In February 1947, a Swiss commission was appointed to initiate the construction of the tunnel. Ten years were to elapse, however, before the necessary convention was signed between Italy and Switzerland, following the constitution of an Italian company on 29th November 1957.

Work on the Italian side began in summer 1958, on the Swiss side in spring 1959. The project bore fruit on 5th April 1962, when Swiss and Italian drilling teams finally met, their excitement being shared by millions of European viewers.

The pass below Mont Joux has been known for many centuries. Before the Roman conquest the Gauls used it for their incursions into Italy. Legend has it that even Hannibal made use of it. The Romans erected a temple to Jupiter on the mountain top (whence the name Mons Jovis) and they also built a highway which soon became an international artery, frequented by their legions, by merchants and by pilgrims. Monks of the Benedictine Order and later those of St. Bernard of Menthon established houses of refuge to assist weary travellers. Today, the monks of St. Bernard, who belong to the Augustinian Order, still maintain the tradition.

Over three hundred journalists and radio and television reporters took part in the opening ceremony of the tunnel on 18th March. The official inauguration will take place in spring. On the first day the tunnel was open to motorists, 1,300 vehicles passed through it.

There are toll charges ranging from four Swiss francs for a motor cycle to between nine and twenty francs for cars and between thirty and eighty francs for lorries and coaches. [S.N.T.O.]

THE STORY OF SWISSAIR

Swissair was formed in March, 1931, by a merger of Balair and Ad Astra, and from the outset the new company set a fast pace in developing air travel. In 1932 it became the first European airline to operate the Lockheed Orion, a single-engined low-wing monoplane with a retractable undercarriage. This "speed-plane", as it was called then, carried four passengers and cruised at 162 m.p.h. — 60 m.p.h. faster than any of its contemporaries.

In 1934 the twin-engined Curtiss Condor entered service with Swissair. To look after the 15 or 16 passengers this giant carried, Swissair employed the first hostess in Europe.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Swissair's fleet consisted of five DC-3s, three DC-2s, a Dragon Rapide DH-89, a Fokker F.VIIa and a Comte AC-4, totalling 163 seats.

Regular services were suspended during the war and were resumed in July 1945. Since then Swissair has spread its networks over all the continents except Australia. More than ninety-five per cent of its traffic is now carried by pure jet aircraft and a Swissair aircraft is either landing or taking off somewhere in the world every four and a half minutes, on average.

Despite the financially hazardous post-war years, Swissair has remained independent of state control and receives no form of government subsidy. During the seventeen years until 1964 it had paid out dividends of between four per cent and six per cent to its shareholders, with the exception of 1961 — financially the blackest year in aviation history, when many European airlines lost millions of pounds each. Even during that year Swissair managed to make a small net profit, though not enough to afford a dividend.

Swissair's big switch to jets brought the strength of its fleets in early 1964 to: four DC-8s, eight Coronados (two leased to Scandinavian Airlines System), eight Caravelles and eleven Convair 440 Metropolitans.

Following a cautious policy in allowing for the depreciation of its aircraft, Swissair's basic plan is to meet ninety per cent of the cost of each new aircraft over the first ten years of its life, but in good years big extra sums are used to try to bring the period down to seven years. This policy is a contrast to some airlines' depreciation periods of up to fourteen years.

Swissair became the first airline in the world to operate Convair 990 Coronados. It was also the first airline to receive permission from the makers to modify this fan-engined aircraft to Convair 990A standard. The work, performed at Swissair's own workshop at Zurich Airport, comprised the addition of Krueger flaps to the wing leading-edges, new wing fillets and rear fairings on the jet engines.

The Convair 990A Coronado, with a high-speed cruise figure of over 620 m.p.h. and room for one hundred passengers, is likely to remain the fastest airliner in the world until the supersonic Concorde comes into service.