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The Furka Tunnel is open at last

NINE years of disappointments have ended. The Furka Base Tunnel was inaugurated on June 25.

At the beginning was the dream of the then Federal Councillor Roger Bonvin who visualised a narrow-gauge railway network at an altitude of 1500m. A modest credit of Sfr. 30 million was granted but then came the first disappointments – bad rocks and sub-soil, miscalculations, lack of money.

Parliament helped again and again, and millions and more millions were swallowed by the famous and infamous "Furka-Hole". As the Neue Zürcher Zeitung said, the Furka Base Tunnel is an unwanted child for which the Confederation has accepted responsibility and has taken it in care, even though it is not its father.

Yet the Furka-Oberalp Railway considers the tunnel as a gift from God, for the new tunnel allows the trains to run regularly even in the worst winter and a service can now be guaranteed all the year round.

Much money will be saved in no longer having to clear snow and on heavy expenditure for repairing electric installations and rails after winter damage.

The "Faltbrücke" of Steffenbach had to be taken down every autumn because of the danger of avalanches and then be erected every spring. Signal stations had to be dismantled and put up again.

The Furka-Oberalp-Bahn began operating the first part of the route, Brigue-Gletsch, on June 30, 1914. Today its length covers 115km, including the Schöllenenbahn from Göschenen to Andermatt. The Furka Tunnel was only part of the original idea which also covered a connecting tunnel to the Bedretto Valley and to the Gotthard route at Airolo. It alone emerged.

The initial estimate of Sfr. 70 million and a five-year building period became 311 million and nine years. The first grant was made in 1970 and the work began in 1973. Three years later, a further 85 million had to be made available.

The cutting through was completed on April 30, 1981, and now, after nine years and a total of Sfr. 311 million, the tunnel is operational. The Confederation carried 94.6 per cent of the cost, the Canton of Valais 3.5 per cent and Uri and the Grisons 0.95 per cent each.

As the Neue Zürcher Zeitung said, the three cantons will soon forget the delay and the enormous cost as they are delighted with a "winter-proof" railway connection between the Goms and the Urserental and the promising increase in the tourist value of the two alpine regions.

Their co-operation with the constructors was considerable, and together they

achieved the splendid result, rightly acclaimed as the longest narrow-gauge railway tunnel in the world.

Sadly, the Glacier Express from Zermatt to St. Moritz "loses its glacier", as an article in the Basler Zeitung declared last autumn. The traveller will no longer see the "vitriol-blue crevasses" of the Rhone glacier, which Goethe thus described.

The last journey took place on October 11 last year and the run on the trains up to that date was tremendous. More than a third more passengers were transported than the previous year.

Incidentally, the Rhone glacier belongs to the famous Seiler hôteliers family. They purchased the inn (built in 1830) 30 years later and developed it to the well-known Hotel Glacier du Rhône. They later built the Hotel Belvédère.

At one time, due to the favourable position at the foot of the pass routes Furka and Grimsel, already used by the Romans, some 150 carrier horses were kept there and in Andermatt, Airolo, Meiringen and Brienz. It was not until 1914 that the railway came, and only in 1926 was it possible to travel by train the whole way to Disentis.

With the new tunnel the journey from Zermatt to St. Moritz has been shortened by half an hour. The tourist managers of both resorts are co-operating in providing special attractions, and various package tours are available.

The Swiss National Tourist Office in London's Swiss Centre (telephone 01-734 1921, or in writing to 10 Wardour Street, W1V 3HG) will give you information about the Glacier Express package tour as well as on many other holiday opportunities.

If the early history of the Furka Base Tunnel was beset with great problems, the official opening in June was certainly favoured with splendid weather. All the objections, critics' warnings and the worries were forgotten in great jubilation. The

enthusiasm was widespread.

The actual inauguration celebration took place at the eastern tunnel opening at Realp, while on the Valais side, at Oberwald in the Goms, a festive procession of official guests was organised, taking them to the marquee. Federal Councillor Schlumpf cut the ribbon, which symbolically gave the green light for the first train. He maintained that much of the credit must go to the former Federal Councillor Bonvin, the "real Furka pioneer."

The Bishops of Chur and Sion and the abbot of the monastery of Disentis gave the Church's benediction and consecrated the great work.

It was right, too, that the men who did the difficult work, who had to grapple with technical problems and face nature's hostilities, should have been given great praise.

There was, no doubt, a lot of muddling and miscalculation initially, but as the chairman of the Furka Railway said, the tunnel was "living federal and inter-cantonal solidarity without which nothing great can be achieved". The mountain regions would now be released from their isolation.

Perhaps the Valais and the Grisons will profit more than the Urserental where, according to the Luzerner/Zuger/Nidwaldner Tagblatt, they do not have the many facilities of the well-developed tourist industry. But although more cautious, they too expect an increase in tourist traffic.

During the past two years, Switzerland has realised several great tunnel projects. First, in June 1980, was the fast SFR line which connects the international airport at Kloten/Zurich with the rest of the Swiss railway network. The 13.4 km include 5.9 km of tunnel.

In September 1980 came the opening of the longest road tunnel in the world, the Gotthard-Strassentunnel – 17 km long.

Then followed the Seelisberg tunnel where the two "tubes" of 9.3 km each became operational. And now the longest narrow-gauge railway tunnel in the world has become a reality.

The first road tunnel, of 700 m, was completed in Switzerland 275 years ago. That was the Umerloch on the Gotthard Pass route in the Schöllenen Gorge. The first railway which went from Zurich to Baden, in 1847, needed a tunnel opening of about 100 m through the Schlossberg in Baden.

Switzerland's topographical conditions demand the construction of tunnels and Swiss engineers have built them, often against great odds. But they have persevered and succeeded and they deserve recognition and praise.

Mariann Meier

'Gift from God' guarantees a service all the year round