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THE BRIG—VISP—ZERMATT RAILWAY

By Remo Perren, Manager of the BVZ

A brief description

The Brig-Visp-Zermatt tourist railway was first brought into operation on 18 July 1891. Since then — when the trains were drawn by steam locomotives and the journey took 2 hours and 40 minutes — it has undergone radical modification as regards both technology and methods of operation.

On 1 October 1929, electric traction was introduced on the Visp-Zermatt section. At the beginning of June 1930 the extension of the line from Visp to Brig was formally inaugurated, and on 25 June 1930 the "Glacier Express" from Zermatt to St Moritz via the Furka-Oberalp railway ran for the first time. Year-round working over the whole of the line could not begin until 1933, after the completion of some 800 metres of avalanche protection galleries. Today there are 8 galleries, with a total length of 2,363 metres.

Following the Second World War, the revival of international tourism gave rise to substantial increases in traffic on the BVZ line which have continued to this day. Following the completion of the road to Täsch at the beginning of the 1970s, the increase in traffic became increasingly concentrated in the Täsch-Zermatt section.

Today there are some 15,000 services every year running all the way from Brig to Zermatt as well as about 25,000 shuttle services each year between Täsch and Zermatt (the trains run at 20-minute intervals). On this section the traffic density has reached a level of substantially over 100 trains per day. On fine summer days, and during the winter high season, 6,000 passengers are transported each way over this section every day, and on peak traffic days the number may reach 10,000.

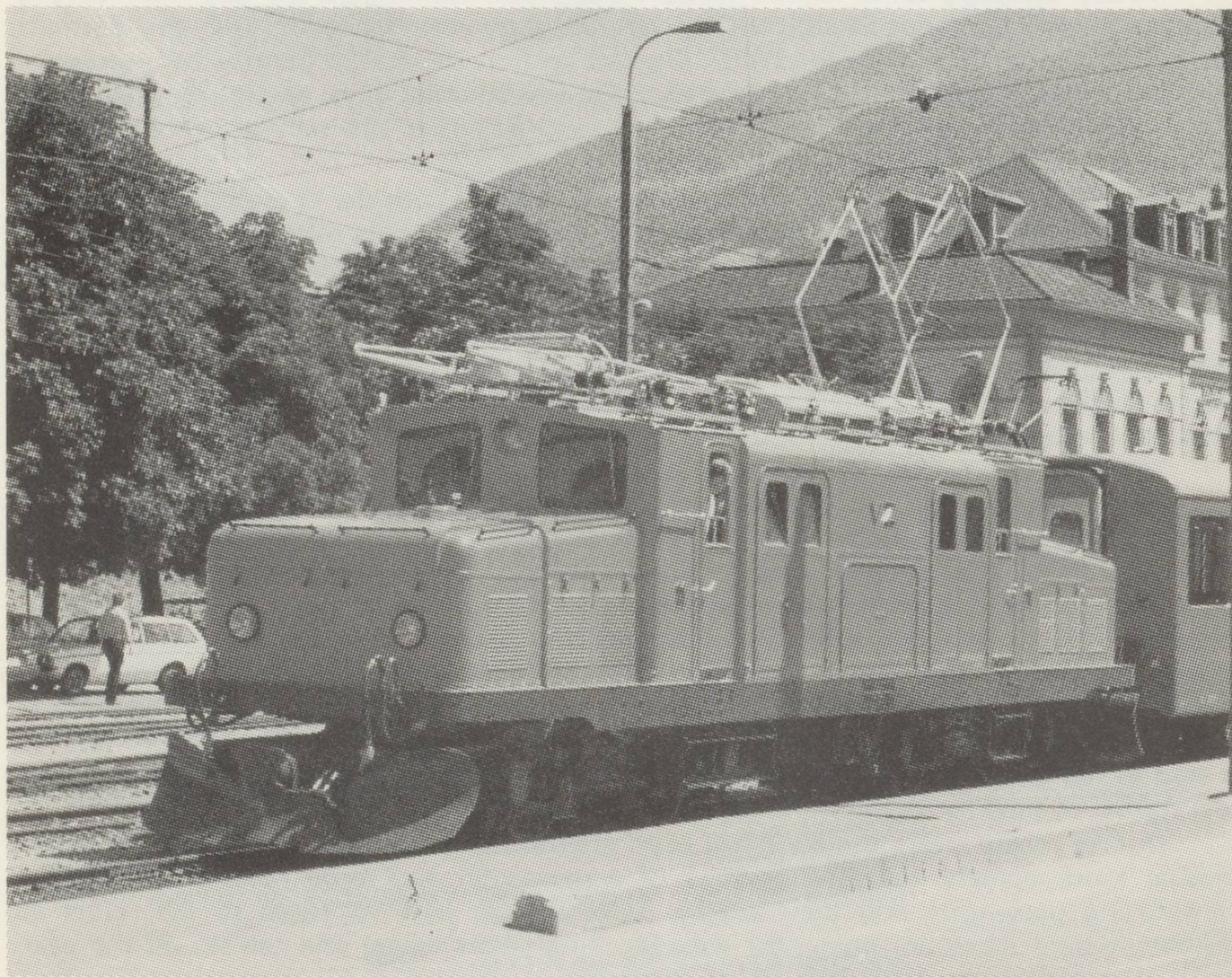
The BVZ has consistently endeavoured to keep up with the development of traffic by improving its installations and equipment and by adding to its rolling stock. The major landmarks of the process of development include the introduction of automatic block signalling and of remote control all the way from Brig to Zermatt in 1966; the extension of the station at Täsch at the beginning of the 1970s as part of the introduction of the regular shuttle service between Täsch and Zermatt, the acquisition of 4 complete six-coach shuttle units with Thyristor propulsion; and the reconstruction of a depot and maintenance building at Glisergrund, near Brig, at the beginning of the 1980s.

In 1979 the Federal Office for Transport approved the BVZ outline plan for the complete modernisation of Zermatt station. The reconstruction will take place in a number of stages, will require about 10 years to complete and will cost about 30 million francs. In 1985, after 4 years' work, the first stage of the building was completed. The work done included an avalanche retention wall, 300 metres long and 12 metres high in certain places, on the west side of the station; new tracks and platforms; and a modern heating oil storage unit under the station with a present capacity of 1.5 million litres. The subsequent stages will involve the reconstruction of the operations building and the station buffet; finally, a commercial centre will be built with space for shops and offices as well as lodgings for railway employees. The company hopes to be able to complete the new station in time for the celebration of its 100 years of operation in 1991.

During recent years the BVZ has been attempting to develop a service of a rather unusual kind, namely the development of a pleasanter and more rational method of transporting passengers and their luggage from the car park in Täsch to the resort in Zermatt, where there are no motor vehicles. In a resort where one can ski all the year round, the visitor must be relieved of the burden of carrying his own luggage to the greatest possible extent.

Initially, "coolie trunks", big enough to take ski-ing equipment as well as luggage, were purchased; following this, experiments were made for a number of years with luggage vans with sliding doors specially converted for the purpose. Finally, the first carriage in which passengers travel all the way to their destinations with their luggage were introduced in 1986. During the 1986-87 winter season two made-up shuttle trains, each with two of these high-capacity coaches (somewhat resembling trams), were introduced for the first time on the short section between Täsch and Zermatt. During the same winter season the number of block sections was doubled, making it possible to despatch trains at 1½-minute intervals; this was a further major step towards the achievement of the highest possible standard of service over this section of line.

However, the company is not resting on its laurels, and it is already making plans for the railway as it will be at the end of the century. Great efforts are still being made to improve standards of protection against avalanches and falls of rock. During the next few years the company plans to spend an additional 6 million francs on the Täsch-Zermatt section — the most exposed section of all. Measures to improve safety are also being undertaken at a number of exposed spots between Kalpetran and Randa. The reconstruction of the station at Zermatt should also lead to structural alterations and extensions at Täsch station in order to improve the traffic flow further. Finally, it is intended to improve still further the efficiency of the whole of the singletrack line between Brig and Zermatt, which passes through topographically difficult country in a number of places. This, together with the acquisition of five additional modern



BVZ HGe4/4 No. 11 at Brig

Photo: Editor

locomotives, should enable the present hourly service to be replaced by a half-hourly service, and even to envisage a departure every 12 minutes.

The Brig-Visp-Zermatt railway has for many years been of considerable importance for the Matter Valley and for the whole of the Upper Valais as well. It is one of the largest industrial enterprises in the valley and in the upper part of the canton; it employs some 230 persons of both sexes, living in 27 villages in the Upper Valais; the jobs are secure and keenly sought after. The company's wage bill amounts at present to about 13 million francs per year. In addition, it spends every year some 10 million francs on investment and maintenance, much of which is spent in the Upper Valais. Thus the company is also contributing to the maintenance of a number of jobs in local industry.

So far, the operating results achieved by the company have been good enough to provide it with the resources it needs; it has not had to apply for any public subsidies. In fact, it is one of the few railway companies in Switzerland which is still well enough off to be able to pay part of their earnings to the cantonal authorities, or to the villages through which the line passes, in the form of taxes. As a private company, it has to cover its own capital costs and pay interest at market rates as well as dividends in order to maintain its creditworthiness and to be able to finance the major capital investment projects it intends to undertake in the future by recourse to the free money market.

Today the Brig-Visp-Zermatt railway is a technically modern and economically efficient enterprise which is determined to meet the continually increasing demands of its customers for additional transport facilities, shorter journey times and higher standards of safety and comfort, all of which contribute to the quality of the service.

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