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The open chairs of the original First chairlift provided passengers with unrivaled views of the Oberland countryside and mountains. *Photos Andy Mieklethwaite*

Farewell to the First

Andy Mieklethwaite recalls a pioneer chairlift

On Sunday 18 August 1991 the Chairlift from Grindelwald to First was closed.

We had arrived in Grindelwald the previous day. To my shame I had not noticed the small note in the Kursbuch and it was only on arrival that we discovered how fortunate we were to have one last chance to sample its delights. So next morning, along with hundreds of others, we queued for almost an hour before launching into that peaceful ascent to First.

The story of cableways in the Alps began in Grindelwald in 1908 with a short-lived cable car from the Hotel Wetterhorn to the Engi, a shoulder of the Wetterhorn itself. An original car is in the Verkehrshaus in Luzern and a replica stands outside the Hotel Wetterhorn. The top station can still be seen perched on the Engi

and, if you have a head for heights, can be viewed at somewhat closer quarters by taking a climber's track which perilously picks its way round the vertiginous cliffs of the Engi.

It was much later, in 1947, that the First chairlift began operation. There were four connected stages, from the bottom station opposite the Hotel Sunstar, climbs gently over the panoramic Terrassenweg to Oberhaus. The next stage climbs more steeply through the trees, here and there in a sort of cutting in the trees, until it passes over the shores of a peaceful blue lake to reach Bort. The third stage crosses high Alpine meadows, usually delightfully ablaze with flowers, to Egg, and the fourth stage reaches First at a height of 2168 metres above sea level.

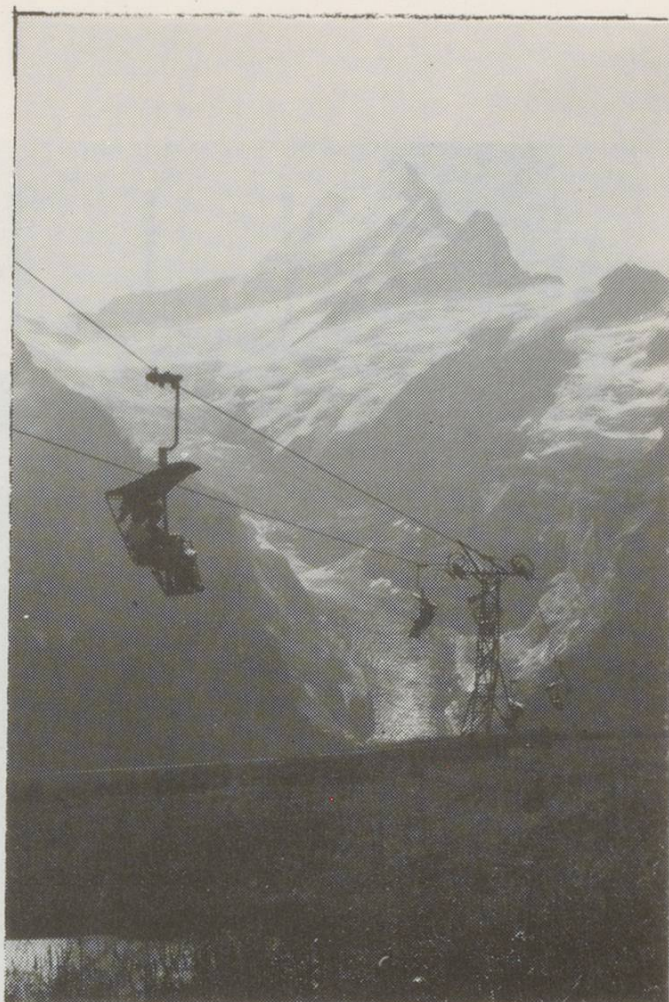
Students of modern chairlifts will be puzzled by the Firstbahn. Most chairs these days are permanently fixed to the moving cable. A single seat version can be found at Kandersteg-Oeschinenensee; French ski resorts now boast triple and even quadruple seat versions, which call for considerable speed and agility in alighting from the moving chair!

No such hurry on the First or incidentally on the still extant Beatenberg-Niederhorn. Two people sit side by side, facing sideways, and can take their seats whilst the chair is stationary in the relative comfort of the sheltered station building. The chair is then propelled down a short incline and engages with the moving cable in the same way as the modern Gondola on the Maennlichen. At stations, chairs proceed round tracks, and can even be moved in and out of sidings by suitable use of the points.

But the outstanding feature of the First was the surroundings. What better way to be transported up into the high Alps than in the peace of this chairlift, broken only by the rattle as the chair goes over the pulleys on the pylons; to hear the crickets in the meadows below, the crested tits and nutcrackers in the pine trees and all the while that ever-expanding view of the Fiescherwand, growing from that tantalising glimpse at the bottom to the awesome spectacle at the top.

The view from the top must rival even those from Schynigge Platte, Titlis and Sustenhorn, encompassing as it does full frontal views of the Wetterhorn and the Eiger in the east and the glorious Blumisalp in the west. No wonder the restaurant and terrace at First have been greatly expanded since 1947.

For the hiker or rambler, First offers a vast choice - gentle descents to Grosse Scheidegg, Bort or Busalp, the tourist track to Bachalpsee, or more strenuous hikes to the Faulhorn and on to Schynigge Platte. In winter too there are ski pistes of every standard, though a heavy blanket, which is collected before taking one's seat, is often needed to keep oneself warm during the half-hour journey.



Within days of our final trip, the cables had come down, the chairs had been dumped unceremoniously in heaps and the new Gondola station at Grindelwald had overrun the old. Helicopters shattered the peace of the Bernese Oberland, bringing Triffid-like structures from the car park at Grund to form the pylons of the new line. New stations nearby will replace the old at Oberhaus and Bort, but that at Egg is replaced entirely by a new alignment via Grindel.

A six seater gondola on a roof at Grindelwald gives a foretaste of things to come. The shelter will be welcome in winter, and the views will remain but will the flowers and marmots survive as three times the number of hikers and skiers trample over the meadows? One thing will be gone forever, the peaceful noises of meadow, forest and stream will be unable to penetrate into the bubble capsule humming its way to the summit.