

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: 5 (1997-1999)
Heft: 11

Artikel: 73 years and 25 million cars : BLS car transport through the Lötschberg Tunnel
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854581>

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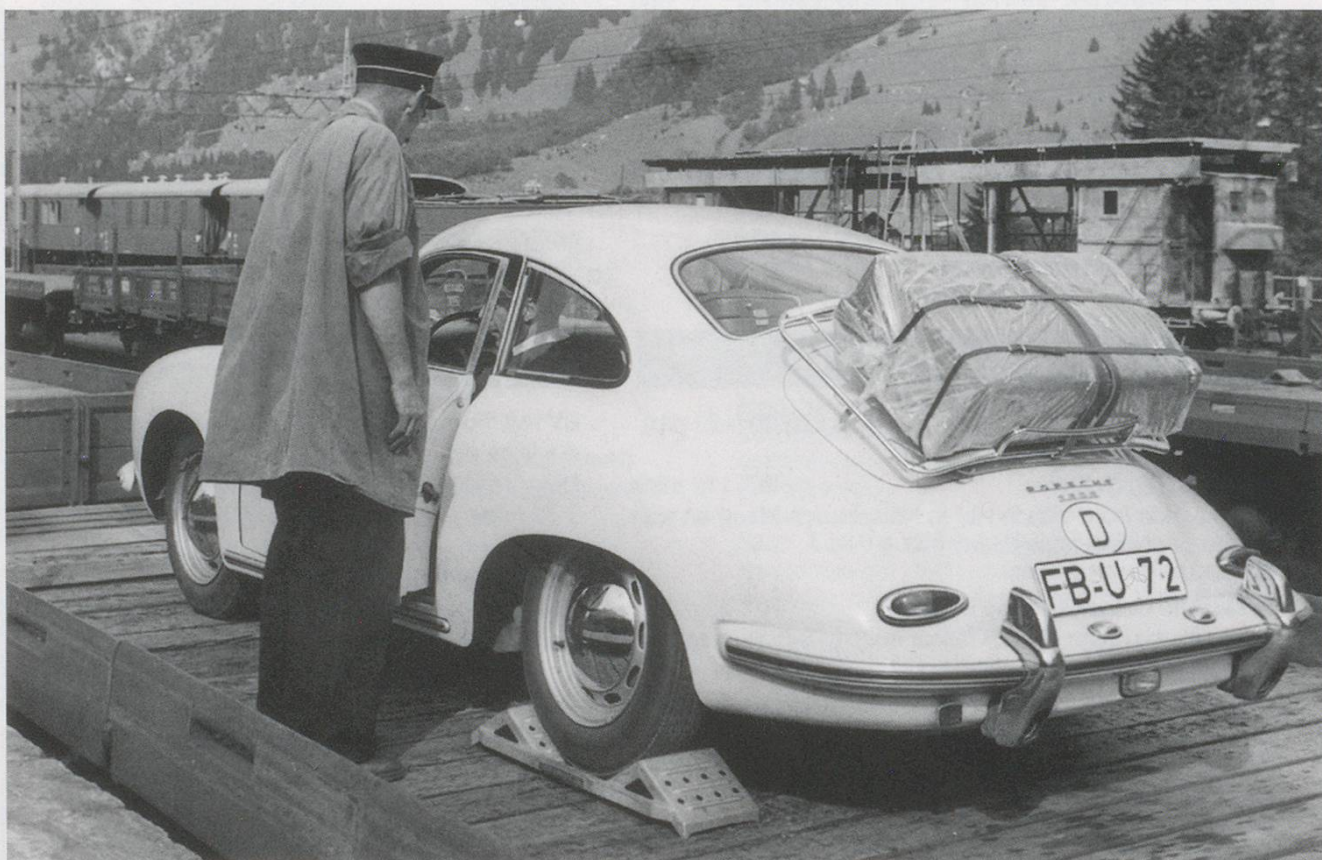
73 YEARS AND 25 MILLION CARS

BLS Car transport through the Lötschberg Tunnel

George M Hoekstra

On the 3rd of June 1999, the 25th millionth car was transported through the Lötschberg tunnel, as safely as all the others before. The lucky driver, a regular user of the service, together with the drivers just before and after, were welcomed in Kandersteg with an impromptu buffet set up in one of the other car-carrier sets. Reason enough for a look back at the 73 years of this service. It all started in 1926 when the first cars were transported on normal low sided 2-axle cars attached to the

back of regular passenger trains or freight trains, whichever came first. Service was to Brig or Domodossola, as the road from Goppenstein down to the Rhone Valley in those days was little more than a track and Iselle did not have a loading ramp yet. Prices were high: Kandersteg to Brig 35 Francs, to Domodossola 60 Francs just for the car. The driver and all the passengers had to have normal train tickets for the journey on top of that: a fortune in the 1920's! It is not surprising that only a few dozen cars were



In the beginning 2 Axle flat cars were used. This "O" - class car had. special flaps on the side (seen with the handgrips) to enable the cars to ride onto the wagons from the ramp. This system is still in use today. The other cars were usually of the "M7"-class modified with flaps at the ends, so cars could ride through. The driver of the Porsche could afford the fare: in the 50's you paid for the car, driver and passengers! An interesting detail on the side: the cars seen in the background (behind the Porsche) with the high working platforms still exist today! They were used both for the double tracking of the Lötschberg line in the early 90's and for the Piggyback Corridor work in the late 90's. Never throw anything away . . . PHOTO° BLS-ARCHIVES

transported in the first years. Spiez and Frütigen were added as destinations and after improvements to the road, Hohtenn and Goppenstein in 1940. Kandersteg-Goppenstein was reduced to 25 Francs, the same price as today . . . but driver and passengers still had to have tickets as well. Preglia and Varzo on the southern ramp of the Simplon were added as possible destinations. Some Kandersteg-Goppenstein car-

was successful: 13,718 cars were transported that year. Six years later, more than 100,000 cars! Improvements were made all the time now: a new loading ramp in Kandersteg, a better track-layout in Goppenstein and new 4-axle car-carriers. Most importantly the formation of push-pull sets with a driving trailer greatly increased capacity in 1968/69. On the 8th of September 1970, after 44 years of service, the magic number of one



And the winner is... On the 3rd. of June 1999 the 25th millionth vehicle was transported through the Lötschberg tunnel. The lucky driver, together with the ones just in front and just after him, were congratulated in Kandersteg by the (good) tunnel-fairy "Loetschi" and BLS-director Martin Josi. This was one of the last official engagements of Mr Josi as he retired at the end of the month. Associate director Mathias Tromp has now taken over the helm.. The eagle eyed can spot the buffet set up inside the vehicle-carrier in the background: a first!

PHOTO: George M. Hoekstra

trains (still 2-axle flat cars) were pulled through the tunnel by the Kandersteg station shunter..., thank God it was an electric locomotive! Traffic still was low: 225 cars in 1950, 1871 in 1955. Changes were made again in 1960: Iselle became the only destination in Italy and, most importantly, you only had to pay for the car as driver and all passengers travelled free from then on. This

million transported cars since service began in 1926 was reached.

The second million then only took about three years. In 1974 six push-pull sets were able to provide a half-hourly service in the summer. 1976 brought larger and longer ramps in Kandersteg and Goppenstein, allowing simultaneous loading and unloading of the trains. 1977 will

be gratefully remembered by the whole population of Kandersteg as the year of liberation: the opening of the village-bypass to the loading ramps. The traffic of over half a million cars through this mountain village at 4000 ft had made life quite unbearable for inhabitants and tourists alike. I remember it only too well. 1986 brought the 10th million, 1995 the 20th million and today, only four years later, the 25th million. Improvements to the road from Goppenstein down to the Rhone valley, as well as the gold plating of the Simplon pass road (travel it by postal coach from Brig and you will see what I mean . . .) led to the normal service now being limited to Kandersteg-Goppenstein. Every half hour from early morning to late night (hourly through the night at summer peak times) and on peak days, a 7 1/2 minute service is possible. If the roads become blocked, as happens sometimes in the winter, the BLS is flexible enough to operate other services at very short notice. For example: Gampel/Steg - Domodossola (Simplon road blocked and no ramp at Brig at the time due to construction work there), Frütigen -

Kandersteg (road blocked due to avalanche this winter), Frütigen/Kandersteg - Brig (same reason). Since 1996 the BLS has 8 push-pull car carriers, including two built by Talbot with higher roofs, which can take small coaches and light lorries as well as the cars and transporters the other ones can carry. Larger vehicles will have to wait for the opening of the base-tunnel in 2006. The roofs are now too high for the tunnels on the rest of the line. Normal maintenance and small repairs are thus undertaken in a newly build shed in Kandersteg. Heavy overhaul means a trip down to Spiez and for this the roofs have to be lowered by hand. The record number of cars transported in one day, with all the 8 sets in operation and with the 7 1/2 minute interval service, was reached on the 28th of February 1998: no less than 13,729, vehicles were transported, about as much as in the whole of 1960. The service is now getting new ticket machines as the old ones have the millenium bug. Also, with about one third of the traffic coming from foreign tourists, they must be able to accept the Euro as payment, in cash as well as from credit cards.

CYBERSPACE CORNER – Swiss Railway Websites

Mainly John Whitby with some additions by the Editor

- <<http://www.bruenig.ch/bruenig/>> - The Brünig site, being updated, not yet in English
- <<http://www.uol.ch/gotthardbahn/>> - A great site about the Gotthard line, photos, news etc.
- <<http://www.digittrain.ch/>> - Model Shop in Luzern with Mail Order.
- <<http://www.modelco.ch/f/catalogue.html>> - Model shop in Neuchâtel. Very comprehensive on-line catalogue
- <<http://website.lineone.net/~john.p.whitby>> - Johns own site with links to other related sites.
- <<http://www.swisscraft.ch/BAM>> - excellent site from the Bières-Aples-Morges, includes track plans to download.
- <<http://www.bt-bahn.ch/>> - Bodensee-Toggenburg Bahn, the editors favourite railway. Good site with nice pictures to download and even the chance to apply for a job.
- <<http://www.szu.ch/>> - Sihltal Bahn. Another clever site. Includes games which you can download onto PC's only.