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A NEW OLD FUNICULAR

FIRST, THE OLD

Along the length of the Gotthard line can be seen pipes running down the mountainsides. These are water pipes from reservoirs to power stations in the valley. Alongside the pipes were built funicular railways to help in the work of servicing the pipes. It is quite likely that the funiculars were built first to aid construction of the pipes – this seems logical, but I do not recall reading this anywhere.

Over the years, the mountainside pipes have been mostly, if not entirely, superseded by pipes inside the mountains, so the funicular railways have fallen into disuse. Some years ago, that at Ambri was rebuilt to be suitable for passenger transport, and now carries many walkers to the pleasures of the reservoir at Ritom and several nearby mountain lakes. Incidentally, this is the steepest funicular in Europe.

NOW, THE NEW

At Amsteg, a side valley branches off the main Reuss valley. This is the Bristentobel,

The makeshift but functional car.



A view of the debris blocking the road (which can be seen each side of the slope), taken from a train crossing the bridge above Amsteg.

ALL PHOTOS TAKEN APRIL 2003 BY JOHN JESSON

leading to the Maderanertal. The valley has several settlements, the largest being Bristen. From Amsteg, a narrow road passes under the Gotthard line and climbs the initial steep section into the valley by several hairpin bends. A Postbus service operates over the road, which carries warnings that it is not possible to pass the actual bus on the road, and gives the bus schedules.

Inevitably, it is sometimes necessary to carry out maintenance on such roads. Usually, this can be done with only a limited effect on traffic, but the engineers found an unstable section of rock above the Bristen road hairpins that would have to be blasted down before it fell down. It was known that the road would be closed for a period, and alternative arrangements would need to be made to provide for the residents of Bristen and the other communities.

The answer was to re-activate the funicular railway that runs alongside the old water pipes to the original power sta-



The bottom end of the renovated funicular.

tion at Amsteg. For the sum of SFr 300,000 the funicular was made fit to carry passengers, and on 24th March this year at 08.00 the road was closed for the work to be done. Unfortunately, rather more rock fell down than had been intended, blocking most loops of the hairpin

One of the two small cable cars serving the summer pastures and the Golzernersee, taken near the top station.

section. Despite this, it is hoped that the road will be re-opened in mid-May.

In the meantime, the funicular provides the only ground-level access to the valley. The top of the funicular is some way from Bristen, so a pair of Postbuses (one a minibus) run a shuttle service from the top station through the valley. There is no space for the buses to turn here, so they have to reverse from the main road along a narrow, winding road through the trees to get





Taken from the narrow road to the upper funicular station, looking down to the railway bridge and the Reuss valley. The upper level of the blocked road is at the bottom of the picture.

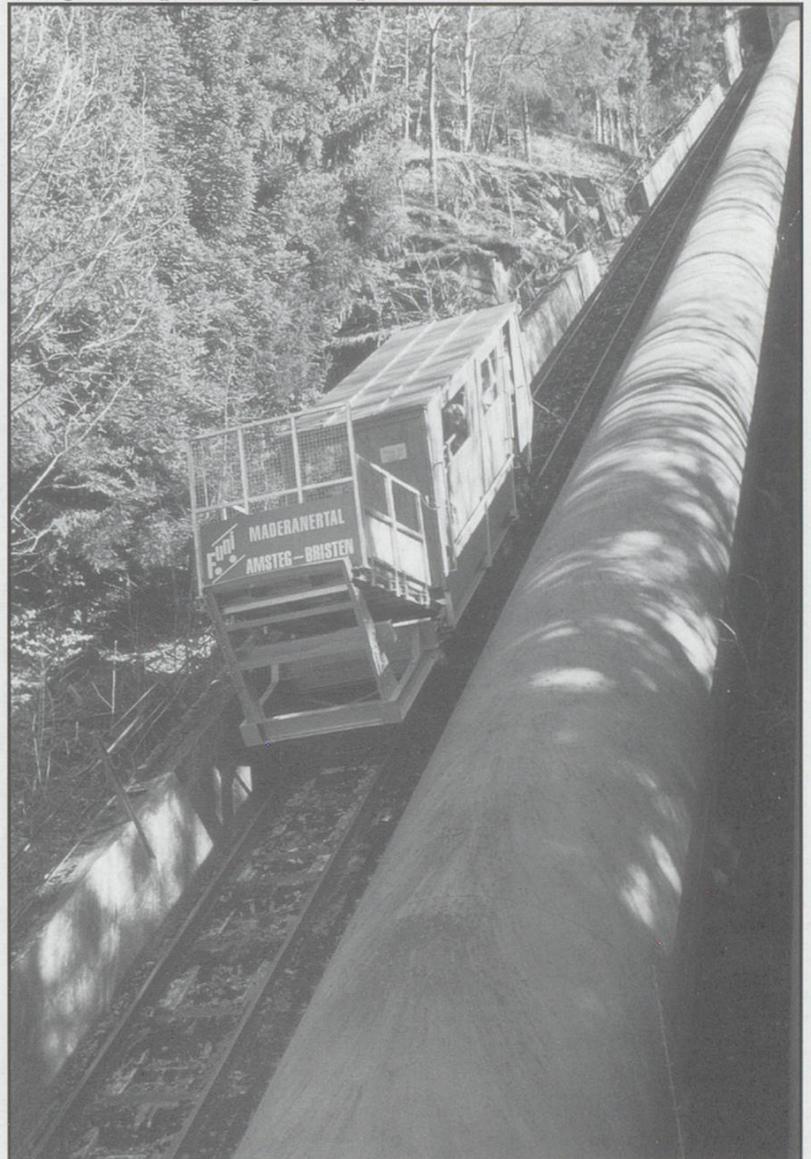
to the funicular. Even then, the larger Postbus cannot get quite all the way, and has to stop a short distance away.

I had heard about the road blockage a few weeks before I paid a quick trip to Switzerland, but thought little of it. In April, I thought, there is no point in heading into the mountains (I am a walker, not a skier). However, I was staying at Erstfeld, and a discussion with the proprietor of the Hotel Frohsinn one evening provided a more complete story, together with the remarkable fact (for Switzerland) that the funicular and the connecting Postbus were free, because of the blockage of the "free" road.

As Sunday 13th April showed every sign of being a glorious day, I decided to take the unique opportunity of riding on a bit of railway that would close again once the road was reopened. The hourly North ramp Postbus took me to Amsteg, where I found several areas of ground marked as car parks for the use of Bristen residents and fluorescent yellow signs directing me to the "Bristen Funicular", just behind the old power station.

You get some idea how steep the funicular is from this shot!

Whether the chassis of the single funicular car is original, I cannot say, but a new body has been provided. The short-term usage shows in the construction – an angle-iron frame with plywood panels, albeit with windows, and a metal frame at the lower end for boarding and the conveyance of goods, pushchairs and so on. The whole assembly creaks alarmingly in motion, but the apparently new haulage cable and the fact that it has been passed as fit for passenger use provided sufficient assurance for





ABOVE: The Maderanertal as described in John's article.

all the passengers. Safety barriers have been installed at bottom and top stations. These are obviously new but what, if anything, they replaced, I do not know.

A few words about the Maderanertal, a pleasant valley that is well worth a visit. Several cable cars offer access to the higher pastures, and there is ample opportunity for walking. Bristen itself is larger than I had expected and, although not fully open for the summer, several hotels and restaurants were already busy. The Postbus route runs through Bristen to the base station of the cable car to Golzern. As the main valley was almost clear of snow, I chanced a trip to higher ground. The cable car is a single section with two small cabins to hold 8 people. At the upper end, a path leads past summer pastures and several chalets to the Golzernersee. This small lake is unusual in that the water is warm, and is popular in the summer with swimmers. As it lies at just over 1400 metres, it is not too warm in April. In fact, it was still frozen when I got to Seewen, just short of the lake, where I abandoned my trek through the snowdrifts that covered a fair amount of the

RIGHT: From the footpath between Bristen and Amsteg, there is this view of the Gotthard line as it crosses the Bristen valley.

path. Despite the snow and ice, the air was warm enough to allow shirtsleeves and I really enjoyed the experience. I am told that the valley is not well-known and, although it gets quite crowded in summer, the bulk of the visitors are Swiss.

After returning on the cable car and walking along the valley, I elected to use one of the three footpaths to Amsteg, rather than riding again on the funicular. One of the paths is blocked by the rock fall, and one runs along the other side of the valley. The third provides some fine views of the railway bridge over the Bristentobel, and crosses both over and under the funicular before diving under the railway and emerging by the power station. Although it is likely that, by the time this is read, the road will be back in action and the funicular closed again, I hope some will be encouraged to visit the valley.

