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SCHINDLER'S LIFT - 101 not out!



Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock lakeside station.

Photos: Michael Farr

Last year saw the centenary of one of the most unusual forms of transport in Switzerland, the Hammetschwand Lift - the highest free-standing elevator in Europe, which is perched high on a cliff side above the Vierwaldstätter See. The lift takes passengers, who have climbed up to 874m using the Bürgenstockbahnen (BB) funicular from the lakeside at Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock, a further 152.81m – vertically! The framework should be familiar to anyone who has sailed from Luzern on one of the ships of SGV (Schiffahrtsgesellschaft des Vierwaldstättersees) as the spindly steel structure with a pointed roof seen clinging precariously to the side of the sheer cliff face near the cliff-top village of Bürgenstock.

Sadly, last August's planned centenary celebrations had to be postponed due to the torrential rain that caused so much devastation in many parts of Switzerland.

However, the delay has allowed time to complete the restoration of part of the

Felsenweg. Most of the damage to this path that skirts the lake had happened during the Lothar storm, but further problems occurred when the exceptionally heavy snowfalls in early 2006 caused some landslides. A double celebration was planned for the 24th June 2006 to mark not only the reopening of the Felsenweg but also the 101st birthday of the Hammetschwand Lift.

On my first journey on the BB an intended visit to the lift was thwarted because the cliff path was closed following the earlier devastation caused by the Lothar storm. Last year I was more fortunate and set out through the hotel complex on a path which climbed fairly gently, the signs indicating I should allow 25 minutes – which proved to be about correct. Had I been more energetic I could have cut off some of the hairpin bends by taking the steps cut in the hillside!

There are magnificent views across the

water to the Küssnachtsee and Luzern and after about 20 minutes the path widens slightly to give a good view of the steel structure. Suddenly I found myself at the bottom station - a doorway cut into the rock-side. After showing my ticket, I was ushered into what seemed to be a lift of the type you would expect to find in a department store.

After a few seconds' climb, however, you break out into the open, giving further views of the waters and fields beyond through the windows in the side of the cabin. All too soon the car stops, the doors open and you walk along a steel bridge straight into the inviting restaurant of the type that is found at the top of almost every Swiss mountain - an oasis in the desert where I could restore my caffeine level.

It is amazing to realise that this seemingly modern attraction is over 100 years old. Construction was started in 1903 by the redoubtable team of funicular and hotel developers Franz-Joseph Bucher and Josef Durrer, and it was opened two years later. For those who like statistics, the base station is at 961.60m and the top 1114.41m, a total journey of 152.81m, the first 45 of which are through solid rock. It is estimated that the tower weighs some 23 tons - and 2 tons of paint were used at its last refurbishment. The first car, built of spruce and zinc, took 8 passengers at a speed of 1m/sec with power supplied from the same generating station as the BB. However, it seems that the ride could be a little jerky when the Standseilbahn was taking power at the same time! Major improvements were made in 1936 when the Swiss firm of Schindler installed a car to carry twelve passengers at an increased speed of 2.7m/sec, making it the fastest outdoor elevator in Europe. It was even

faster than the lift in the Berlin Olympic tower whose top speed was 2.3m/sec. A further refurbishment took place in the winter of 1959/60 that reinforced the tower and provided both a smoother ride and starting/stopping, whilst also increasing the speed to 4m/sec. With a further partial refit this lift continued to operate until 1990, by which date about four million passengers had enjoyed the trip.

In 1990 another major refurbishment was announced at a cost of 2.4 million Swiss francs. This provided a new base station plus a specially equipped panorama car, glazed on three sides. When the lift reopened in April 1992 the maximum capacity was still twelve passengers but state-of-the-art technology ensured a smooth ride whatever the load. At the same time the path from the Bürgenstock hotels was greatly improved. I imagine that it would be possible to push a wheelchair all the way to the lift, though it might be a hard job on some of the steeper slopes!



The view from the top.

This year the lift is due to operate until 22 October and is normally open daily from 09.00 to 18.00, although there is a warning that it may be closed during extremely bad weather. I can thoroughly recommend a trip on both the BB and the lift while visiting the Lake Luzern area. The



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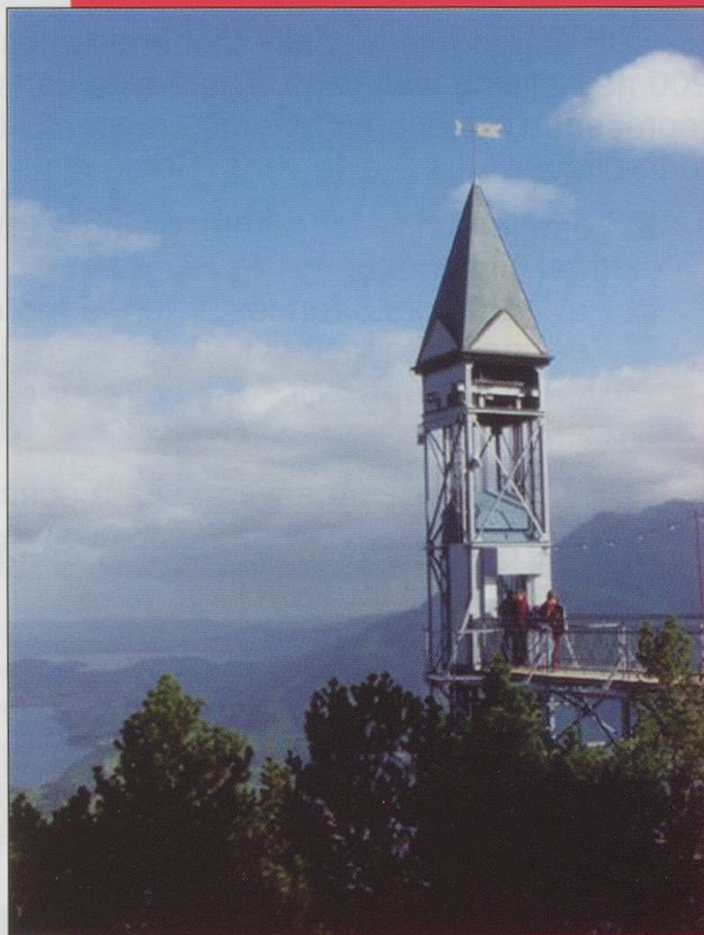
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Incidentally, the BB was also master-minded by Bucher and Durrer to serve their luxury hotel complex. It was opened in 1887 after they had cut their teeth on the comparatively short funicular that was opened on the 8th November 1886 and ran from the lake level at Lugano to the town's Railway Station. The BB is a single-stage metre gauge funicular that is 944m long that climbs 440m from the lakeside station at Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock and has been electrically operated from the first. A major problem for the pioneers was how to handle the cable on a line with a curve with a slope varying from 27% in Kehrsiten station to 58% at the middle part of the line. The most recent major project refurbishment project on the BB took place in 2001 when the two car bodies were renewed with virtually identical ones. Not surprisingly the BB's timetable is timed to meet arrivals and departures from the Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock landing stage of SGV. Potential travellers need to be aware that some trips on the BB are available to the public in only the upward or downward directions. Kursbuch Table 2554 clearly indicates these. Using the SGV is not the only way to reach Kehrsiten. On weekdays a ring-and-ride PostAuto service (Kursbuch Table 480.13) operates from Stansstad, whilst there is a conventional service, also from Stansstad, to Bürgenstock (Kursbuch Table 480.12) that terminates a short walk from the top station. Reservations are compulsory for the Kehrsiten route, as well as on the Bürgenstock service on Sundays and some holidays.



The top of the lift structure.



The local PostAuto at the lakeside.