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LÖTSCHBERG BASE TUNNEL - THE OPENING

Colin Jarman



Approach to the Base Tunnel, with a view of the 'mountain route' above. PHOTOS: Colin Jarman

In June 2007 Maurice Criddle and I visited Switzerland to attend the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel. My colleague Maurice concentrates on video and I handle the still photographs, so it is a workable arrangement - as long as we watch our elbows when photographing out of train windows!!

The Lötschberg Base Tunnel is 34.6km (21.625 miles) long extending from Frutigen in the Kander Valley to Raron in the Rhône Valley. Work began in 1999 and the first break-through was in December 2002. Although there are twin-tunnel sections at each end of the route the central section is currently only single track which may inevitably lead to the potential for future capacity constraints. It is intended the tunnel will carry both passenger and freight workings and, linked with the existing Simplon Tunnel, this new piece of railway infrastructure forms the first fast north-south trans-alpine link.

The Base Tunnel was 'officially'

opened on the 15th June 2007 when some 1,200 VIPs were invited to attend the celebrations. They first met at the site alongside the northern base tunnel entrance in Frutigen for the usual speeches, then around mid-day the VIPs boarded a special train to take them through the tunnel to the southern exit at Raron. The train carried on to the station at Visp where they all alighted and these official guests walked in procession to a nearby location for refreshments. There were four local town

Awaiting the next day's 'Public Opening'



bands, along with various ladies in the local dress, in position to meet their guests whilst schoolchildren lined the route. It was a pity that it started to rain, although thankfully only lightly. The 1,200 people made quite a long column that needed the four local bands to be spaced at regular intervals amongst them.

The following day saw the 'Public' opening and we were told by an official at Frutigen that some 30,000 to 40,000 people were expected. Various tents providing food, exhibitions and souvenirs had been erected and even a temporary train platform had been constructed to load passengers into the special trains in order to travel through the tunnel. These trains ran at regular intervals - about half-hourly - with seats being pre-booked at SFr5 per single journey. A lot of people decided to travel only one-way through the tunnel, returning via the mountain route.

We travelled through the tunnel on one of the first trains that day at around 09.00. This train had travelled up from Spiez (where we boarded) and continued on through the tunnel without picking up any of the public who were waiting at Frutigen for their trip. It seemed that as this train was not one that started from Frutigen it was not on offer for pre-booking. It took 15 minutes to cover the 34.6km and touched speeds of 160kph en-route.

It is expected that an average of 110 freight trains per day will operate over the Lötschberg corridor. Of these around two-thirds will be directed through the new base tunnel and around one third will use

TOP: *Arrival of the VIPs.*

TOP MIDDLE: *Visitors pouring onto the specially constructed platform to board the next special train through the tunnel.*

BOTTOM MIDDLE: *Special train waiting to take the VIPs through the tunnel.*

BOTTOM: *Train entering the tunnel.*





the old “mountain” route. Presently, the heaviest trains using the Lötschberg Base Tunnel have a hauled load of 3250 tonnes and a length of 750 metres. Freight trains will travel through the base tunnel at speeds up to 100km/h. Passenger trains will travel around 200km/h and, when fully



operational, tilting trains will travel up to 250km/h. There will be six Cisalpino daily return connections from Basle to Milan using the tunnel. The new tunnel will also enable double-decker coaches to reach Brig on the BLS route, as hitherto they have been unable to be used south of Kandersteg because of the small bore of the older Lötschberg tunnel.

The BLS car-transportation piggyback service will continue to remain on the “mountain” route, as will an hourly week-day RegioExpress from Brig to Spiez serving communities on the old line and offering a rapid IC/EC connection at Spiez to and from Berne. This service will operate between Brig and Berne on Sundays. The BLS is purchasing 13 new, four-car train sets to be used on these trains. The sets will be based on the low-floor S-Bahn EMU trains, but they will have increased tractive



TOP: Approach to the Base Tunnel.

MIDDLE: Goods, on the mountain route, passing through Kandersteg - 14th June 2007.

BOTTOM: Southern exit at Raron.

effort for operation on this route. It is expected that they will be delivered in the summer of 2008 and until the commissioning of these units the BLS will deploy locomotive-hauled commuter trains between Brig and Berne.

With the opening of the Lötschberg Base Tunnel the journey times between the Swiss Mittelland and the Valais have been drastically reduced – for example Berne to Zermatt in 2hrs 8mins. With the opening of the base tunnel the MGB is to receive five new EMUs with panoramic carriages at a cost of SFr45m. There will be a through train every hour between Brig and Andermatt and a new hourly service between Disentis and Andermatt. In addition to the above-mentioned improvements Brig will become a through station, instead of effectively being a terminus for the MGB routes to the east and west of this town. Visp will also see changes to services as it becomes the main interchange point between the Lötschberg route and services along the Rhône valley.

The opening of the Lötschberg base line marks the commencement of a new age for Switzerland's railway infrastructure. With a peak elevation of only 828 m above sea level this, the lowest of all current Alpine crossings, is a pioneering project that has set new standards in the fields of construction, railway technology and operation.



TOP: A view, from the tunnel site, of the Kander Viaduct

MIDDLE: One of the four town bands and a procession of town folk dressed in their local costume at Visp.

BOTTOM: At Spiez. With the opening of the base tunnel we will see less of such motive power.