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GIESSBACHBAHN Claudia Farley explores Europe's oldest working funicular.

ALL PHOTOS: Claudia Farley.



TOP: The view from the Giessbachbahn onto lake Brienz.

LEFT: View of the Giessbach Falls from the Grandhotel.

The Giessbach Falls in the Bernese Oberland are well worth a trip; the journey is varied and the setting is spectacular. You can get there on a Brienzner See one hour boat journey from Interlaken Ost to Giessbach See pier. This is where the Giessbachbahn (GdB) is waiting to take visitors up to the hotel and the falls. The historic metre gauge funicular was amongst the first to be built in Switzerland and recently celebrated its 125th anniversary, being the oldest funicular still in use in Europe.



Now moved by electricity rather than water-ballast, the cabins are still the same as when they were first used in 1879. Even the conductor seems to be selling tickets in the old-fashioned way! The 345m journey takes just 4 minutes as it climbs 90m to the Grandhotel Giessbach where the views are spectacular: the waterfall above, the lake below and the Bernese Alps all around. The keen-eyed will notice the Riggerbach rack between the running rails. This is only used for braking.

The falls have been a popular tourist destination for almost

One of two carriages of the Giessbachbahn in the mountain station.

On the way up on the Giessbachbahn.

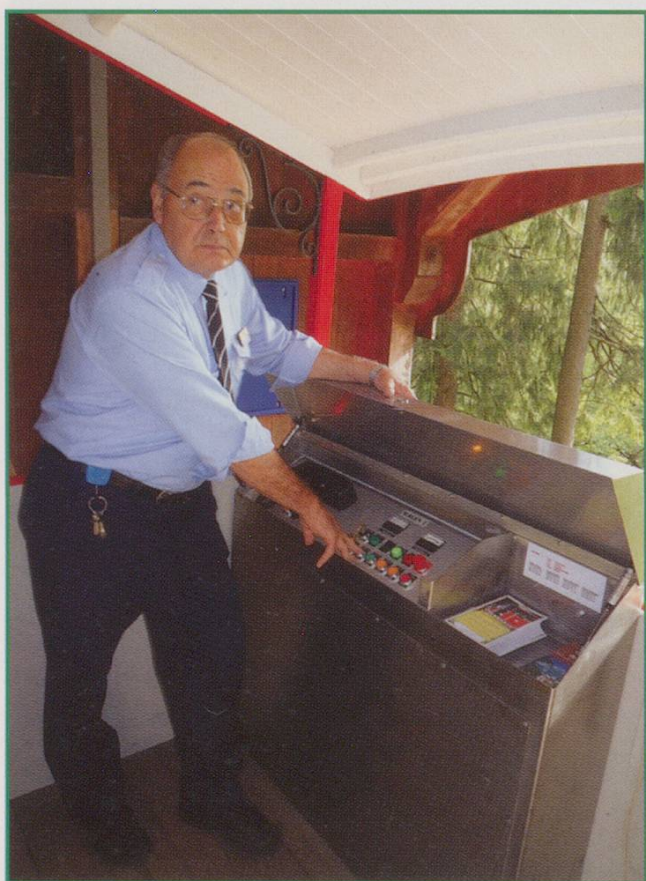
two-hundred years. Initially just a few benches were put up, followed by a simple guesthouse that was eventually replaced by a luxury hotel in 1870. The hotel was frequented by aristocrats and business tycoons from across Europe, but fell into





Station building of Giessbachbahn at the falls.

disrepair in the mid 20th century. It was saved from demolition by the "Giessbach to the Swiss People" foundation, which is largely made up of small shareholders. The hotel was carefully restored to its former



splendour in the style of the Belle Epoque and finally reopened in 1984. This historic hotel is a wonderful place to stay on a special occasion, but also a great spot to stop for a drink.

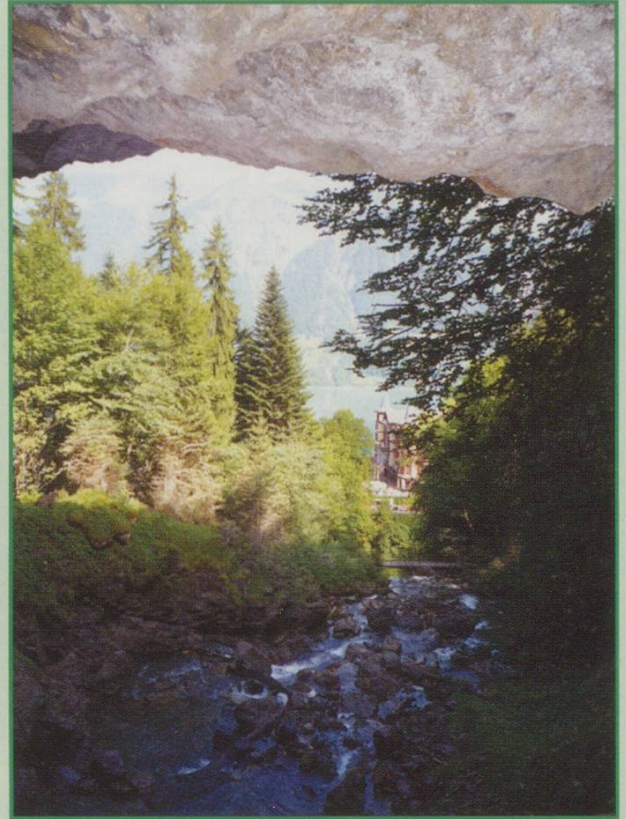
From the hotel, a steep, adventurous path leads up, along and sometimes even under the Giessbach Falls, offering beautiful views and photo opportunities. Alternatively, an easy and lovely 90 minute walk along the south shore of the lake leads through light forest to Iseltwald. Along the walk, there are opportunities to stop for a picnic, make a fire for a barbeque or even go for a swim in the lake. Iseltwald is an old fishing village located around a bay and on the little "snail" peninsula with just a handful of small hotels to stay. From there you can either take the boat to Interlaken, or over to Brienz, or ride the hourly bus (Line 3) back to Interlaken.

Above Brienz, the Brienzer Rothorn rises up abruptly and can be reached with the Brienzi-Rothorn-Bahn, Switzerland's oldest steam cog-wheel railway where "steam workshops" are on offer. A short but spectacular walk from the upper train station leads to the summit, which offers a unique alpine panorama. Another worthwhile excursion from Brienz is the Ballenberg open air museum, which gives visitors a chance to experience Switzerland as it used to be. From Brienz the metre gauge Zentralbahn, originally known as the Brünigbahn, takes you via Meiringen (where Meringues are supposedly from) over the Brünigpass to Luzern, or back to Interlaken Ost.

The Giessbachbahn being operated.



TOP: The "Brienz" arriving at Giessbach See station.



BOTTOM: The operator of the Giessbachbahn selling tickets.

TOP RIGHT: View from the Giessbach Falls down to the Grandhotel.

MIDDLE RIGHT: On the way up on the Giessbachbahn.

BOTTOM RIGHT: The view of Lake Brienz in the direction of Interlaken.

