

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2010)
Heft: 101

Artikel: And finally... snow in Switzerland
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854415>

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AND FINALLY... SNOW IN SWITZERLAND

PHOTOS: Swiss newspaper "Tagesanzeiger".

With most of the UK having suffered transport disruption during last December and January due to varying levels of snowfall, those of us interested in Switzerland were probably saying to ourselves "it would not happen there". Well the Swiss transport system does not always manage trouble free operations when bad weather comes in.

On Monday November 30th a blizzard hit much of alpine Switzerland causing an avalanche that buried an MGB train on the Oberalp Pass. Comprising railcar HGe 4/4 II No.105 "Oberalp/Alp Su", three coaches and a car-carrying wagon (complete with a private car) the Regional train was overwhelmed early Monday afternoon just on the west side of the Oberalppasshöhe station. The coaches and the wagon broke away from the railcar, were derailed and slid a little way down the mountainside, although they remained coupled together. It was reported that two were totally covered with snow and hidden from sight. Fortunately only two of the seven passengers and crew were slightly injured. The railcar remained on the track and was able to make its way to Disentis on the Tuesday.

It was a so-called wet snow avalanche, i.e. unstable and heavy, probably quite slow moving, falling from the north side across the road and then the railway, and so digging out the road up from Andermatt on the following day was the preface to moving up two heavy road cranes to recover the train. Since the danger of further slides was suspected, and the train had to be dug free before lifting, work was slow and could only proceed by daylight, taking a further two days. The service was fully restored by the Friday. The incident took place in dreadful weather in a remote location with few, if any, people around. Three weeks later and there would have been the holiday rush of skiers and the line would have been hosting shuttle trains and multiple Glacier Expresses.

Then the Christmas period saw a combination of weather conditions in Switzerland which caused

trouble on road and rail. Successive heavy precipitation, causing deep snowfalls everywhere, record low temperatures and days of the warm Föhn south wind with thaws across the north, meant blocked motorways, local flooding, landslides and on the railways, two major problems. On the Gotthard line, water entering a granite block retaining wall near Gurtellen froze, and then melted, allowing early on Christmas morning over 2 cubic metres of stones and earth to fall onto the northbound Gotthard track. The first Chiasso – Zürich ICN of the day, with 500 017, ran into the obstruction and was derailed. The 30 passengers plus crew were uninjured, but the line was closed 7 hours in both directions. The ICN was damaged.

At the same time the Albula and Bernina lines of the Rhätische Bahn were closed as a precaution, after official avalanche alarm. Both lines were re-opened at 09.00 on December 26th. Passengers were diverted via Klosters and the Vereina tunnel. Since the Julier road pass to the Engadine was also closed, all road traffic was also directed through the Vereina for the car-carrying trains, but as December 26th is a peak holiday travel day, there rapidly built up a 12 km queue for the car trains. The Gotthard Autobahn and the San Bernadino routes were also closed, mostly because of heavy goods vehicles blocking the lanes after loss of control. Most goods vehicles had to be held in the waiting areas at the foot of the passes. Accidents on snow and ice led to many other road delays, however by December 27th rail traffic was back to normal.

In January more heavy snow saw a number of avalanches being set off in mountain areas (some by lunatic off-piste skiers) that resulted in some fatalities. Fortunately none of these events had any major impact on the public transport system although apparently some local bus services were disrupted for short periods.

This item was compiled from information supplied by Geoff Turner, Bryan Stone and Swiss media sources.