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SIMPLON TUNNEL FIRE



Having read in their free newspaper about the fire in the Simplon Tunnel, passengers join the replacement bus outside Brig Station for a scenic, but slower, trip over the pass. PHOTOS: Tony Bagwell

At about 06.00 on Thursday June 9th a freight train from Italy to Switzerland, using the northbound bore of the Simplon tunnel, came to a stand 3 km from its south portal due to a fire on one freight wagon but very quickly, nine more wagons became involved. Intense heat, with temperatures up to 1,000°C, was reported; all trains between Brig and Domodossola were stopped; and the Brig, Frutigen and Bern tunnel emergency and fire-fighting trains were sent in to attend the fire. The Simplon Tunnel is 19.8km long and consists of two parallel single track tunnels, dating from 1906 (south-bound) and 1921 (northbound). There is a central automatic block station with crossovers whilst the section where the fire occurred was on a rising grade of 1%. The tunnels have linking passages that allowed the dense smoke generated by the fire to fill the parallel tunnel, as well as escaping into the atmosphere at the south portal where for a time it also closed the adjacent Simplon Pass road.

The fire was under control by Thursday evening, but the wreckage was still very hot and fire-fighting continued for 55 hours from the first alarm, with both tunnels remaining closed over the whole time. The fire took place at a peak period just before a holiday weekend when traffic was at its height. During the full closure buses (taking over an hour longer than the rail schedule) were provided between Brig and Domodossola allowing some passengers to travel between Switzerland and the Milano region. Throughout Switzerland appeals on radio and TV told would-be passengers to use the Gotthard route. Some freight was also diverted to the Gotthard but many southbound freight trains were being stabled in the Basel area. An additional problem was that the Lötschberg Base Tunnel also had to be closed, because its tunnel emergency train and crew were no longer in place in Frutigen, with Brig – Bern – Zürich/Basel trains being delayed by some 25 minutes due to taking the old route via Kandersteg.

The 1906 bore of the Simplon Tunnel reopened on the afternoon of Saturday 11th June as a single-line operation. With the help of Trenitalia an hourly each way shuttle passenger train operation was introduced between Brig and Domodossola worked by a Re4/4 II with a scratch set of lightweight coaches. Also, some of the freight trains that had been stabled on the approaches to the tunnel were able to be moved, with some through trains being operated via the Gotthard. This was not possible, for example, for the many daily RAlpin trains from Freiburg (D) to Novara (I) as the Gotthard loading gauge cannot accommodate 4m high

ro-ro trailers. However, the holiday weekend took pressure off the freight business, although passenger demand was at its height and the recommended alternative Gotthard trains were badly overcrowded.

An inspection of the tunnel on Monday 13th confirmed that the mass of ten melted freight wagons would take days to release, though one distorted wagon carcass was outside at Iselle by that afternoon. The train had been a chartered block load of intermodal units, not semi-trailers but swap-bodies (common on European domestic intermodal operations), for LKW Walther an Austrian company. The loads were a typical Italian export cargo: ceramic tiles; household appliances (washing machines and kitchen equipment); & some structural steel work. No goods were listed as hazardous. The swap-bodies had wooden floors and canvas sides and roofs whilst the loads contained substantial amounts of packing material such as wood and polystyrene. The wagons, which were relatively new standard low-floor skeletal intermodal wagons, had no electrical parts nor, (apart from lubrication and brake pipes), anything combustible.

At the time of writing the Italian authorities were investigating the cause of the fire but Andreas Meier, CEO of SBB, who owns the Simplon Tunnel, talked openly about remote monitoring of the catenary showing up fluctuations commensurate with short-circuiting of the 15,000 V traction current. This supports the theory that a loose canvas roof on one of the swap-body units might have touched the overhead wire to cause a "flashover" followed by the fire. Whatever its cause, the forced draught of running at speed in a single-line tunnel would then suffice to create a furnace. At a Press Briefing Herr Meier also expressed his thanks to a "guardian angel" that this fire had not involved hazardous goods or, even indirectly, a passenger train. He also remarked that he now had an answer for those who asked why so much was spent on safety and training.

By the end of the holiday weekend operations had been rapidly been normalized with the tunnels being used as double track from Brig to the central crossing point, and from there to Iselle as a single line allowing around seven paths per hour each way - enough to handle normal traffic. The rebuilding of the damaged section was confirmed as needing several months of work, however, programmed extensive renovation was also falling due, and it was hoped that this and the repairs would be co-ordinated. Determining responsibility and insurance claims will inevitably be complex. 