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Autor:	Stone, Bryan
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The NEAT is coming!

Bryan Stone looks at winter, the Gotthard Base Tunnel, and a little history.

Airolo in the snow.

All photos: Bryan Stone or his collection

The Swiss Express reader receives this edition in December, when perhaps only a few early Christmas cards recall those far-off days with log fires and deep snow. In Switzerland the glaciers are fast retreating, heavy snow is no longer certain, and many managers of ski resorts at around 1,000 m altitude look anxiously at the forecasts. Brown, bare hillsides are bad for business.

It was not always so, of course. The old Gotthard Tunnel, opened in 1882, is at 1,106 m altitude in Göschenen, and at 1,141 m in Airolo. This was quite high enough for heavy falls,

and if anyone thinks Airolo is the south, the amount of snow deposited by the Föhnwind coming up wet and cold from the south can teach a hard lesson. The Gotthardbahn had thought it could get away without a rotary plough; offers in 1892 and 1894 from Germany were refused, with the justification that traffic had not been disturbed by snowfalls. On 15th January 1895 the line was blocked. A letter to Henschel for a steam powered Rotary was quickly answered, and in January 1896 the Xrotm 100 was delivered. It first saw action in March 1896, as an avalanche from the Häggrigental blocked the line. It worked until 1975, and after three last sessions for the cameras, went in 1982 to the Verkehrshaus in Luzern. The rotary was kept at Erstfeld. It was ordered out when snow lay deeper than 50 cm above rail level. It required a locomotive to propel it, often in fact two. It could handle settled and new snow, but avalanches required great care; the tightly packed snow may be full of rocks and tree trunks, and broken blades are no help. After the electrification in 1920 a Crocodile was usually used. If the catenary was damaged, a C5/6 2-10-0 was mobilised. These proceedings took time to organise, raising steam and finding crews, so we should not imagine a flying start to the rescue.

The list of snow troubles is long, and not only the plough was required. The Gotthardbahn and, after its nationalisation in 1909 the SBB, have built innumerable galleries and protective works along the line. But it remained a mountain route, as in



January 1951 when seven avalanches stopped traffic for 35 hours. On 12th February 1951 avalanches between Airolo and Ambri, Lavorgo and Bodio stopped traffic for 8 days. Between Erstfeld and Amsteg, a slide in 1956 derailed 10 freight wagons of a passing train. The Kohlplatz avalanche (a known threat) on 22nd December 1962 caused an interruption of 40 hours, and 42 trains, many with Italian workers going home for Christmas, were diverted over the BLS - at a time when this was single track. In 1968 from 27th January and again from 11th March, the north slope was interrupted for several days. In 1975, at least 10 avalanches between Erstfeld and Göschenen came down. This time the Easter traffic was diverted. In 2006 the heaviest snowfall in 20 years hit the Ticino – and it all happened again.

There are countless stories, and also legends, of trains, travellers and engine drivers combatting problems the deep snow can bring. These will have no part in the story of the NEAT Base Tunnel, which remains below 550 m altitude and will rarely see snow as it offers 3 hour journeys between Zürich and Milano. But much has changed; the 20 million passengers/year, which 20 years ago once travelled the route, are today only some 7 or 8 million. The seasonal workers, the holiday makers to the Adriatic; people on business between north and south; the big blue sleeping cars; the through coaches between Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Germany, and Italy, are gone for ever, like the steam engines of the Gotthardbahn. Changing employment and lifestyles, low-cost airlines, electronic communications and the ubiquitous private car have all reduced the passenger numbers – the new lines are now primarily to move freight in a consumer driven society.

But what was it like? Perhaps we should first go back to 1850. At that time a traveller to Milano slept in Luzern, rose early and took the 05.00 steamship from Luzern to Flüelen, arriving 07.45. At 08.00 the Gotthard Postal Coach left for Italy, taking 30 minutes in Andermatt for lunch. The descent on the south side, down the hairpins of the Tremolo, reached Airolo at 17.20. Bellinzona was reached at 23.05 and after 15 minutes' pause the coach continued to Camerlata, south of Como.

An original 12-seat Postcoach of this era stands in the entrance porch of the Swiss Landesmuseum in Zürich, complete with its route board Flüelen – Camerlata. Horses were changed at Altdorf, Intschi, Gotthard Hospiz, Faido, Bodio, Osogna, Bironico, Lugano and Mendrisio. The 12-seat coach needed 5 horses. This is the one that painter Rudolf Koller immortalised in 'The Gotthardpost' (Zürich Art Museum). In Amsteg, it was claimed that 400 horses were engaged on the Gotthard.

The good news was that after a brief breakfast, a connection on the railway, opened in 1849, brought the passenger after 28 hours into Milano at 08.55.

It may surprise you to know that the same timetable applied summer and winter. When snow lay on the pass, two-passenger one-horse sledges were used, as also for the mails. When, at whatever season, there were more passengers, coaches and sledges ran in convoys. Before the Gotthardbahn opened, in

RIGHT: The carriage used now for tourists.

LEFT: A depiction of the dangers faced by travellers back in the day.

1882, some 70,000 persons per year, or 200 per day, were using the coaches and sledges of the Gotthard route.

When the railway opened, it made possible a journey of 9 hours 20 minutes between Luzern and Milano. The 4 trains daily (including a night service), destroyed however not only the life's work of the Uri and Tessiner Ostlers and Postillions, but also that of Graubünden's Lukmanier pass. Indeed, if Bavaria, St Gallen and some British financiers (who were thinking of the passage to India via Italian ports) had had their way, the Lukmanier might have been our route; but the Gotthard Conference of 1869 chose the Gotthard for the new railway. By the way, according to the first timetables, you could leave London via Calais, Delle and Basel to catch the next day's 10.00 to Milano in Luzern. Soon you may take the early Eurostar/TGV from London to Zürich, and be in Milano in the evening. You will see no heaving horses or steam engines, only rarely snow and (in 70 km of tunnels), hardly any mountains. Or you can fly.

A postscript is that in the summer months you can ride a Postcoach, just as in 1870, twice daily from Andermatt to Airolo. It is all very authentic, especially the lunch at Gotthard Hospice, and the descent, just like in Koller's painting, down the Tremolo gorge. Your correspondent's daughters gave him the trip as a present. 

