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Gotthard Base Tunnel Opening

Ilkka Huotelin



SBB Re 460 079-7 'Alfred Escher' in a Gottardo 2016 sponsor colours ready to take an extra train from Biasca to Zürich. All photos: Ilkka Huotelin

It took decades of debating, several referendums to get going and 17 years to build, so it was only natural that the Gotthard Base Tunnel opening would be big news in Switzerland. It was officially opened on 1st June followed by a special party for the 2,400 people involved in the construction, and on the following weekend there were a series of events for the general public, which I had a chance to attend. The opening party had been announced exactly one year in advance, followed up with regular updates in the media in the build up to the big day, and the attention it got was great across the whole country. The Swiss are typically very locally focused and not much interested in what happens elsewhere, especially across the language borders, but the official opening event was extensively broadcast live in the three different national languages, for the whole day. The Federal Government had spent CHF12m on the events, and if one counts expenditure by the Cantons, Communes and sponsors the total figure will be much higher.

1st June - The Official Opening

As the main reason for constructing the new alpine rail links was to get trucks off the roads and onto trains, and as Switzerland is a key international transit route between Southern and Central Europe, this was a key foreign relations event for the Government. So in addition to having the whole Swiss Parliament present, also the leaders of neighbouring countries attended the opening. Germany's Angela Merkel referred to the tunnel as the heart of the transport system and said that it is now Germany's time to fix the aorta – the access route north of Basel, which needs more capacity. Besides the official ceremony and the speeches, the day also had various performances and shows for the

invited guests at both ends of the tunnel, which many people liked - but some found somewhat odd. Because Switzerland is a true people's democratic republic at heart it was not, as it would have been in many other countries, the politicians who would be on the first train through the tunnel, but it was people and school children who had won a special lottery. 160,000 people had participated in a draw in hope of winning one of 500 special tickets given to the two first trains, formed by RABDe 500s (ICNs), that travelled the tunnel simultaneously in both directions.

4th/5th June - The Public Party

During the following weekend it was a great party for the general public and around 80,000 people visited the four festival sites:

- Erstfeld - on the old line north of the tunnel
- Rynächt - a temporary station in the north
- Biasca - on the old line in the south, and
- Pollegio - a special site in the south next to the tunnel's control centre

The logistics were organised faultlessly as one would have expected. SBB ran 240 extra trains over the two days, at the cost of freight movements which were shut-down over the period, whilst PostAutos shuttled the visitors between the Erstfeld and Rynächt sites, as well between Biasca and Pollegio every few minutes. They may have been the busiest days those stations have seen, but it was very easy to get around. As often in Switzerland the whole community gets involved and the local police forces, with the help of the army, were directing the traffic and making sure that no over-enthusiastic visitor would decide to walk into the tunnel. There were even temporary platforms for those who wanted to take pictures

of the trains running into the tunnel, or just from the festival areas. There was a lot of information, displays and brochures, but mainly in the three national languages and not much in English. This is sometimes a challenge for the foreign visitors here. For those who could not make it to the main festival, smaller events were organised at six stations across the country.

Erstfeld

Erstfeld was maybe the most interesting site for a train enthusiast, with extensive displays of SBB and SBB Historic's rolling stock. SBB Historic has a depot here and they had brought more rolling stock from their other sites. There were three locomotives in steam: D1/3 No.1 'Limmat'; A3/5 No.705 and C5/6 No.2978, moving short distances back and forth, but not carrying passengers at this time. However, the RAe TEE No.1053 'Gottardo' was serving as a very stylish stationary restaurant for anyone who wanted to take a pause. The SBB was showing not only their regular locomotives, but several items of special equipment, including measurement and rescue trains as this is the rescue centre for the tunnel. There were personnel demonstrating the controls and displays and answering questions, (lack of fluency in the local dialect limited my conversation unfortunately) and a lot of information panels had been set up.

Rynächt

The opening festivities were sponsored by several companies and together with their stands they were extremely visible here, as well as in Polleggio. Besides the usual suspects such as SBB, SwissPost, one of the big banks, one of the two cooperative retailers, the Swiss rail manufactures ABB and Stadler were also there. All showed links to the railways, but it was more brand marketing with limited details. There were many catering stands selling the local produce – a lot of cheese and ham! Also visible were regional tourist boards indicating to prospective visitors who they can see, and what they could taste at the opposite ends of the tunnel hence encouraging them to make the journey. SBB also used this occasion to advertise for new employees and to promote itself as an employer, whilst the Swiss universities demonstrated their innovations on the future of transport. To mark the opening, SwissPost issued special Gottardo 2016 stamps, and the Swiss Mint special commemorative coins, all of which were on sale.

Polleggio

Next to the Control Centre and the new line, a large festival area was set up with a large stage for performances. Here was everything from big, abstract performances retelling the story of the Gotthard route throughout history, to local bands performing their repertoire. Stadler was showing here a simulator of their future EC 250 'Giruno' multiple unit, which will operate on this line from 2019. It proved very popular and attracted the longest queues of all the attractions.

Biasca

Biasca was the second site with a large collection of trains. Just a few days before the event, a risk of a landslide was detected next to the freight yard and the trains were relocated



The model of the base tunnel system being demonstrated at the Erstfeld maintenance centre. It is used in the training of employees and emergency services.

either next to Biasca station or to the other sites. Here SBB Cargo and Hupac displayed locomotives, cargo wagons and logistics solutions and visitors could climb into the locos and talk with the drivers. The Club del San Gottardo had their Tigerli E3/3 No.8501 in steam and one could also visit their restored excursion train connected to an Ae4/7, and taste local wines!

The Tunnel Journey

There was naturally a chance to travel the new tunnel, and SBB ran a shuttle train three times an hour using the IC2000 double decker trains. Tickets cost CHF8 one-way (if you had a GA, or similar, valid for that day), or CHF30 full price, with all the seats sold as 2nd class. As noted, temporary platforms had been constructed at both ends of the tunnel at Rynächt and Polleggio. The return journeys were over the mountain route, where trains ran exceptionally every 15 minutes. Well how was the 20 min. journey? Well a-tunnel-is-a-tunnel with not much to see. There is on the right hand side in both tunnels an illuminated walkway and every 325m a door to an evacuation tunnel, and there are two "stations" at Sedrun and Faido with junctions connecting the two parallel tunnels. The trains that use the tunnel have their

The Rynächt festival area seen from the watch manufacturer's stand who were one of the sponsors of the event. Mondaine had a special edition of their classical SBB watch on sale with the Gottardo 2016 theme on the back of the watch. At the temporary platform an IC2000 shuttle is waiting for passengers for a special trip through the base tunnel.





ABOVE: A tour inside the SBB Diagnostic Vehicle at Erstfeld.



LEFT: The Pollegio control. From here the operations and the safety of the tunnel are controlled.

air conditioning systems boosted to cope with both the heat (up to 45°C) and the humidity of the tunnel, and of course the ETCS 2

installed as there are no optical signals. For a regular traveller on the route the new tunnel saves a lot of time and is more comfortable, but the tourist will still prefer the old mountain route for its great views with its twists and turns.

The Mountain Route

SBB expects the number of passengers to drop dramatically on the old Gotthard route and from the 11th December timetable change there will just be an hourly RE (meaning no conductor on board) operated by a TILO Flirt (RABe 524) travelling the old route. It is great that a frequent service is retained, but comfort of course will not be the same on a train designed for short trips, compared with the long distance trains, some with panoramic coaches. It will be interesting to see the planned 'Gotthard Panorama Express', which will run at weekends from Easter to October replacing the 'Wilhelm Tell Express'. Both SBB Historic and Club del San Gottardo plan to run more heritage trains over the mountain line next year, as there will be a lot of spare capacity.

On the whole, it was a truly well organised and memorable event, with so much to see that one had to be choosy. It was a pleasure to see how much pride the Swiss take in their railways and in connecting both sides of the Alps smoothly. 🇨🇭



Gotthard Base Tunnel – 1st June 2016

Bryan Stone

Some personal thoughts from your Swiss News Editor

Along with millions of other Swiss I watched the opening ceremony of the Gotthard Base Tunnel on television. Only the great-and-the-good, and a few lucky citizens, were present at the event. It was more than moving, and more than historic. Yes, we know the statistics: 57km long - a world record; 125,000 tonnes of steel arches; 28.2m tonnes of excavated material (some used to make new islands in Lake Luzern); 4m cubic metres of concrete; 3,200 km of copper wire; 2,600 workers and 16 years building time. The cost, CHF12.2 billion and, sadly nine people dead. We know that it was finished a year early and substantially below budget. It is an extraordinary work, the greatest step in 100 years, and not only for railways.

Magnificent as it is, that is not what it is about. It

represents much more.

It is an outstanding project for European unity and coherence, but also an endorsement from the start, of faith in rail, passenger and freight, for the future. It reflects, of course, Swiss compromise also towards the EU, as SRS members will realise. Switzerland is not an EU member, and thus it was most significant that Federal President Schneider-Amman made two things clear at the opening. First, Switzerland is a part of Europe, and second, Switzerland has built the new Gotthard Tunnel for Europe. This is the more striking when considering that the entire NEAT (New Rail Alpine Transversal) project, including the funding of the Gotthard and Lötschberg Base Tunnels, was voted by the Swiss people in a 1992 public referendum. This was in full