



Switzerland.
by train, bus and boat.

History III:

From crossing the Gotthard in 20 hours to speeding through in 20 minutes

Crossing the Gotthard along the old pass road evokes the past. The journey back through the longest train tunnel in the world allows a glimpse into the future. In its entirety, this round trip through space and time transforms the historic quantum leap on the Gotthard into a remarkable experience.

The opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel marks the latest milestone in the traffic route's eventful history. Since the 13th century, the Gotthard route has established itself step by step as a key north-south transit link through the Alps. A trip over the Gotthard Pass in the traces of bygone travellers throws the difference between then and now into sharp relief. The northward-bound journey back through the Gotthard Massif – a 20-minute train ride through the longest railway tunnel in the world – is in contrast a journey back to the future. Twenty hours seem like a reasonable time for a journey over this legendary mountain and through its fascinating and archaic landscape. But for the pack mule trains of the Middle Ages, the trail represented the most gruelling of challenges. Later on, the stagecoach ride along winding mountain roads was regarded as a trial to be endured by the merchants, scientists, ambassadors and world travellers undertaking the journey. Today this time-honoured, horse-drawn mode of travel is once again plying the pass road between Airolo and Andermatt, offering an entertaining experience that is both sustainable and unique. Entertaining experiences can also be had with Andermatt local Bänz Simmen, who conducts guided tours of his village and snowshoe treks through the surrounding countryside. The outgoing and urbane Simmen is an absolute authority on the region and its history and eschews worn clichés in favour of the facts. He remarks that then and now, the opening of the pack mule trail and the modern flat rail link have one thing in common: "Change accompanying the opening of new transport routes has always aroused fears in Andermatt. Ultimately however, it has always yielded opportunities," he says. Bänz Simmen sees the pending change as an opportunity to focus on a return to nature.

Despite spending several years in Zurich and travelling extensively abroad, Bänz Simmen has always been drawn back to his native village of Andermatt. In the 1980s, he was the founder of Switzerland's first snowboarding association. Today Simmen not only runs snowshoe treks and guided village tours – his small internet café is a popular meeting place for guests of all ages. He also lent a hand at the Gotthard Base Tunnel construction sites at Sedrun, Faido and Amsteg. A trained laboratory technician, Simmen has a special interest in minerals and is also keen on the GPS treasure hunt geocaching. www.kiosk61.ch

Travel times through the ages: The journey along the medieval pack mule trail from Basel in the north of Switzerland to the southern border at Chiasso took 6 days. The opening of the transit route for wheeled traffic in the 16th century reduced the journey time to 3.5 days. In 1882, the opening of the Gotthard railway line slashed the travel time between north and south to 10.5 hours, thus significantly increasing the route's importance. 134 years on, Switzerland is once again opening the longest train tunnel in the world. It will cut the journey between Basel and Chiasso to 4 hours.

Gotthard Stagecoach: The Gotthard Stagecoach started operating on the pass route in 1842. A nostalgic trip from Andermatt to Airolo in a replica of the original Gotthard stagecoach can still be enjoyed today. <http://www.gotthardpost.ch/index.php/de/reise>