

History of the Gotthard transit route: 1200 – 2016

Pre-12th century: The Gotthard Pass was well known during the Roman era; however, the Schöllenen Gorge made it extremely difficult to cross.

From 1220: Construction of the 60-metre long wood Twärrren Bridge, running the length of the Schöllenen Gorge. Construction of a wooden bridge over the Reuss, which, according to legend, was built by the Devil and thus became known as the Devil's Bridge.

1595: Construction of a stone bridge over Schöllenen Gorge, the second Devil's Bridge.

16th century: Construction of the *Strada Urana* across the Piottino Gorge at Faido, a gorge as forbidding as the Schöllenen.

1708: Opening of the 65-metre long Urnerloch, the first road tunnel in the Alps, to replace the Twärrren Bridge, which had been washed away in 1707.

1831: Opening of a new road, more than five metres wide and suitable for vehicles. Renovation of the bridge over the Schöllenen Gorge.

1825: The first railway in England inspires a vision of a railway line running from northern to southern Europe.

1871: Foundation of the Gotthard Railway Company under the chairmanship of Alfred Escher.

1872: Construction of the Gotthard tunnel begins. The project is led by Louis Favre and at its peak employs as many as 5,000 workers.

1882: Three-day opening of the 15 km train tunnel, at that time the longest in the world, with special trains running between Lucerne and Milan.

1947: Vision of a two-deck, combined road and rail base tunnel through the Gotthard from engineer and traffic planner Carl Eduard Gruner.

1960s/70s: Evaluation of various options for a base tunnel.

1963: Swiss parliament decides to build a road tunnel through the Gotthard.

1974: Decision made to build a dual-track base rail tunnel, but due to an economic recession and political disagreement the project is put on ice.

1980: Opening of the world's longest road tunnel through the Gotthard.

1991: Parliament votes to construct two base tunnels at the Gotthard and Lötschberg.

1992: Clear support for the NRLA project (New Railway Link through the Alps) in a referendum, with almost 64% in favour.

1993: First exploratory drilling in the Gotthard from Faido into the Piora Basin.

1994: Public approval for the Alpine initiative to protect the Alps, which aims to limit road freight traffic.

1998: Adoption of the FinöV proposal, which confirms, inter alia, public approval for the financing and construction of the NRLA project.

1999: Start of drilling and blasting work by AlpTransit Gotthard AG.

15 October 2010: First breakthrough in one of the tunnel bores and start of installation of the railway infrastructure on the north side of the Alps.

11 December 2016: Start of operations on the 57 km rail tunnel, the longest in the world.

Significance of the Gotthard railway for Switzerland

The first bridge over the Schöllenen Gorge on the Gotthard transit axis in 1220 at a height of 2,106 metres allowed the pass to be crossed for the first time. For central Switzerland, the pass was significant both politically and economically. The construction in 1595 of the stone bridge further eased passage over the Schöllenen Gorge. By 1830, the Brenner Pass, at an elevation of 1,370 metres, had 20 times more traffic than the Gotthard. But the limited appeal of the Gotthard transit route barely affected the Confederation: the route compelled the authorities along the way to collaborate, while the modest transit operations drew little attention from the major powers.

In 1825, the inauguration of the world's first railway line in England prompted speculation about a rail link between northern and southern Europe. Experts in Alpine road construction had long viewed the Gotthard terrain as impassable, although strategically it was the ideal link between north and south. In 1863, after lengthy disputes about the route, the Gotthard Railway Company was established in Lucerne, and the involvement of Alfred Escher, an influential politician and businessman from Zurich, marked a turning point.

The Gotthard Treaty of 1869 defined the route of the Gotthard rail line and shortly after the Gotthard Railway Company was incorporated, with Escher as its chairman. The route between German-speaking Switzerland and Ticino also coincided with the political interests of the German Reich and Italy and was therefore co-financed by the three parties. Under the direction of Louis Favre, work on the Gotthard tunnel began as early as 1872. As many as 5,000 workers, most from Italy, worked at the northern and southern portals. The conditions were extremely tough; at least 199 workers lost their lives and Louis Favre himself died in the tunnel in 1879.

The first breakthrough occurred in 1880, with a lateral deviation of just 33 cm and a deviation in height of 5 cm. Just two years later, on 1 June 1882, the first scheduled trains ran the length of the Gotthard route between Lucerne and Chiasso. The *Augsburger Allgemeine* commented: "The dividing wall that separated the nations has come down... the countries have moved closer to one another." The connection through neutral Switzerland bound the country to the European community while strengthening its neutrality.

The opening of the Gotthard tunnel thus not only marked inauguration of the world's longest railway tunnel, but also a feat of engineering on a global scale. The Gotthard railway was hugely popular for many years until the First World War. Numerous tourists came to Switzerland to see the Gotthard railway; further south became their target destination only later.

The Gotthard railway also helped the mythical Gotthard region to take on a new dimension. People reflected on Switzerland's history and revived the legends of William Tell and the Devil's Bridge. After the line was built, Switzerland no longer considered itself an Alpine country, but increasingly perceived itself in political and historical literature as a Gotthard state.

Today, the Gotthard is an example of a genuine interaction between natural and cultural landscapes. From north to south, the Gotthard transport landscape reflects a cluster of transport systems that for the most part have remained unchanged. Bridges, tunnels, routes, roads, railway buildings, hotels, residential houses and fortifications from across the centuries enrich the landscape.

The opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel at the end of 2016 will add a new element to the transport landscape, once again drawing the regions and neighbouring countries closer to each other.