

An event run like a Swiss watch

Did you ever wonder how they throw a railroad festival in Europe?



When Czech 4-8-2 498.022 showed up at Erstfeld, Switzerland, to mark 125 years of the Gotthard Tunnel, Swiss musician Steiner Bruno greeted her with an Alpine horn.

thousand people enjoyed the Alpine air of Switzerland — and the sweet smell of coal smoke and hot steam of seven steam locomotives — Sept. 8-9, 2007, in two small Swiss villages.

The occasion was the 125th anniversary celebration of the opening of the famous 9.3-mile Gotthard Tunnel, which was built between 1871 and 1881, with regular Gotthardbahn Railway traffic first moving through the bore in 1882.

“The Gotthard Railway is one of Swit-

zerland’s, as well as Europe’s, most important railway links,” says Thomas Koppel, deputy director of the Swiss Railways Heritage Foundation, a 20-member subsidiary of the railroad founded in 2001 to preserve the history of Swiss railways.

The event is an example of a railway festival with European flair that draws a large crowd. Consider that the most recent large U.S. festival like this, the California State Railroad Museum’s Railfair ’99, drew 180,000 people over 10 days.

What’s different about a Swiss railway event? For starters, look at who runs the show. While U.S. rail industry chiefs talk about concentrating on core business, Swiss Railways CEO Andreas Meyer has invested a great deal of time and money to keep Swiss railway history in front of the public. The historic foundation stores and maintains vintage equipment throughout the system for special occasions such as this. In all, it owns and operates more than a mile of locomotives and cars in two gauges — standard and meter gauge.

The foundation also operates a museum at Interlaken featuring a collection of model trains, locomotive and car hardware, a cinema that shows railway films, an interactive exhibit that lets visitors be the engineer in a cab simulator, and a café.

The setting for the tunnel celebration couldn’t have been more perfect: Erstfeld and Biasca are each towns on the 1,965-mile Swiss system in strategic locations on either side of the tunnel, both with bustling yards and shops.

FESTIVITIES PLANNED FOR A LONG TIME

The railway and two Swiss government agencies spent 18 months planning before launching the year-long festivities.

Highlights included the erection of a special observation platform so visitors can watch trains climb the narrow gorge near the tunnel; and the introduction of an observation car in daily service on the Gotthard route with 26 rotating seats and headphones to inform riders of sights, landscape features, and rail history. Daily electric-locomotive cab rides (at \$640 per adult) were offered throughout the year, and a June excursion weekend was held with vintage trains operating over the tunnel route, some with steam power. Numerous smaller events — from an open-air theater to a school camp for 1,000 children — were scheduled with the cooperation of local regional governing bodies.

At Erstfeld, the shop floor was boarded over so the Swiss Railways employee band could entertain the crowd as participants enjoyed a beer and wurst break. The yard area included exhibits, rail-related historical club displays, vintage passenger cars, brand-spanking-new modern equipment, and, of course, historic steam and electric locomotives in abundance.

There was also a complete emergency



The tunnel celebration provided a chance to display modern freight cars.

tunnel-fire train that visitors could walk through, maintenance-of-way equipment, rail movies, interactive displays for children and adults, a local 47-member HO- and O-gauge club layout to view, and locomotive-on-turntable cab rides for kids.

A rare treat was the appearance of the *Limmat*, a gleaming wood-and-steel replica of the first Swiss steam locomotive from 1847, now housed at the Transport Museum in Lucerne. The *Limmat* pulled four vintage cars for complimentary rides.

Crowded on yard tracks at Erstfeld were vintage pieces, such as 1917-built 2-10-0 2978, the *Elephant*, Switzerland's largest steam locomotive; 498.022, a 4-8-2 Czech steam locomotive; and other Czech and German steam locomotives, as well as the first electric freight engine on the Gotthard line, dating to 1919.

Modern equipment highlighted during the show included a regional passenger train manufactured by Stadler with electrical equipment designed for both Italy's D.C. and Swiss's A.C. power and a diesel-electric switching locomotive that incorporates environmentally friendly exhaust filters. All in all, it was quite a show, and it foreshadows a much larger project.

BASE TUNNEL UNDER WAY

With the tunnel anniversary complete, the Swiss are in the midst of constructing a 35.4-mile, \$7 billion parallel Gotthard Base Tunnel. Expected to be completed in 2017, the bore will be the world's longest rail tunnel and will maintain an altitude of 1,650-feet [see "Inside the World's Longest Tunnel," May 2004 *TRAINS*]. It will have two single-track tunnels connected every 590 feet as an escape route. Additional tunnels, shafts, and passages in the



Fans view a Czech steam locomotive at the 125th anniversary celebration of Gotthard Tunnel. About 50,000 people attended the event. Three photos, Don Heimburger

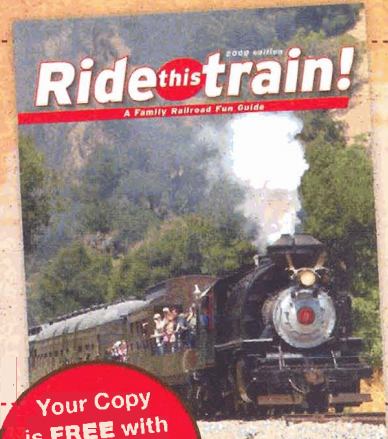
enormous project, at which 2,000 workers labor 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, will bring the total length to 95 miles.

The fear is that the new tunnel, 68 percent of which is complete, will marginalize communities sitting above and near it, and that the famous 1882 tunnel will fall into disuse, although Swiss Railways expects to maintain a certain level of service, and there is a preliminary study to give the line United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO, World Heritage status. The new tunnel is expected to cut a full hour off the Zurich-to-Milan schedule, with the resulting time being quicker than flying between the cities.

The amount of freight vehicle traffic crossing the Alps has risen sharply over the past two decades. The new Gotthard Base Tunnel, characteristic of the inventive Swiss, is being heralded as the engineering feat of the 21st century.

Yet another cause for celebration.

DESTINATION: RAILROAD



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