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Autor: Gauntlett, Trevor
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Pioneering on the 'Gottardino'

Trevor Gauntlett

The 'Gottardino' special trains through the Gotthard Base Tunnel (GBT) run between 2nd August and 27th November, the operation consisting of two trains/day Tuesday to Sunday. One starts in the morning from Flüelen giving connections from a lake ship service from Luzern, a scheduled 'Panorama Car' service from the Ticino and the local S-Bahn service from Zug, the second is a late afternoon departure from Biasca. Both trains have a 45 minute stop at the Sedrun safety station as part of a scheduled 2-hour trip. Booking through the STC in London my wife and I were privileged to get tickets for the first advertised train. We travelled from Lugano and had time to take photographs of the dedicated rake of First Class open coaches (one a DVT driving trailer) coupled to a Class 460 at the north end, along with some of the incoming paddle steamer, before boarding. A dedicated rake meant dedicated internal branding, with the regular SBB posters at the saloon ends replaced with the word 'Pioneer' in one of the Swiss languages. At each booked seat there was a 'Pioneer Passport' – to be stamped in the evacuation tunnel – a commemorative bottle of water and a plan of the layout of the exhibitions at Sedrun. Each group of seats received literature about the GBT, the

'Gottardino', safety instructions in the event of a real evacuation, and (in German only) details of the AlpTransit project's yet-to-be-completed infrastructure. Sadly it appeared that some intending passengers from the Ticino would miss their trip as due to operational problems the ICN unit that missed a connection at Bellinzona did not stop at Flüelen, making us realise that we had been wise to take an earlier train to give an easier connection. Interestingly some of our fellow 'Pioneers' arrived with luggage as they were apparently making this part of a longer journey. Everyone was on board before the scheduled departure time and the atmosphere had a distinct buzz of excitement.

The SBB crew, who were accompanied by an emergency first aider and at least two police officers, gave a short welcome talk through the PA system and took us through the emergency procedures in the GBT – but only in German. It was difficult for me to recognise when mentions of *sicherheit* were references to the safety procedures, or when they referred to the Sedrun safety station. Our guide noted the potential for delay when gaining the main line, but we departed just 2-minutes later than scheduled. After passing Erstfeld it was explained that we would take the junction very slowly, though trains would enter the tunnel at 160 kph in normal operation. We cruised into the tunnel and gently picked up speed, however after about 5 minutes the guide announced that we would begin to approach full line speed. Unlike TGVs there was no speedometer, nor was there an announcement when we reached top speed. Some 15 minutes later we were advised that we should remain seated as we slowed on approach to Sedrun, then drawing to a halt were welcomed to Graubünden and were able to disembark.



ABOVE: 460 006 08 and the dedicated rake.
LEFT: The evacuation tunnel. Photos: Trevor Gauntlett

The safety (or evacuation) station has two offset platforms on the outside of the tracks, connected by short evacuation tunnels to ramped passages that rise to a higher cross passage. From here the lifts head to the surface. Between the two closest platform ends, and underneath the connecting cross passage, the railway crossover tunnels meet the southbound running tunnel. The 'Gottardino' stopped with its rear car adjacent to one emergency door and the driving trailer to another. Access along the platforms beyond those points was forbidden. Leaving our rearmost carriage we entered through fire doors from the platform into one of a network of tunnels that appear to vary considerably in size around the facility, as they are designed for different roles in the event of evacuating a busy train, or in a major incident. One of our fellow passengers demonstrated that the tunnels were wheelchair-friendly, but it was not at all clear how she had got off the train, as there was no obvious specialist equipment on the platform. Having seen Swiss station staff struggle to get wheelchair users onto ETR610s at both Lugano and Bellinzona using an adapted fork lift truck, procedures for de-training a wheelchair passenger in the event of an emergency in the GBT seem unclear. At 23-25°C the temperature was cooler than expected, due to the ventilation system that draws in outside air to pressurise the safety station tunnels at a higher pressure than in the operating tunnels. This is to ensure that smoke, fumes, etc. are kept out of the emergency exit routes. In trying to stabilise my camera for shots in the subdued light, I discovered to my surprise that the rough sprayed concrete on the walls is extremely friable (see note). The floors of the emergency tunnel are smooth to ensure rapid escape, but they also have what appear to be quite deep drainage channels at the edges. These channels potentially constitute a trip hazard, not just when tourists are present but they could also be a problem during a real evacuation.

There were five elements to the displays set out to educate and amuse visitors during their 45 minute stay in the station: safety equipment; profiles of those who brought the GBT to completion; statistics about the project; a 20 minute video, screened in a closed-off-side gallery, covering the project including its opening ceremony, and finally 'periscope' views of the mountains above. Most explanatory text on the displays was in German, French, Italian and English, however on some of the larger graphics (including those detailing the statistics) the text tended to be in German only. The scale of the safety station and the escape tunnel network is captured in one fire exit sign that indicates some 1550 metres to the exit. This is inevitable with the potential for 750 metres long trains. These have required platform lengthening during the summer at locations including Bellinzona and Arth-Goldau. Although the stamping stations set up at Sedrun for the 'Pioneer Passports' allowed every participant a clear opportunity to

A display showing the mass of rock excavated.

experience something unique, I thought that AlpTransit had missed an opportunity by not having any merchandise on sale either here, or on the 'Gottardino'. An outlet offering goods from their website, or even some unique items that could only be purchased in the tunnel, would seem to have been an opportunity missed. Around half way through our visit we had a demonstration of the safety station PA system, as it was used to advise that there were 20 minutes remaining until departure. This allowed plenty of time for platform and train photographs, plus an opportunity to view some displays that were no longer surrounded by throngs of people.

On departing the safety station we were able to see the illuminated crossover caverns at low speed. We were fortunate enough to be on the right side of the train and to therefore get great views along the tunnels of the northern crossovers at Sedrun. Unfortunately, being in a brightly lit rail carriage, no photographs were feasible. Then, during the 20 minute run to the tunnel exit, we were amused that some of the Swiss then reverted-to-type treating this once-in-a-lifetime-event as any other regular trip. One woman opened her knitting, while a family of three began a card game with the fourth traveller in their bay. There was also a nice final touch when the SBB train crew came around distributing chocolates - Bündler Nusstörtli. On arrival in Biasca those not hurrying on were directed by our train host to the local produce store in the main station building. This did sell some of the 'Gottardino' items that can be purchased from the web site, so a 'T'-shirt and pin were duly purchased. No doubt those heading back to their kitchens left the shop with a selection of Ticinese sausages and cheese as well. All-in-all, a splendid day out and a feeling of having completed our 'connection' with the project, after making several visits to the AlpTransit visitor centres at Erstfeld and Pollegio over the years. There has never been another rail-based event of similar status. +

Editor's Note: *It would appear that what the author describes as 'friable concrete' is actually a fire retardant covering sprayed onto the walls of the tunnel. This is common practice in such circumstances.*

