



Glacier Express AG - History

The success story of a unique rail connection across the Alps

A continuous rail network is born

The **Visp-Zermatt** railway line, which was powered by steam until 1929, was opened on **18 July 1891**. Since **10 July 1904** it has been possible to journey by train between **Chur and St. Moritz** and **1 August 1912** saw the completion of the stretch between **Chur and Disentis**. World War I was responsible for an interruption which meant that the continuous section between Brig and Disentis was not opened until 3 July 1926. And it was not until **5 June 1930** that it was possible to travel from **Visp to Brig** on the narrow-gauge track.

The birth of the Glacier Express

This was the connection everyone had been waiting for. And on **25 June 1930** the Glacier Express started operating **between Zermatt and St. Moritz as a through train**. The three railways Brig Visp Zermatt Railway (BVZ), Furka Oberalp Railway (FO) and Rhaetian Railway (RhB) deployed their best vehicles: the RhB its ABs C 4ü 61 (which as the AS 1161 is still being used today as a saloon car), a 2nd/3rd class coach of the 604-607 series, the BVZ a 1st/2nd class coach with a saloon compartment and the FO a C4ü 260. These were accompanied by a new dining car provided by MITROPA in Neuhausen (which today is the "Gourmino" coach 3812).

The trip from Zermatt to St. Moritz took from 7:30 am to 6:20 pm and in the opposite direction from 8:15 am to 6:55 pm, or almost 11 hours. The Glacier Express was powered by electricity between Zermatt and Brig as well as between Disentis and St. Moritz from the very beginning. The section between **Brig and Disentis** was not powered by electricity until **1 June 1941**. Until that time, trains on this section were powered by steam.

The train was in great demand. Around 20,000 people travelled on the trains between July and September. Due to World War II, the Glacier Express service was suspended between 1943 and 1946. In 1968 the train was given its standard red livery. Due to the massive amounts of snow and the associated danger of avalanches on the mountainous Furka section, the Glacier Express had to suspend operation between mid-October and the start of June.

Operation all year round from 1982

On 26 June 1982, the **Furka base tunnel** was opened and with it the all-year connection between Valais and Graubünden.



In 1980, Helmut Klee, Director of the Swiss National Tourist Office in North America, recognised the magnificent value of the Glacier Express for tourism and particularly for those wanting to **travel to the Alps**. Americans did not want to be based somewhere for their holidays, but wanted to cross the Alps in comfort. He encouraged the tourist experts in St. Moritz and Zermatt, as well as the three railway companies involved, to relaunch the Glacier Express and advertise trips in travel catalogues – as far as possible coordinated with the opening of the Furka Tunnel in June 1982. This was a way of encouraging a lot of **Americans to come to Switzerland** and perhaps persuade them to come back one day to spend their holidays in the country. The first meeting was held in March 1981 in Zurich. In addition to the BVZ, FO and RhB railways, the tourist directors of St. Moritz, Zermatt, Zurich and Geneva, as well as representatives of SBB and Swissair took part.

The Glacier Express was rediscovered. A **report** by Roman Brodman **on the slowest express train in the world on German TV station ARD** on Easter Monday 1983 resulted in unprecedented demand from German passengers, and something that just had not been expected. Over night, those responsible at Glacier Express created advertising media and the Swiss Tourist Office in Frankfurt was thus able to satisfy the demands of lots of people potentially interested in travelling in just a few days. Numerous **operators** then included the Glacier Express in their programmes and the tourist organisations trained thousands of **travel agents** accordingly. Passenger figures rose from January to October 1983 to 73,200.

To take the stress out of the journey for Glacier Express passengers, **individual seat reservations** were introduced on 3 June **1984** – a totally new feature in inner-Swiss transport. A lack of a connection to the IT system resulted in reservations and confirmations being made and issued by telephone or postcard. This new service was, in part, inspired by Helmut Klee from New York. It was also Klee who reported feedback from US passengers and helped continuously adapt the quality to suit passenger requirements. St. Moritz spa director Hanspeter Danuser played the alpenhorn on the New York Empire State Building and thus got himself invitations to American TV studios. His main topic: the Glacier Express. Passenger numbers increased in 1984 to 89,360.

In **1985 two further** Glacier Express trains were introduced in each direction and, as a supplement to the Glacier Express between St. Moritz and Zermatt, an extra side connection from Davos was created. This was intended to better cover **the great demand in the summer season**. Forty famous members of the "Association of American Travel Writers" spent a week in Engadin and rounded off their stay with a trip on the Glacier Express. As a result, the New York Times featured a lead story picturing, among other things, the famous slanted glass. The number of passengers in 1985 increased to 184,000



To make sure water flowed in the coaches in winter, the passenger coaches on the Glacier Express were equipped with heatable water fill funnels and the stationary water installation in St. Moritz featured shaft heating.

The Glacier Express – a mountain train caught in the forces of nature

In **July 1987** the Upper Rhine flooded the railway track near Trun as well as two tunnels. The Glacier Express travelled on the one side from St. Moritz to Ilanz or Tavanasa and from the West to Disentis. The PostBus ran between them. Railway employees helped with the transfer of luggage. Seat reservations were continued reliably in the connecting trains. All important departure stations and those along the way were provided with fax machines to ensure seat reservations were maintained. The disruption near Trun was not solved until September 1987. Between July and September a total of 48,000 passengers were transported by PostBus, with thousands of items of luggage being reloaded.

On **27 February 1990**, the Glacier Express was blown over on the Oberalp Pass by storm Viviane. Luckily none of the passengers were hurt; after their shock, they celebrated their luck in a military camp. By chance, the Head of PR at Rhaetian Railway was on the train that day with a group of journalists from Austria and he was also celebrating his birthday on this red-letter day.

In the **spring of 1991** the Brig - Zermatt section was interrupted near Randa by a landslide. Passengers were once again transported around the blocked section on buses. The Glacier Express followed its schedule on the rest of the trip.

In **September 1993**, Brig was flooded. The Glacier Express, however, was spared but could no longer provide its through service. Passengers had to change between Naters and Visp.

Innovation on the Glacier Express.

In **1991 the quality of travel** on the Glacier Express was improved by including reports on the various sections on tape in English, French and German. Passenger numbers increased in 1992 to 237,000.

Even though the Glacier Express fleet had constantly been adapted to suit increasing requirements, innovation was necessary. For the first time, the FO introduced a panoramic car as a test vehicle which could be assigned to groups.



In **1993** the panoramic train pair represented the dawn of a new age. Each of these two trains consisted of five panoramic cars of the FO or BVZ and also, between St. Moritz and Brig, a nostalgic dining car of the RhB. Pininfarina had designed the new panoramic cars and Breda in Pistoia (I) had built them.

Passenger figures reached **the 252,400 mark in 1994**. From 26 June 1982 to 31 October 1996, a total of 2.75 million passengers used the Glacier Express. This made the Alpine express one of the world's most successful and most well known tourist trains. The Glacier Express can be booked on all five continents. Along with loyal passengers from Switzerland, Germany and the US, passengers from Asia who wanted to discover the Alps were becoming increasingly important for the Glacier Express - particularly the Japanese.

The BVZ and FO railways merged on 1 January 2003 to become the Matterhorn Gotthardbahn (MGBahn). From then on, the Glacier Express has been operated by the MGBahn and RhB.

On 25 June 2005, the Glacier Express celebrated its 75th birthday. This anniversary was celebrated extensively throughout the summer.

Into the future in 2006 with a completely new Glacier Express

Towards the end of the 1990s it became clear that the coach material and catering concept was no longer meeting customers' (high) expectations. First-class panoramic cars and conventional coaches in first and second class shaped the image of the Glacier Express. Furthermore, it was not possible for all passengers to be served in the dining car and the dining time was limited.

To keep the railway's image at a high level, it was decided to purchase 24 new panoramic cars in first and second class incl. bar/dining cars. A new catering concept was to cause a stir; meals were served at passengers' seats and naturally the tried and tested concept of fresh cuisine was retained. Investments totalled around CHF 60 million, funded jointly by the partner railways RhB and MGBahn.

2008 saw a record number of passengers for the Glacier Express: 260,000. In autumn of the same year, the economic climate changed dramatically worldwide with the collapse of the banking system and, together with a high Swiss franc, led to a drop in the number of passengers in 2009. At the end of the year, passenger figures totalled 239,000.



In July **2010** the Glacier Express reached a low with the accident in Fiesch. Due to a delay, the train driver accidentally accelerated too early derailing the last three coaches. A Japanese passenger lost his life, 42 others were injured.

The high level of the Swiss franc, a reduction in the number of passengers to 202,000 and the abolition of the compensation by the Confederation led to the **train to Davos being discontinued in 2013**. From now on, it was not only an aim but also a necessity for the Glacier Express to be the only train in Switzerland that was profitable.

2015 - new impulse for the Glacier Express

The Swiss National Bank's announcement that it would no longer hold the Swiss franc at a fixed exchange rate with the euro in January 2015 was drastic for Swiss tourism. Passenger figures dropped to 188,000. There were fewer groups and the groups were becoming smaller in number; the number of **individual passengers** was on the increase. Furthermore, **increasing digitalisation** was having an effect on passengers' information and booking behaviour and thus required a standardised image on common electronic booking platforms, faster decision paths and more direct contact to passengers. These were all new challenges for the train and its operative management. For these reasons, and also because further investments in rolling stock were necessary, the Boards of the two railway companies initiated the Svilup project in the summer of 2015. The aim of the project was to show how the Glacier Express could be run profitably long term and which structures would be necessary for this purpose.

In November 2016, a new, contemporary and intuitively operated website with an integrated shop ("one-stop shop") was launched.

As a result of the analysis and the first draft of the business plan, the 'Svilup leads' decided to found a **subsidiary** as soon as possible and for the first time in its almost 90-year history to engage a manager for the Glacier Express. **Glacier Express AG** domiciled in Andermatt was officially founded on **23 August 2017**. **RhB and MGBahn each own 50%** and have three seats each on the Board of Directors. It is presided over by Councillor Isidor Baumann, Member of the Board of MGBahn. Annemarie Meyer is Head of Operations at Glacier Express AG which has a total of four employees.



In the winter season 2017/18, a test **photo stop at Oberalp** was introduced on the Glacier Express 903 between St. Moritz and Zermatt. First results show that passengers value this stop. Now, the railway wants to test out the photo stop during the summer season.

A **new operational concept** is being introduced in the **summer season 2018**. Two Glacier Express trains will be turned around after lunch in both Chur and Brig and will then travel back to Zermatt and St. Moritz. With this doubling of capacity through the Rhine Gorge and over the Oberalp Pass, the management is hoping for more passengers and better chances of satisfying the demands that digitalisation and the shift of passengers from groups to individual passengers entail. Furthermore this is the first time passengers will have the opportunity to arrive in St. Moritz and Zermatt on the Glacier Express in the evening. Everyone knows that light in the mountains is particularly fascinating in the evening and in the morning.

The **Excellence Class** is being launched in the winter of 2019. This is an offer for passengers who demand a little more and who would like more amenities, more service and comfort on the Glacier Express. For this purpose, two coaches will be redesigned totally inside so that all passengers will be guaranteed a view of the mountains, glaciers, gorges, valleys and idyllic mountain villages from a window seat. The coaches feature a bar and the experience includes personal service, food and beverages.

In view of the 90-year celebrations, **all panoramic cars will be overhauled** between 2019 and 2021, will be given a new design inside, made state of the art and equipped with a **new infotainment system**. It will also once more be possible to open the occasional window to take snapshots of the Alpine landscape without any reflections and thus share the experience with friends.