



The legendary railway through the Alps

Eight years after a luxury train travelled from Paris to Constantinople for the first time, a railway line was opened in the Swiss Alps that travelled up to Zermatt in the Mattertal valley in July 1891. In contrast to the Orient Express, which was built along the simplest topography, this first section of the Glacier Express was already a masterpiece of Alpine engineering. The 291-kilometre route was further developed in the tradition of these visionaries of the railway. It passes through a total of 91 tunnels, goes over 291 bridges and deep gorges, beneath snow-capped mountain peaks and past idyllic mountain villages and Alpine pastures – right through the heart of Switzerland.

The Albula Line with the famous Landwasser Viaduct from Chur to St. Moritz, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was inaugurated in July 1904. Eight years later, the section from Chur to Disentis followed along the Anterior Rhine, a mystical river that had already been revered as “Father Rhine” in ancient times. Due to the First World War, construction work had to be stopped. The last section over two passes between Valais, Uri and Graubünden did not open until July 1926.

The birth of the Glacier Express

On the morning of 25 June 1930, the first 70 invited guests travelled from the foot of the Matterhorn to the chic St. Moritz in 11 hours. After 40 years of planning and construction, the most spectacular train journey in the Alps and through the heart of Switzerland had been completed. But the legend of the Glacier Express had only just begun and the success story continues to this day. After all, the magnificent construction of the forefathers is a legacy to tourist excellence to the present day.

In the 1930s, the number of passengers between July and September was around 20,000. Winter operation from October onwards was not yet possible due to the large amounts of snow and the associated risk of avalanches on the Furka route. When the Second World War plunged Europe into misery and international passengers stayed away, operations had to be stopped again until 1946.

A Swiss tourist landmark

In 1968, the train adopted its characteristic colour and was bathed in a uniform red. Otherwise, things were quiet on the railway line. Post-war Europe built motorways and indulged in private transport. It was not until 1980 that the director of the Swiss Transport Centre in North America recognised the great value of the Glacier Express for tourism. Many Americans not only wanted to discover a single place during their holidays, but also wanted to experience the entire Alpine region in comfort. He encouraged tourism professionals in St. Moritz and Zermatt as well as all participating railways and even Swissair to expand the Glacier Express with new travel offers. When the Furka Base Tunnel opened in June 1982, enabling the year-round, avalanche-proof connection between Valais and Graubünden, the Glacier Express introduced year-round service. The Glacier Express started to be rediscovered: in its winter look, as a journey through the glittering snowy landscapes. Or in autumn light through the orange larch forests. As a ride through blossom into the mountain spring.

The report by Swiss documentary filmmaker Roman Brodman on “The slowest express train in the world” in 1983 led to an unexpected demand. Numerous tour operators included the Glacier Express in their programmes. The number of passengers rose to over 73,000. The legendary 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. The main theme was the Glacier Express. The number of passengers increased to 90,000 in 1984. From 1985 onwards, two



additional Glacier Express trains operated in each direction. To complement the original route, a Glacier Express now departed from Davos. As a result, the high demand was better met in the summer half of the year. The front page of the New York Times featured a story picturing the famous slanty glass, from which nothing spilled even on a 12% incline. The number of passengers doubled to 184,000 within a year.

A mountain range under the spell of the forces of nature

In July 1987, the Anterior Rhine flooded the railway line near Trun as well as two tunnels. This section of the route had to be bypassed by PostBus for three months. Rhaetian Railway employees helped passengers to transfer their luggage. Swiss service quality in an exceptional situation. In February 1990, Storm Vivian overturned a 120t Glacier Express train on the Oberalp Pass. Fortunately, nobody was hurt. After this scare, the passengers only had to spend a merry night in a military camp until the rescue team arrived. Due to a landslide near Randa in the spring of 1991, the railway line between Brig and Zermatt was interrupted. Once again, passengers were able to bypass this section by bus. In September 1993, severe rain flooded the line near Brig. The Glacier Express did not suffer any damage, but could no longer offer its through service. Natural disasters did not damage the reputation of the Glacier Express. On the contrary, they reinforced its legend as a masterpiece of far-sighted engineering.

Innovations and modernisation

While many railway companies automated their operations in the 1990s, the Glacier Express continuously improved the quality of travel. From 1991 onwards, audiotope features explained the sights along the route. The number of passengers continued to rise to 237,000. In 1993, the first panoramic trains heralded a new era. The trains consisted of a nostalgic dining car and 5 panoramic cars, which were glazed to the ceiling, guaranteeing a panoramic view for all passengers. The Italian design studio Pininfarina designed the new panoramic cars. The number of passengers exceeded the quarter of a million passenger mark for the first time in 1994. This is how this panoramic journey became one of the most successful and well-known railway experiences in global tourism. The Glacier Express can now be booked on all five continents. Alongside loyal guests from Switzerland, Germany and the USA, more and more Asian passengers are discovering the legendary train journey, which has become "The Window to the Swiss Alps."

Setting the course for the future

In order to continue to offer top quality, the Glacier Express ordered 24 new panoramic cars for all travel classes. In addition, a new catering concept was introduced. Meals started to be served at passengers' seats and the tried-and-tested fresh à la carte cuisine was expanded. Following the record year of 2008 with 260,000 travellers, passenger numbers fell in subsequent years due to the global financial crisis, the banking crisis and the euro crisis. In summer 2015, the two railways launched a project that would put the Glacier Express back on track to success. At the end of 2016, a new web shop was launched on glacierexpress.ch to make it easier to book seats and tickets. The subsidiary Glacier Express AG, headquartered in Andermatt, was officially founded in 2017.

The legacy of an exclusive tradition: Excellence Class

Glacier Express launched the Excellence Class in winter 2019. This new premium tourist offer was designed for travellers who wanted to experience excellent service and comfort à la Orient Express. Two carriages were completely redesigned and rebuilt in the company's own workshops according to the plans of the Swiss design studio NOSE. The interior was inspired by classy mountain hotels and implemented with the highest quality materials. The covers are made of quartzite and the wall cladding of solid walnut. Above the bar, a chandelier made of crystal glass



swings in the curves, and above it, a compass dome rotates in a circle in the helical tunnels. The electric bucket seats are made of beige leather and elegant fabric in glacier colours. The central strip of the ceiling and an abstract mountain landscape are gold-plated. Passengers are seated in leather armchairs right by the window, a tête-à-tête at the table for two and the concierge serves champagne and canapés to welcome passengers, followed by a five-course meal including wine accompaniment. For Excellence Class, the Glacier Express received the Travel Top Award from lifestyle magazine Monocle and the Milestone.

In preparation for the 90th anniversary in 2020, all 1st and 2nd class panoramic cars were also completely overhauled and equipped with a modern infotainment system in eight languages. Since then, it has once again been possible to open the window in the dining car and on the entrance doors to take a glare-free photo of the mountain landscape.

The journey continues, but the exclusivity remains. The Glacier Express is committed to a tradition dating back to the pioneering days of the railway, when travelling was still about unforgettable journeys.