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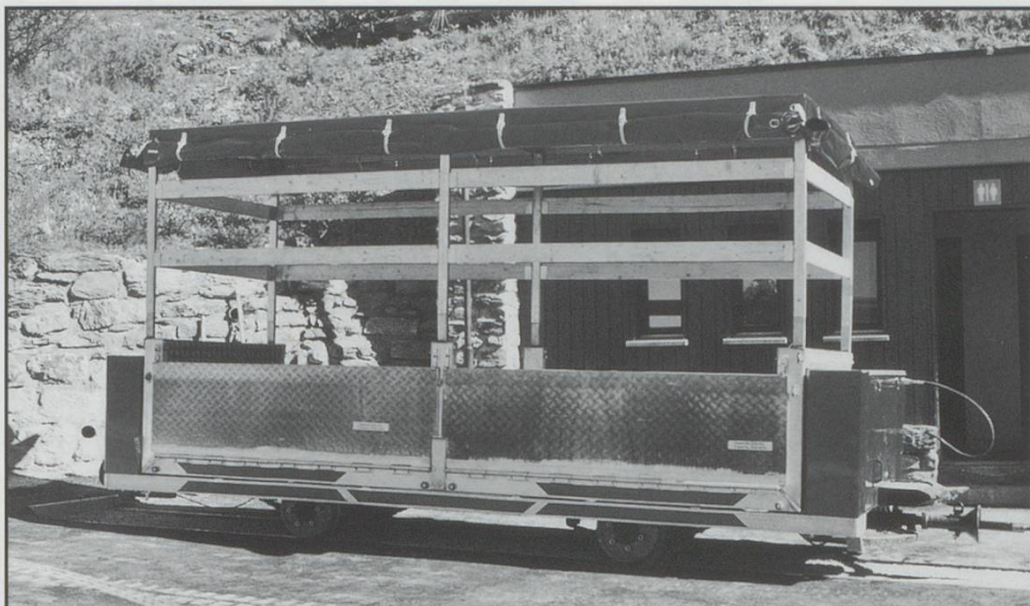
The tram waiting in front of the new part of the hotel, built in chalet style.

Photo: George Hoekstra. 7/2001

Your correspondent was recently invited to the inauguration of the new Riffelalp tram and hotel, at an altitude of 2222 m (7400 ft)! Riffelalp station, on the Zermatt-Gornergrat railway, is about 500 m away from the hotel.

The path, which runs along a narrow ridge, is almost level. Nevertheless, all supplies, guests' luggage, as well as all waste have to be transported along this ridge. The local parish, who owned this land, was unwilling to give local hotel pioneer Alexander Seiler permission to build a road across its land. Unperturbed, Mr Seiler then applied to the federal authorities for a concession to build a tramway. Permission was duly granted and the parish had to sell the necessary strip of land! A small tramway was built on 80 cm (31 1/2 inch) gauge track, complete with dual catenary - it took its supply from the three-phase Gornergrat Railway current. It opened

in July 1899 and transported guests and supplies to and from the hotel. It was then and probably still is today, the shortest tramway at the highest altitude in the world. In 1961, the hotel was totally destroyed in a raging fire. The site and its tramway lay derelict for almost 40 years. The two tramcars survived and were kept for many years in the garden of the Seiler family's house in Zermatt. The hotel only reopened last December, after being completely rebuilt, extended and upgraded to five star status. The huge cost of building at this altitude was mainly met by a large grant from the Sandoz-Foundation. There is plenty of nostalgia in this brand new hotel: full wood panelling, oil burning-style lamps (yes, they are electric now), deep easy chairs and such. Yet all the modern comforts expected of a five star hotel today are there as well: indoor swimming pool, fitness rooms



A special trailer was built for the transport of goods. Remember: everything has to be transported to and from the hotel on the tram in summer.

Photo: George Hoekstra. 7/2001

and other facilities demanded by today's mostly young and active clientele, everything right down to the jacuzzi in your bathroom. The difficult balance of old and new has been successfully achieved. The service is impeccable and dining is a joy. Most importantly, the marvellous view you get of the Matterhorn is the best I know. Far superior to that from Zermatt itself, and better than that from the Gornergrat, where the angle is different. For the adventurous, in this high alpine region you can make marvellous hikes from the Riffelalp, some are naturally quite strenuous. In winter, there is an abundance of ski-runs. But, sometimes, the weather is not very good. They say that in the high Alps, the weather is either very good or very bad... But in this case, the hotel itself has enough to



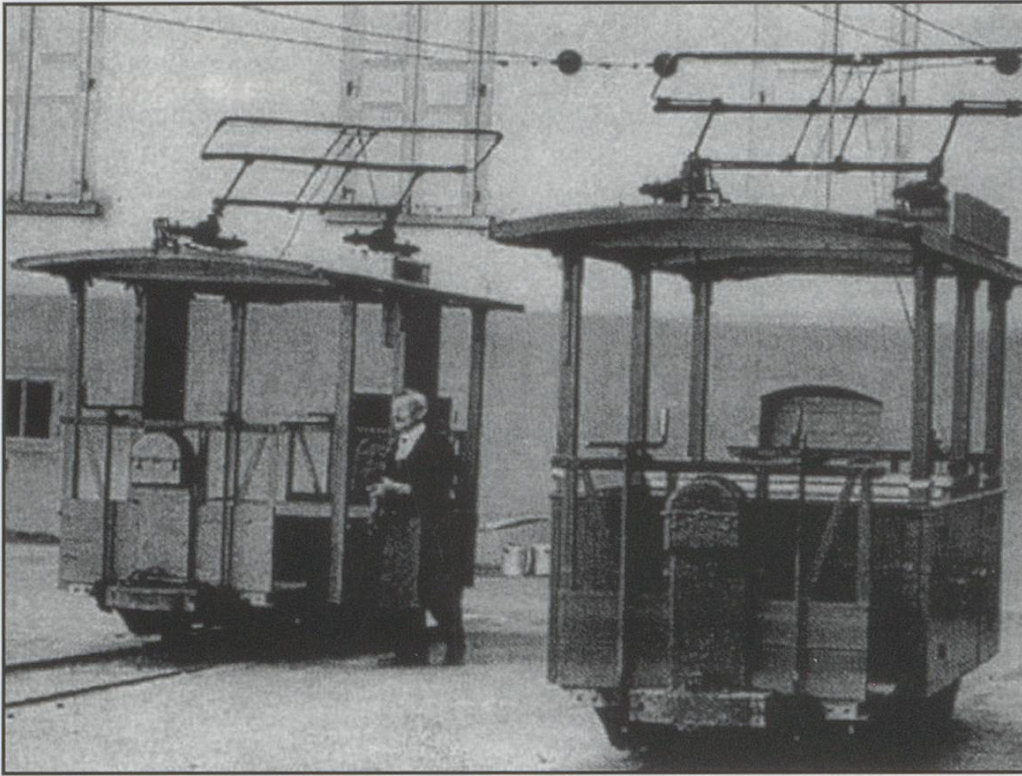
Inside, nostalgia is tastefully assured here in the bar with full wood panelling and (electric) oil lamps.

Photo: George Hoekstra. 7/2001

offer to make a stay indoors most enjoyable. The little tram has also been revived, this time though as a battery-driven vehicle. It was (rightly) thought, the overhead wires and their masts would be too distracting in this magnificent landscape.

Furthermore, automobile-free Zermatt has had a lot of

experience with battery-driven road vehicles. One of their constructors was thus approached to re-build the two tramway vehicles. After almost 40 years of disuse, this was no mere task. Several Railways and Societies supplied parts: the door handles and locks for instance came from the Schynige Platte Railway, the couplings from the Tram Bahn Bern Society and so on. The light "Vignole" tracks are laid in a compacted natural surface,



Prints of the original tramway from 1899. Note the double pantograph for the three-phase current.

Phot.o: GGB-Archives

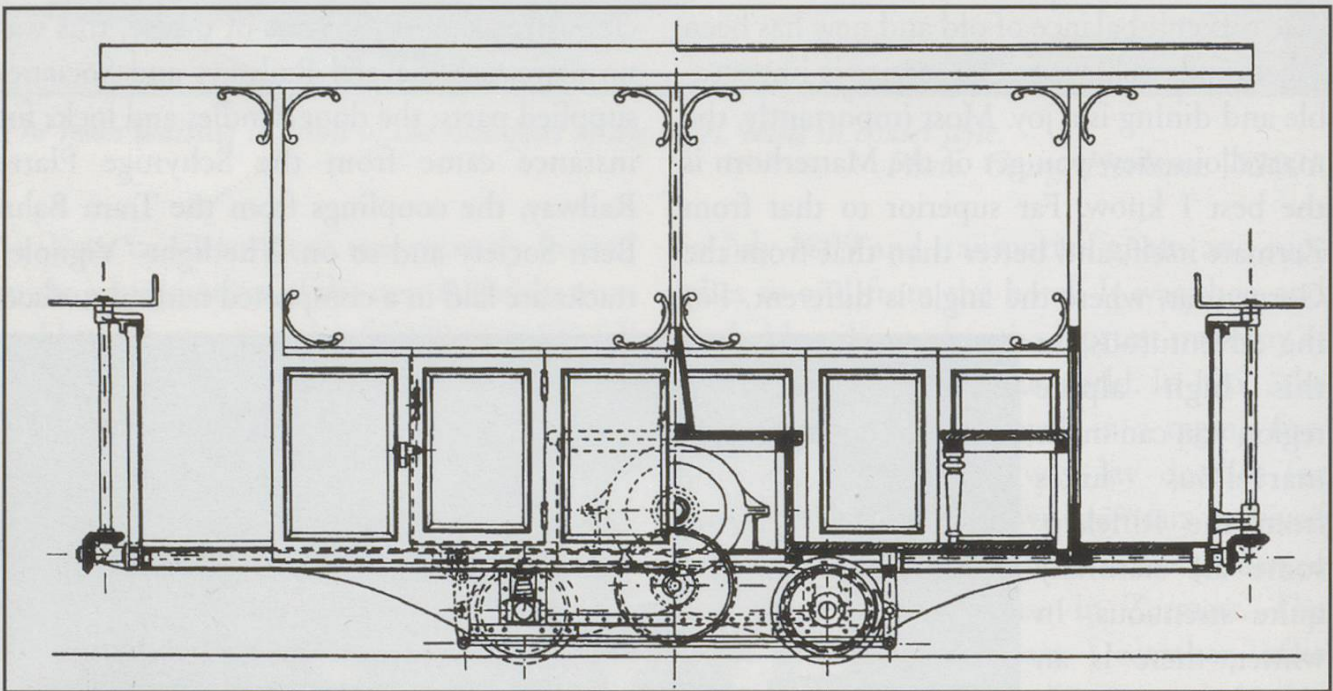


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Edmondson type tickets are issued for the highest tram in the world.



The new battery-powered tram. The batteries are under the seats, giving a low centre of gravity for good stability.

(Archive UGB)

rather than conventional open track laid on top of a surface. In summer, the narrow pathway has to be shared with the walkers. During the long winter months, when it is impossible to run the tram, the path has to be used by snowmobiles. If you really want the experience of a lifetime, try the Riffelalp in summer!

FOR MORE INFORMATION
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