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Autor: Leutwiler, Ernst B.
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Funicolare Lugano Stazione – Città

Ernst B. Leutwiler



The interior of the new top station and one of the cars.
All Photos: Ernst B Leutwiler

When the main line railway from the north to Italy via the Gotthard tunnel, arrived at Lugano in 1882 the site of the station was 53m above the old town leaving residents and visitors to this increasingly popular resort, with an arduous route between the two areas. Increasingly pressure mounted from influential people who determined that a more commodious link should be established. At the end of 1884 the well-known pioneers of mountain railways Bucher & Durrer obtained a concession to construct a 220m long, metre-gauge funicular on a gradient of 25.3% to link the city to its station. Once the project commenced in April 1886 progress was swift, and following an inspection in the October operations started on

the 8th November 1886. Equipment comprised two 40-person open cars supplied by SLM Winterthur that operated using the water-balance principle, with Rigggenbach track serving the handbrake. Based on the ideas of Roman Abt the inner ends of the axles utilised rollers rather than wheels enabling the operation of the central passing place without the use of points, a system now used worldwide on funiculars. There was a choice of fares: 1st Class at CHF0.40, or second at CHF0.20.


The City of Lugano took over operations in 1905, having obtained a Federal Concession, and continued to operate the water-ballast system until September 1954. The cars were replaced in 1912 and again in 1929 when Von Roll supplied

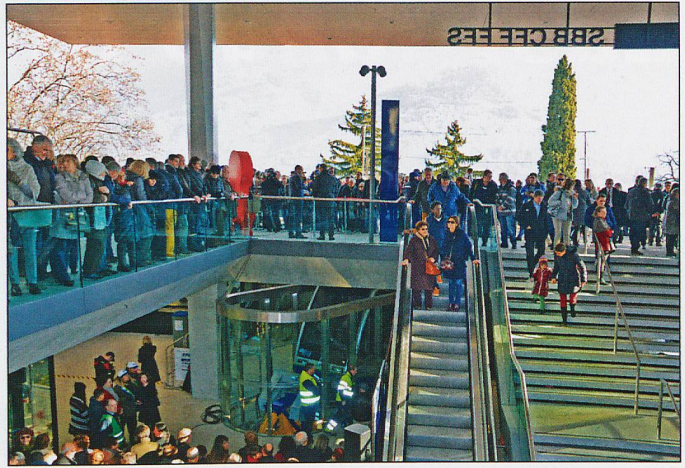
48 seat units. Extensive reconstruction resulted in the re-opening of the system in June 1955 with new cars, again by Von Roll but accommodating 75 people, powered by an 110hp, 3-phase 380V AC motor and operating into a modified base station located in the middle of the old town buildings. Change came again in 1967 when automatic operation was introduced, with the line running continuously from 05.00 – 24.00, seven-days-a-week. Although the most heavily used funicular in Switzerland, carrying some 2.5m passengers annually, by 2014 the operating concession had expired and complete modernisation was required to bring the system up to the require-

An 1886 view of the original bottom station.



ments of 21st C users, in order for a new licence to be issued. Operations ceased at the beginning of August 2014 and owners TPL introduced a replacement road service, the 'FuniBus', to link the two termini for those unable or unwilling to make the climb on foot, whilst the necessary improvements took place.

This essential part of Lugano's infrastructure re-opened on the 11th December 2016 in order to coincide with the first day of operations through the Gotthard Base Tunnel. There was a massive turnout of people on the day wishing to see the improvements that they had been waiting over two-years for. Crowds gathered at the top station where the operation was blessed by the local Bishop, and the Piazza Cioccaro, where the line terminates in the city, was totally thronged. The TPL had also organised a competition to name the rebuilt funicular and at the opening ceremony this new name was announced as "La Sassellina", chosen to remember the old name for the part of the city where the service runs. Apart from the new, elegant, 100-person cars supplied by CWA, the entire operation has been totally rebuilt by a team led by Garaventa of Goldau. The reconstructed track leads to a new valley station, whilst at the SBB/FFS station it terminates in a new and enlarged underpass with a new control room and a light-flooded station buffet, all part of the refurbished station also opened on the 11th. For those who prefer to walk through the city there is a shorter set of stairs from the terminus of the Ponte Tresa line, alongside the funicular, and down to the Cathedral and the centre. The frequent service now costs CHF1.30 for a single trip that takes just 60 seconds. On the opening day all travel was free. 



TOP: Crowds at the top station for the opening of the new funicular.
 MIDDLE: The view looking over Lugano.
 LEFT: Work in progress on the middle cross-over section.
 BOTTOM: The interior of one of the new cars.

