

Once in a lifetime tunnel ride

The Gotthard Base Tunnel, the longest train tunnel in the world, enters into service on 11 December 2016. Prior to this, the record-breaking construction will be more accessible than ever, but only for a limited period: from 2 August 2016, passengers may descend into the once-in-a-century construction on exclusive tunnel rides - disembarkation in the depths of the mountain included. The special "Gottardino" train only runs until 27 November 2016 and the number of tickets is limited.

The Gotthard Base Tunnel is part of the NRLA (New Railway Link through the Alps), a plan Swiss voters accepted in a referendum in 1992. The project includes two other tunnels, one under construction and the other one already completed, but the Gotthard Base Tunnel is arguably the most fascinating of the three. The world's longest and deepest traffic tunnel, it took a herculean effort to build.

Tabea Mandour, project manager at Swiss Travel System, the marketing organisation responsible for international ticket sales for all Swiss

public transport means, explained to us just how difficult exactly it's been to construct it. For more than ten years hundreds of workers braved not only tropical temperatures underground, but also the challenge of water-saturated rock. At the time of our interview, in April 2016, work was still frantic as the test operation of the Gotthard Base Tunnel was in full swing. The handover of the longest train tunnel in the world by constructor Alp Transit Gotthard AG to its future operators, Swiss Federal Railways SBB, will take place on 1 June 2016, after 17 years of construction.

Before regular operations of the Gotthard Base Tunnel commence on 11 December 2016, SBB is giving customers the opportunity to admire the interior of the once-in-a-century construction. From 2 August to 27 November 2016, the special "Gottardino" train will carry visitors to a record depth in the rock of the Swiss Alps. A special stop will be made at the multifunction station in Sedrun. Here, 800 metres below the surface, a tour will vividly demonstrate the dimensions of the gigantic tunnel system. Once trains are travelling through the Gotthard Base Tunnel at high speed, a stop in the middle of the tunnel will no longer be possible, so this is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

The main purpose of the Gotthard Base Tunnel is to increase total transport capacity across the Alps, especially for freight, notably on the Rotterdam-Basel-Genoa corridor, at minimal environmental damage. Ms. Mandour pointed out however that the new north-south connection should also increase tourist travel into Switzerland as it notably shortens the train journey from Italy and southern Germany quite considerably. From the end of 2016, passengers will cross the Alps in the new tunnel in only 20 minutes and reach their destination faster than ever.



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