

## Historic routes

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## Sources:

Basic map: PK 200'000 swisstopo, Wabern

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### 2.b.3 The quickest way to Venice: historic routes in the Albula / Bernina region

The historic Albula/Bernina route – in contrast to the railway line – did not go via Thusis but ran from Chur via the Lenzerheide to Tiefencastel or direct to Filisur. The way continued over the Albula Pass into the Engadin and over the Bernina Pass to Tirano following a similar route to the railway, many years later, though with certain differences (Albula Pass, southern side of the Bernina). The Albula/Bernina route was valued as the shortest link between northern Graubünden and its subject states and to Venice, particularly after the beginning of Graubünden's dominion in the Veltlin valley (1512). Historical milestones were the building of a road across the sheer face of the Bergünerstein (1696) and the changing routes on the southern side of the Bernina Pass. The construction of the pass roads for horse-drawn coaches in the 19th century and then the construction of the railway a few decades later brought another fundamental shift in the distribution of traffic.

#### The Bergünerstein – “overcome by fear and trembling”

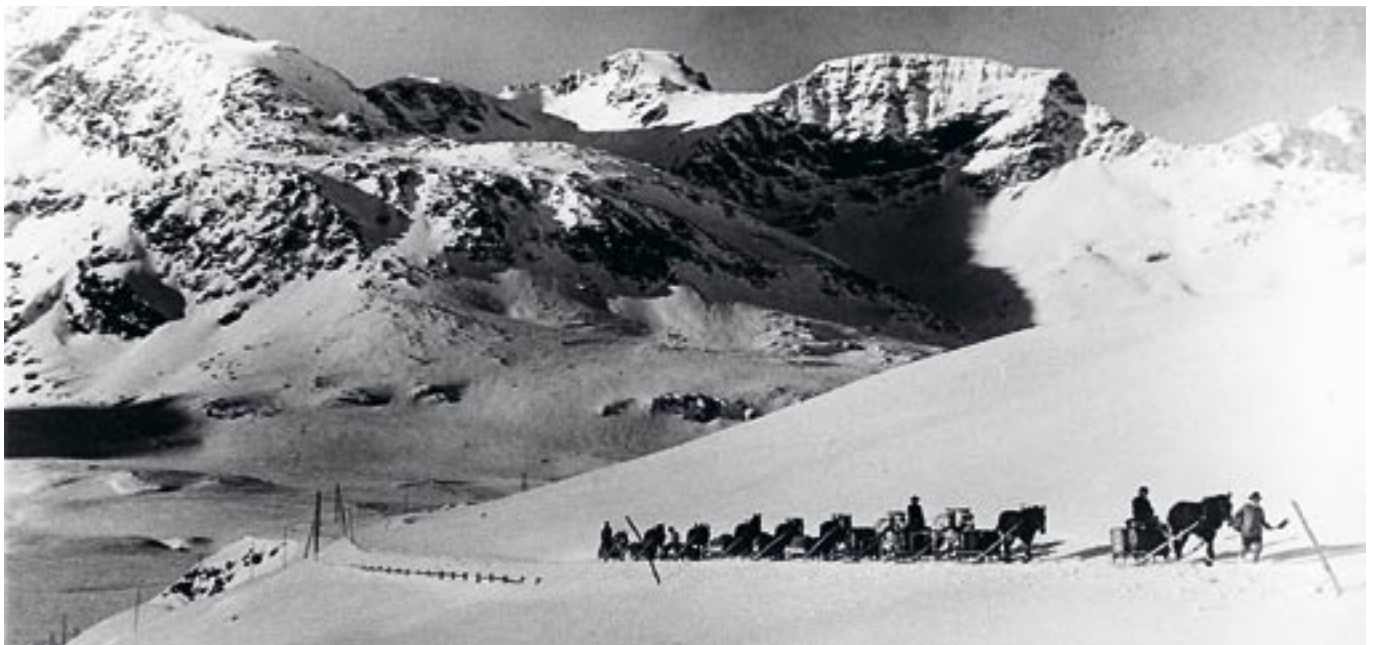
In Roman times the routes over the Julier and Septimer passes, together with the Splügen and San Bernardino passes, were among the most important links between southern Germania and northern Italy. Cart tracks, ruts in the rock, along the Julier Pass show that carts were used to transport goods. In the Middle Ages, the Septimer Pass was one of the most important transit routes for the carriers, who were responsible for the transportation of goods, as well as for travellers and pilgrims. The Albula route, in contrast, is not mentioned until the High Middle Ages when Bishop Berthold of Chur set up a toll station at Guardaval near Madulain, where the Albula pass route reaches the floor of the Engadin valley. The Albula Pass was also used occasionally when the Septimer was impassable for one reason or another. Use of the Albula/Bernina-Route peaked in the 16th century when France established a post system between Chur and Aprica, with posts at Lantsch, Bergün/Bravuogn, La Punt-Chamuesch, Pontresina, Poschiavo and Tirano. The route lost its transit

function towards the end of the 16th century when the San Marco road was built between Bergamo and Morbegno in the Veltlin. The current route from Thusis through the Schin to Tiefencastel did not come about until the boom in road and railway building in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Until then the Albula route ran from Chur across the Lenzerheide to Lantsch, Filisur and Bergün/Bravuogn. Anyone who started from Thusis, had to cross the “Moir”, a precipitous rock face on the right bank of the river, to reach Tiefencastel. In Tiefencastel, first mentioned in 840 as “Castellum Impitinis”, the Albula road crosses the Julier/Septimer route. The greatest impediment between Tiefencastel and Bergün/Bravuogn was a vertical rock face called the “Bergünerstein” that forced travellers and pack animals to make a tedious detour. Consequently, in 1600, the people of Bergün/Bravuogn decided to blast a way through the rock but the daring idea was not realised until 1696. This was the first time that explosives were used on a large scale in road building. The comfortable, gently rising Bergünerstein road along the rim of the abyss



Albula Pass > Steep climb below the “Val digl Diavel” (Devil’s Valley); new paths were laid several times.

H.J. Gredig



Bernina Pass > Transporting wine from the Veltlin over the Bernina Pass to the north was a centuries old tradition; photograph about 1900).

Unknown

did not fail to amaze travellers for one and a half centuries. The “Schweitzer Geographie” printed in 1770 recounts: “[...] on the left hand is a perpendicular rock face and on the right is a solid wall, so the traveller thinks he is walking along a nice even road, but if he stands on the wall then he is overcome by fear and trembling”. Below the crest of the pass, the carriers and travellers found themselves in a virtually impassable scree in the “Val digl Diavel” or Devil’s Valley, which the travel writer David Crantz described as “primeval chaos”. The descent to the village of La Punt and the continuation of the road towards the Bernina Pass was less problematic.

### **Wine, salt and corn**

In the 16th century, the Bernina Pass was part of the much frequented route from Chur via the Engadin to Tirano. Traffic between the two allies Venice and France could pass through the territory of the “neutral” Confederation and Dreibünden and did not have to touch the lands of Milan. However, prehistoric finds and Roman coins from the times of Claudius, Marcus Aurelius and Philippus show that the pass was already used much earlier and probably without interruption since earliest times. This is backed up by the silver mines on the Bernina Pass that were exploited from 15th century. However, until 1500 the Bernina Pass was overshadowed as a trade route by the those via Bormio (Passo di Fraele and Passo di Foscagno) and over the Muretto pass between Val Malenco and Maloja.

The export of wine from the Veltlin valley over the Bernina Pass is mentioned for the first time in 1452. The Duke of Milan, Francesco Sforza Visconti, confirmed to the men of Poschiavo their right to take 80 cart loads of wine from his

lands and to import them to Poschiavo without having to pay any duties. Tirano was the regional centre of vine growing and the Veltlin carrier trade; the transport of wine by mules or horses from Veltlin to Graubünden effectively made the Bernina Pass into a ‘wine road’ in autumn and winter. The valuable freight took the wine carriers from the Engadin over the Scaletta Pass to Davos and across the Schlappiner Joch on to Montafon in Austria.

A “Tariff Order”, issued by the Upper Engadin court of jurisdiction dated 1734, shows which goods were transported over the Albula Pass. Besides wine, corn and salt, rice, iron and sundries were also transported. However, salt was no doubt the most important product transported after wine. This was obtained from the Tyrolean saline at Hall, below Innsbruck. In the 16th and 17th centuries the salt transports over the Albula were sometimes taken not only to Bergün/Bravuogn but also on to northern Graubünden and to eastern Switzerland.

The best choice of route for the Bernina Pass was always an issue. The terrain permitted two alternatives on the southern side: via Cavaglia, later the alignment of the railway line, or via Val Laguné, the route taken by the pass road today. Both variations were used, either alternately or at the same time, and the preference for the one or the other appears to have changed several times. In 1522 the people of Poschiavo decided to improve the “strada regalis” via Cavaglia. Traders were no longer allowed to use the old road. This somewhat shorter way remained the principal route for some 200 years. After an avalanche disaster in the precipitous Val Pila in 1729, the road was rerouted through the less dangerous Val Laguné. But this did not prevent the people from Poschiavo from rebuilding and improving the road via Cavaglia, as recounted





Bernina Pass > Lago Bianco and Bernina-Hospiz from the east. Coloured aquatint by Johan Rudolf Dikenmann, around 1880. Rhätisches Museum, Chur



Albula Pass > Pass road. Lithograph by Albert Benninger, before 1882. Rhätisches Museum, Chur



The opening of the Albula Railway in 1903 marked the end of the post coach era. Rhätisches Museum, Chur

in an 1830 travel journal: “two roads leading to Poschiavo separate to the north of Lago Bianco. The road to the west runs along the lake to the little mountain village of Cavaglia. It is the older and shorter route and has been passable for small carriages for a few years, but it is dangerous in the avalanche season. The other winds south eastwards past the Lago Nero, in the Engadin, as far as the crest at the Scheideck, by the cross (à la Croce). It is longer but safer than the first and built for pack horses”.

### Building the pass roads

The dispute on the layout continued when the carriage road was being planned. In the 19th century, the young Canton Graubünden was starting to realise a network of standardised roads 5–6 m wide: the “new roads”. They replaced the narrow, bumpy bridle paths and were used by the post coaches rather than pack animals. The first was the lower or Italian Road (1818–1823), from Chur over the Splügen and San Bernardino passes, followed in 1820–1840 by the upper road across the Julier and Maloja passes into the Bergell valley. Work started on the first section of the new road over the Bernina Pass in 1842; the last valley section between Poschiavo and Campocologno was completed in 1865.

In the meantime work had already begun on the Albula stretch between Tiefencastel and Bergün/Bravuogn while the Albula Pass had its own carriage road by 1864–1866. Construction of the 23 km long and 4.2 m wide pass section between Bergün/Bravuogn and La Punt cost 350,000 CHF.

The construction of the new roads fundamentally changed the entire concept of transport. In effect it ousted the centuries old tradition of carriers and pack animals that was organ-

ised on a cooperative basis; in contrast the post system boomed. The post coaches plied four-in-hand from Chur to Bergün/Bravuogn and five-in-hand across the pass to Samedan. In 1900, the official post coach contractor in Samedan kept 150 horses. The winter service was run with sledges. The post coaches transported numerous famous people across the Albula and Bernina passes. Giosuè Carducci, Emile Zola and Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, signed their names in the guest book at the Ospizio del Bernina.

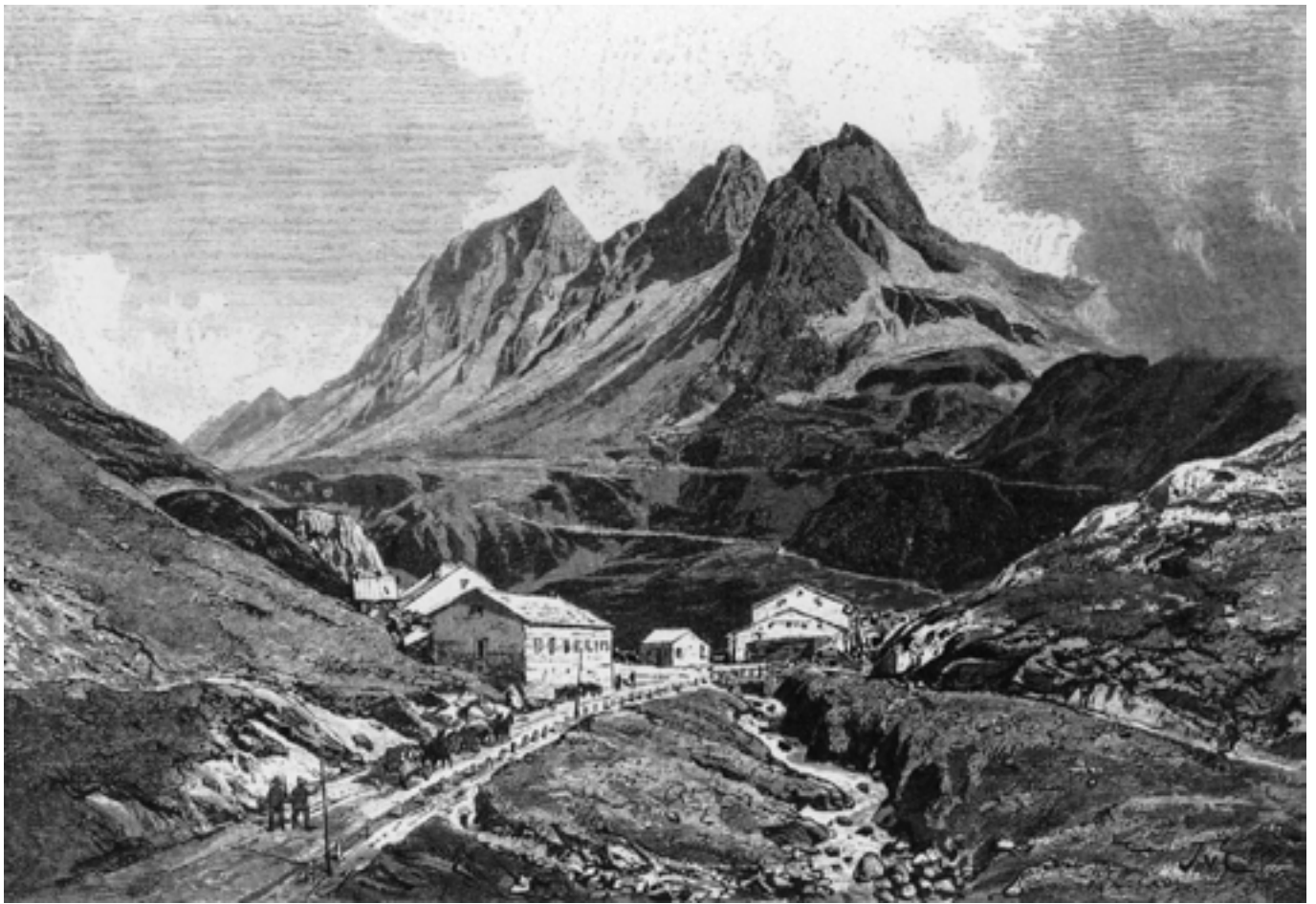
The opening of the Albula line in 1903 brought the post coach era to an abrupt end. After the railway came into operation the Albula and Bernina roads remained closed in winter. It was only with the spread of ski tourism from the Engadin towards the Bernina Pass that the Bernina road was again opened all the year round, in 1965.

### Dangerous travelling

Travelling in pre-post coach days was anything but comfortable; complaints about the state of the roads run interruptedly through the history of transport. The travellers were often not accustomed to the hardships, nor to the cold and snow.

In the 17th century the Albula/Bernina route was still important for transit between Italy and the Graubünden and German trade centres, but the complaints about the poor condition of the roads continued unabated. The general tenor was that the way was difficult and dangerous, rough and tough. Of the many tales of avalanche disasters, one that occurred in 1741 acquired tragic fame: the train of pack animals and carriers was caught by the Scunflo avalanche as they crossed back over the Albula and nine men were lost.





Albula Pass > The guest house at Crap Alv offered accommodation to travellers. Xylography by Themistocles von Eckenbrecher and Adolf Closs, around 1865. Rhätisches Museum, Chur



Albula Pass > The Hospiz was built at the same time as the pass road, in 1871. Anonymous aquatint, about 1870. Rhätisches Museum, Chur



Poschiavo > A carrier on the way north. Steel engraving by Ludwig Rohbock and Georg Michael, from before 1861. Rhätisches Museum, Chur



One problem was the lack of shelters. In contrast to the Septimer, where there is evidence of a hospice already in the 12th century, there was no emergency shelter on the Bernina Pass until 1519. In 1654 a guest house was built on the northern side of the Albula Pass but it was 1817 before a modest shelter was built on the crest of the pass; there was no real hospice until the pass road was built in 1871.

The shelter on the Bernina Pass also had room for ten horses. The “Bernina Häuser“, on the northern side of the pass, provided the principal accommodation: this was a small settlement, occupied throughout the year, with stabling for 25 horses. Accommodation for man and beast was also provided in Cavaglia or – on the eastern route – in Pisciadel, Zarera, Lereit and La Motta. The volume of carrier traffic over the Bernina Pass was considerable; this is clear from the extensive stabling facilities in Tirano, Poschiavo or Pontresina that could accommodate some 200 horses.

Despite the danger of avalanches, goods transport in winter was very popular as one could put a heavier load on a sledge than a mule could carry and also because the local farmers had more time for transport services in winter than in summer when they were busy with the haymaking. On the Bernina Pass, the two neighbouring communities of Pontresina and Poschiavo saw to it that the road in their parish was passable in winter. The local farmers took over the job of clearing a way through the snow, stamping it down with their oxen. In 1544 the community of Chamues-ch, for example, engaged to clear the mountain road, keep it in good condition and mark the edges of the road properly with long poles. In return, the community was allowed to levy a toll from the travellers: four schillings for every head of cat-

tle and for every load per pack animal. In Poschiavo every parishioner could be called on to work on repairs to bridges, roads and churches. The maintenance duties were the most difficult. In 1410, the Upper Engadin communities together with Poschiavo and Brusio engaged to maintain the Bernina road as far as Piattamala at the end of the Puschlav valley.

### Historic tracks in the landscape

Traces of former routes and tracks are not always visible; frequently they have been built over by modern farm tracks or roads as between Tiefencastel and Filisur. On the way over the Pentsch, that goes round the Bergünstein, an inscription dated 1688 indicates that this road was improved shortly before the new road was blasted across the sheer rock face. Numerous traces of historic tracks are still visible on the Albula Pass, mostly as deep ruts in the surface worn away by the passage of pack animals. On the way from La Punt to the top of the Bernina Pass there are hardly any signs of traditional road building except for a small stretch of paved road at Morteratsch. There are few topographic difficulties at this point and there is no call for complicated road building. The situation is quite different on the southern side of the Bernina Pass: on the eastern alternative, below La Rösa and in the Bosch da la Turiglia, the historic road is paved and lined with dry stone walls at several points (La Motta or Lereit). The historic sections of the road are even more marked to the west over Cavaglia, in particular the four metre wide paved road between Cavaglia and Cadera that runs into a dead straight lane with dry stone walls both sides. Not only the bridle paths, but also the younger generation of roads, those built in the 19th century, have lost a great deal of their traditional



**Albula Pass > Deep ruts above  
La Punt recall the old mule train  
traffic.**  
H.J. Gredig



**Bernina Pass > The old mule track  
in Val Pila is now a popular hik-  
ing trail.**  
H.J. Gredig



substance on the Bernina Pass. The increasingly heavy traffic has entailed massive improvements. The interventions on the Albula Pass were not so marked, primarily as in contrast to the vastly improved Julier Pass, it is merely a secondary road that remains closed in winter.