



Interview with Ludwig Näf, CEO  
of RALpin AG

# The Alpine rolling highway



The Swiss government has passed laws to protect the majestic beauty of the Swiss Alps and supports RALpin's rolling highway through government subsidies

Switzerland's position as a transit country on the important north-south trade axis through Europe places a heavy burden on its road transport infrastructure. An astonishing 600,000 heavy goods vehicles pass through the Alpine Republic each year. In the mid-1990s, efforts to shift the passage of goods through the Alps away from the roads and onto other modes of transport were enshrined in legislation. 35 years later, RALpin AG ensures that one in six of these trucks crosses Switzerland without using its roads. International Business spoke to Ludwig Näf, CEO of RALpin AG about how this has been achieved and what the future holds.

**EB:** Mr. Näf, you were appointed CEO of RALpin AG at the beginning of July this year. What was it that attracted you to the company?

**Ludwig Näf:** I have spent my entire career so far in the rail transport and transit sector and believe that it offers many of the solutions that we are looking for in terms of dealing with issues surrounding congestion, environmental damage and facilitating cross-border trade. RALpin AG has developed an extremely effective model by which all of these aims can be achieved.

**EB:** How does RALpin achieve this?

**Ludwig Näf:** RALpin AG is the product of laws passed in Switzerland aimed at shifting goods transports passing through the Alps from the roads to the railways. The company was set up in 2001 to develop and operate an intermodal corridor to ferry goods from our terminal in Freiburg in Germany to Novara in Italy. We operate a so-called Rolling Highway through the Swiss Alps. Lorries embark the specially designed rail bogies for a 450 km trip that lasts on average between eight and ten hours. Drivers travel

separately in comfortable carriages where they can relax over food and drinks and ensure that they take the legally required rest periods.

**EB:** Switzerland bans lorry drivers from driving at night and on Sundays. How much does this help your business model?

**Ludwig Näf:** The ban on heavy goods transports at night and on Sundays is very important. We offer unrestricted, around the clock transports. That makes us very attractive to freight forwarders and logistics brokers. We also have to

make the service attractive to drivers. If they would rather take their statutory break in their truck cabin at a lorry park, then we won't be able to persuade them to use our service. They are our customers as well.

**EB:** How is RALpin working to make its service more attractive for those who use it as well as those who pay for it?

**Ludwig Näf:** We have ordered five new driver accommodation carriages with comfortable sleeping berths, showers and snacks. Driv-

ers can already avail themselves of these services at our terminals but we want to enhance the driver experience in transit. Freight forwarders are already finding it difficult to replace drivers and the entire sector suffers from staffing problems. We can play a part in making the job of professional driver a little more attractive.

**EB:** Roughly one in six of the trucks passing through the Alps makes use of your rolling highway at present. How many of the remaining five out of six trucks do you think you can shift to your service?

**Ludwig Näf:** We are expecting to grow by between 10 and 20% in the next few years. There is certainly potential to increase the number of users of our existing service, but we also want to introduce additional routes. Within the next two years, we hope to open a new terminal near Milan that will lengthen the distance drivers using our service can cover. Convenience and cost are two big drivers of our success.

**EB:** When you talk about a route that could potentially ship goods by train all the way from Freiburg to Milan, what makes your service different from traditional unaccompanied intermodal transports?

**Ludwig Näf:** With our service, loading and unloading are substantially faster. Our trains are in essence roll-on, roll-off and that process usually takes just 30 minutes to load and 15 minutes to unload. Furthermore, you only need one

driver for the whole, door-to-door journey because they can take their statutory rest break comfortably on the train. Another advantage is the 300 EUR saving in avoided road tolls and the saved fuel costs in both directions. It costs 650 EUR to cross the Alps on one of our regular services. That is an expense that is quickly recouped when you consider the savings that can be made in other areas.

**EB:** How have the numbers of users of your service developed since it was first launched?

**Ludwig Näf:** By 2006 we were transporting 80,000 trucks per year and in 2008 we celebrated the 500,000<sup>th</sup> truck on our service. The annual average is around 95,000 trucks, so we are very pleased with the development so far. From an environmental point of view we are also reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 28,000 t per year. This year, we have seen the effects of the economic slow down with transports slightly lower.

**EB:** What do these figures represent in terms of the proportion of the total amount of goods flowing through the Alps?

**Ludwig Näf:** We are responsible for around 5% of total goods movements through the Swiss Alps. If we measure by weight, that corresponds to 10% of the total. We have many longstanding customers, including major players in the sector. Our new customer acquisition efforts are targeting the markets in Eastern Europe and



**Loading of RALPIN's roll-on, roll-off trains takes just 30 minutes. Disembarkation takes just 15 minutes**

Lithuania as well as Italy where a lot of traditional family haulage companies are being passed on to the next generation.

**EB:** How do you think the haulage and logistics sector will develop in the coming years and what effect will that have on your business?

**Ludwig Näf:** There are huge pressures on these companies, not just in terms of recruitment difficulties. The biggest is, of course, the need to cut costs to remain competitive. Our service goes a long way to increasing safety and efficiency while delivering a financial benefit. We believe that this simple calculation will tempt more hauliers onto

our transalpine trains. A quarter of our financing comes from state subsidies intended to encourage this shift and stemming directly from Swiss legislation to protect its Alpine regions. This allows us to offer a competitive service, which, once anchored in our clients' schedules, should see us grow even further in the future. Anyone who has tried to drive through the main north-south routes through the Alps and experienced the long queues at all times of day through the tunnels will understand the challenges hauliers face. Looking ahead, for transporters of time-sensitive goods, we believe we offer the best solution.



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