

# The Valtellina Flood: Destroying Roads, Rails and Tourism

Valtellina is the common name used for the Alpine province of Sondrio, in Northern Italy. This long valley became very famous in the summer of 1987, when a huge flood hit the whole area. An incredibly warm summer caused the glaciers to release a great quantity of water, which summed up to exceptionally heavy storms (the rainfall of two months fell in just three days).



As a result, the rivers broke the banks, submerging villages and destroying roads and rails. There were fifty-three casualties and damages for an estimated 2 billion euro. Some landslides occurred too – the biggest one buried Sant'Antonio Morignone and three other villages just south from Bormio under forty-million cubic metres (more than 1.4 billion cubic feet) of rocks and earth, virtually cutting off the upper part of the valley.

## **Not All Publicity Is Good Publicity...**

Needless to say, this disaster attracted the attention of media. The coverage didn't represent very good advertising though. Of course, the zone wasn't in a "business-as-usual" situation, but virtually all the tourist areas were intact, albeit more difficult to reach. This was the case of resorts like Madesimo and Valmalenco, whereas Bormio and Livigno and the whole Upper Valtellina, albeit unharmed, were isolated from the rest of Italy (but could be reached through Switzerland). Many reports on this disaster were 'spiced up' and imprecise, to say the least – risking to ruin the good publicity linked to the 1985 Fis Ski World Cup hosted in Bormio.

## **Good Prices against Prejudice**

The local tourist office reacted quickly. After a very short time, two information points were set up on the road leading to the valley, in order to try and save the summer season by giving honest, up-to-date information on the current situation and on alternative routes. A second wave of bad weather, though, compromised this objective, and put the winter season in danger.



Works started for the number-one priority (a road link with the Upper Valtellina through the area ravaged by the landslide, which opened on 21st December that year), whereas the local tourist bodies decided to launch a heavy advertising campaign on newspapers and TV channels – mostly in Italy and Germany – with the agreement of the regional and national authorities.

“Forza Valtellina” (“Go Valtellina”) was the campaign's slogan. It was one of the first examples of an image rescue campaign for a resort, funded by an emergency measure just weeks after the disaster occurred.

The main lever used to save tourism was represented by discounts on services (lift pass, thermal spas and shops). Accommodation prices were left untouched, as it was believed that lowering them would decrease the perceived value of the resorts, with a long-term negative effect. The “Valtellina Card” was created, with, among other things, a 50% reimbursement of the weekly lift pass in the most affected towns (30% for the other ones).

### **Convincing Tourists and Skeptics**

A8-page insert was included in the most important magazines (no less than 6 million copies over 4 weeks). Heavy discounts on normal advertising fees were obtained, mainly through personal contacts. Therefore an investment of 2 million euro created a campaign with a much higher value (7–9 million euro, say some estimates). Attention by the political world was strong, with many authorities visiting the area and some of them actually making last minute decisions to spend their summer holidays in Upper Valtellina just after the flood. Support also came from Standa, a famous chain of department stores which organized special contests among its customers.

Not everybody, though, believed in the success of these measures – for example, the lift owner in Bormio didn't want to open that winter. He was convinced through bank guarantees signed by local operators who agreed to cover any loss which might occur. Luckily for them, they didn't have to pay anything, as the season went so well, with an actual increase in the lift passes sold!

The authorities seized all possible occasions to promote the province, even in the following years. Among the many initiatives, a 1,000 sq. m. pavilion during the 1988 trade fair in Milan was open. Another way to have positive media coverage came from sport events, such as the Fis Ski World Cup races or

the Giro d'Italia bicycle competition.



### **The Legacy after 23 Years**

Nearly all traces of the flood have now disappeared – except for the scar left by the big landslide, which is still visible. The road system is now more comfortable, thanks also to big investments by the central government through a special act of law, the 1990 “Legge Valtellina”. More than 1.2 billion euro financed roads, infrastructure and other projects.

All in all, the name of Valtellina is now better known than it used to be before, whereas the 1987 disaster is almost forgotten – and the sense of unity among tourist operators which characterized the months after the flood has also somewhat faded.

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