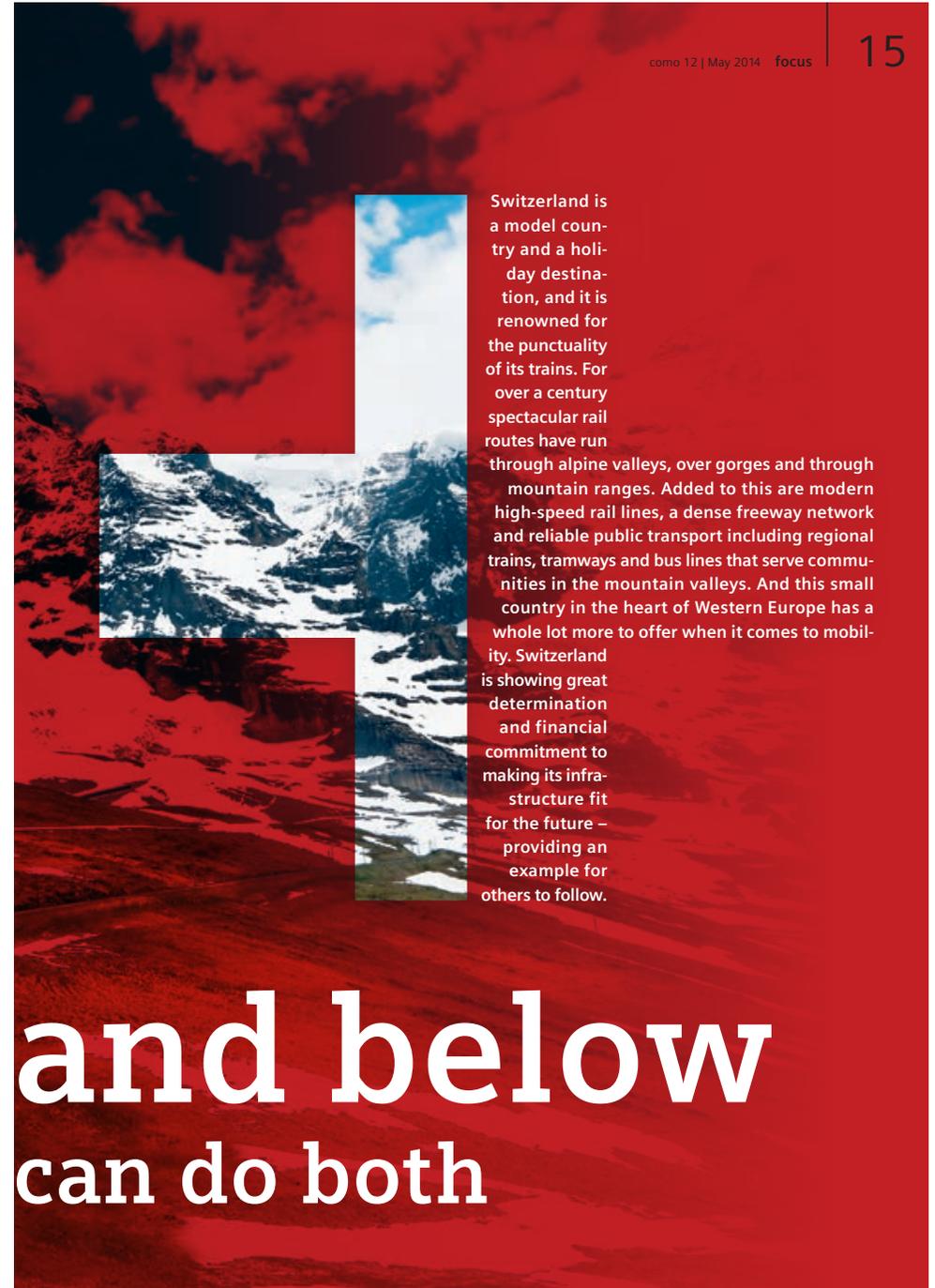Switzerland is a model country and a holiday destination, and it is renowned for the punctuality of its trains. For over a century spectacular rail routes have run through alpine valleys, over gorges and through mountain ranges. Added to this are modern high-speed rail lines, a dense freeway network and reliable public transport including regional trains, tramways and bus lines that serve communities in the mountain valleys. And this small country in the heart of Western Europe has a whole lot more to offer when it comes to mobility. Switzerland is showing great determination and financial commitment to making its infrastructure fit for the future – providing an example for others to follow.

Above and below
Switzerland can do both

Through the Alps on narrow gauge: the mountain routes of the Glacier Express, the Matterhorn Gotthard railway and other alpine journeys offer spectacular views and are particularly popular with tourists.

In many people's eyes, Switzerland is a country where not only the clocks are incredibly accurate, but things function a little differently. This may be due to its traditional roots: over seven centuries ago, in 1291, the "original cantons" of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden came together to form the Swiss Confederation. The modern federal state, which consists of 26 partially sovereign cantons and has four official languages – German, French, Italian and Romansh – was founded in 1848.

Owing to its topography, Switzerland is considered one of Europe's most densely populated states, although it only has around 8.1 million residents in a total area of roughly 41,000 square kilometers. This is because the flatter Central Plateau region between Lake Geneva and Lake Constance, where most Swiss people live, only makes up around 30 percent of the country. In the typical Central Plateau cantons of Aargau and Zurich the population density rises from the national average of 192 to up to 800 people per square kilometer. Meanwhile, almost half the land area lies in the naturally sparsely populated Alps, which pose an additional obstacle in terms of transport on the main route from north to south. And yet, Switzerland is a typical transit country: In July 2010 the Swiss road tunnels Gotthard, San Bernardino, Great St. Bernhard and Simplon counted around 1.3 billion vehicles traveling from the neighboring countries in the north to holiday destinations in the south.

Tunnels: infrastructure for the mountains

Straight through instead of up and over the mountain – the idea goes back a long way. Around the year 1220 a blacksmith from Andermatt is said to have driven iron pegs into the steep cliffs of the Schöllenen gorge and used them to secure a wooden bridge that would ease the journey along St. Gotthard Pass. Soon chroniclers were reporting up to 12,000 travelers and trade caravans on the narrow mule track – and the traffic jams they caused. Finally, in 1708 the Italian architect Pietro Morettini built the first alpine tunnel into the rocks of the St. Gotthard Pass, known as the Urner Loch.

The advent of the railway brought a new incentive: in 1882 the 15,300-meter Gotthard rail tunnel opened and revolutionized transalpine transport – the journey at 1,800 meters beneath the summit now takes just under 20 minutes. To ensure the safe passage of trains here, Siemens installed a bell signal system with over 150 signals at train stations, on the track side, at railroad crossings and in the tunnel. With this system, all the bells on a section would ring at the same time to announce a passing train.

It was a time of high demand for miners: Two decades later the Simplon rail tunnel was completed, the longest in the world then at 19.8 kilometers. After another three years the Lötschberg Tunnel also went into operation.