

STAIRWAY TO THE SKY

Building a cableway to Germany's highest peak

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The mechanical digger scoops up large bits of broken-up rock and tosses them downhill, barely able to move from its precarious position on the Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain. Joachim Strohmeier, the 31-year-old operator, is perched on the edge of a precipice almost 3,000m above sea level in the Alps.

Work is advanced on construction of a new cable-car system scheduled to open to the public on Dec 21, 2017. It will replace a smaller, existing cable car that takes tourists up to a restaurant and viewing platform.

"It's just another construction site," says Strohmeier, who works for an Austrian company that specialises in Alpine construction projects.

"At home in the Tyrol we are used to working over sheer drops," he says. Strohmeier is warmly dressed for the work, with the

foehn — a normally warm, downhill wind — blowing. But on the Zugspitze, temperatures have dropped this morning to 2C.

He has never worked at quite this altitude, and he can certainly claim to be the highest digger operator in Germany, but he says he is coping well.

The digger is secured with a thick steel cable to the rock — for the sake of safety, as a fall off the cliff would certainly be fatal.

Each worker completing a platform on the highest level of a specially constructed cableway for ferrying up construction materials is also secured with a harness, a large set of spanners dangling from it.

The men are all specialists and have no fear of heights.

Work at the summit is currently proceeding on the foundations that will bear the new upper station for the cable car. But first



The existing restaurant and viewing platform, left, atop the Zugspitze. At centre is a crane and an especially constructed cargo cableway to haul building materials to the top of the 2,962m mountain in the Alps.

of all around 1,000 cubic metres of cliff face has to be cut away and removed.

Then 1,200 cubic metres of concrete and 500 tonnes of steel will arrive to construct the station. "The timetable is ambitious," says

project leader Martin Hurm.

The vagaries of the weather on Germany's highest mountain demand a high degree of flexibility from the team. "Certain operations are simply impossible on a day like today with the foehn blowing,"

Hurm says. His motto is: work with the weather. Provided that the early snows do not cover everything, work will carry on into November, then cease during the big freeze until spring next year.

The 2,962m Zugspitze marks

Germany's border with Austria. All the higher peaks of the Alps are located in Austria or Switzerland.

This will eventually be a cable car to write home about. The successor to the Eibsee Cable Car, which opened in 1963, operates by the same principles, but will get by with just two, instead of four support pylons.

The existing cable car will continue in operation up to May 2017, when the "Old Lady" as the staff call her will be shut down for good, one of her cars being kept at the lower station as a memorial.

In the interim, visitors will have to use a funicular railway on the German side or a cableway from Ehrwald in Austria, neither of which reach all the way to the peak.

At 127m tall, the new pylons will be the highest steel towers for any cable car in the world. And the distance from the pylon to the upper station of 3,207m is greater than on any other cableway.

It will be a thrilling ride, knowing that your whole life depends on several strands of steel rope freely swinging in a 3km arc.



An existing cable car for skiers passes the construction site for a pylon for the new cableway.

The two cabins — as with most cableways, one travels up as the other goes down — will each have space for 120 passengers and will be able to carry 700 passengers an hour, much more than the 300 ferried by the old cable car.

The cabins will traverse a total

distance of 4.5km with a change in altitude of almost 2,000m — another world record. The new upper station will have a restaurant and a viewing platform with a spectacular all-round view.

The Zugspitze receives up to 4,000 visitors a day and almost

half-a-million over the course of a year. Chief executive Peter Huber is aiming for a 10% rise in those figures once the new cable car is in operation. Ticket prices are to rise only moderately from the current €52 (2,100 baht) for a one-day ticket.