

A drive across the Gothard

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A DRIVE ACROSS THE GOTHARD

A reader has sent us the following account of a 77-mile journey across the Grisons and the Tessin. Starting at Disentis (see map below) he drove to Biasca via the Luckmanierpass and returned to Hospental by the Gothard. He has noted down his impressions in great detail and his report will doubtless conjure up happy reminiscences among those who know and love this part of Switzerland.

From Disentis the road takes us to the Rhine, then winding its way through several tunnels and the wild gorge and waterfall of the Medels Rhine (Reno di Medel), reaches Caraglia, with its bulb coifed church-tower, and surrounded by fir-tree forests, only three miles from Disentis. The Medel Valley presents the most

varied aspects. The gorge becomes narrower and the valley wilder and more barren. A number of hamlets follow. Platta, a scattered village, and Acla, where the Medels Rhine forms the Fümatsch waterfall, then Pardatsch at the entrance of Val Cristallina, a wild valley abounding in waterfalls and minerals. The forest now almost disappears, the mountains come nearer again, rising to 9,000 ft. The road passes the small hospices of Sogn Gion and Sogn Gagl (Romansch for Saint Gions and St. Gall) to the important hospice of Santa Maria near the summit of the Luckmanier Pass, 1,916m., one of the most beautiful alpine passes in Switzerland. In consideration of the Stausee Santa Maria (lake barrage), important road constructions have been effected between Sogn Gion and the Passo del Lucomagno.

Descending from the Luckmanier Pass

This magnificent road, linking the Romansch speaking Anterior Rhine Valley in the Grisons with the Italian speaking Brenno Valley in Ticino, shows in succession rumbling gorges of raging waters to boundless alpine pastures in a sun-clad meridional valley. From the pass the road slopes gently into Val Santa Maria and the Brenno river to Acquacalda, then through the Valle di Lucumagno in a series of long windings with a magnificent view of the Olivone Valley and the Rheinwaldhorn massif, the highest summit of the Adula range.

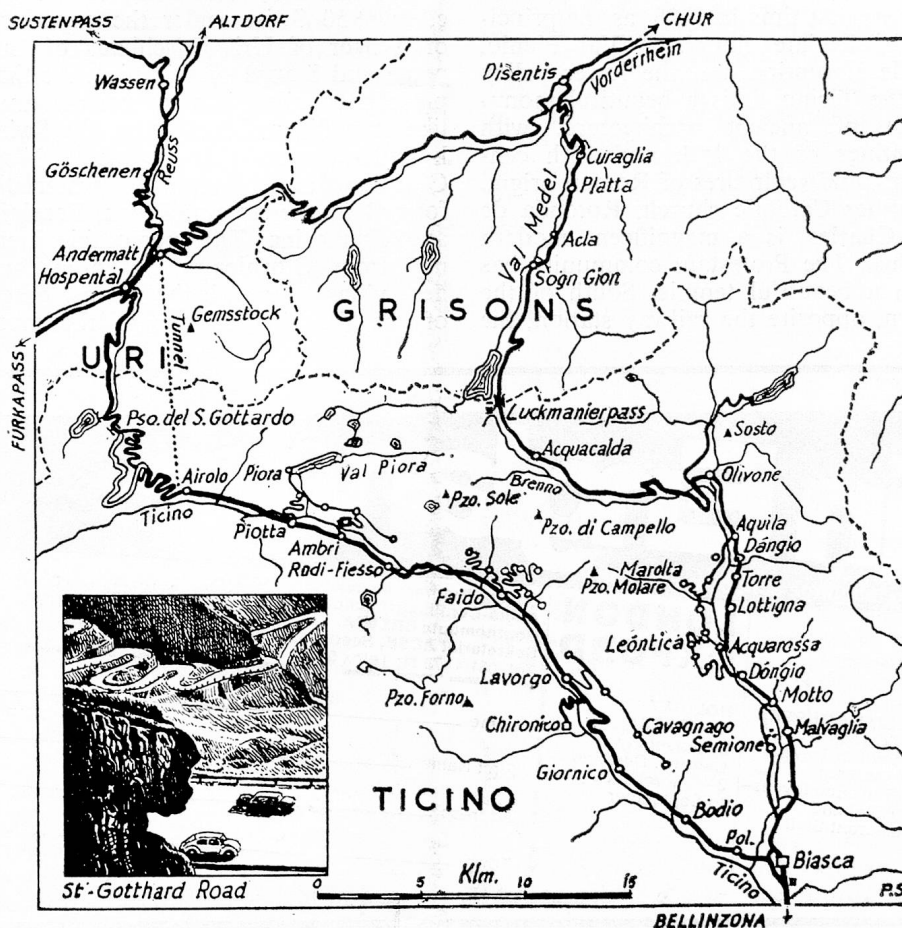
Olivone, at the foot of the granitic Sosto pyramid, 2,223m., is a beautiful and most interesting alpine village of the canton of Ticino, a favourite holiday resort, the climate is excellent. It is from Olivone, 890m., that are made the ascents of the Rheinwaldhorn, 3,402m., highest point of the canton, Scopi, 3,202m., and Lago Retic, 2,378m. Less than four miles north of Olivone are the Completo Waterfall and the famous Sosto Gorge, a visit well worth the little way round to the motorist not in a hurry.

From Olivone, where the properly so-called Val Blenio starts, the valley comprises many villages surrounded with meadows and cultivated fields, with orchards and vineyards lower down the valley. Chestnut tree forests and all the vegetation has a meridional aspect.

Both sides of the valley present a very different character. On the left towers the Adula massif with its escarped snowy summits and fearful incline of their slopes, with ravines and brooks which, after heavy rainfalls, are the cause of great damage. On the right is the large range of the Pizzo di Molare, 2,588m., without well marked summits with gentle slopes, and small lateral valleys.

A bit of history

The Val Blenio is also exposed to rock falls. Three quarter-mile upstream of Biasca the road by-passes a mass of huge blocks known as the "Buzza di Biasca". This enormous heap of mat-



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erials left by the great rock-slide of 1512 that descended from the Pizzo Magno, blocked up the Brenno, transforming the valley in an immense lake. Fourteen months later, at Whitsun, 1514, the barrage broke up, the water causing destruction and hundreds of deaths in Biasca, devastating the valley of the Riviera to Lago Maggiore. Higher up the pile of rocks and stones, the huge cicatrice of the rupture on the Monte Crenone can be clearly seen. The Brenno was the cause of terrible inundations in 1747, 1785, 1829 and 1868; since then important constructions of correction, embankment and of reforestation have repressed the destructive force of the elements.

Between Olivone and the important railway centre of Biasca, on the left side of the Brenno, are sited beautiful and industrious villages. Dangio and Torre, at the foot of a larch-tree forest, possess saw mills, metallurgic works, an electric power station, and until recently the oldest chocolate factory in Switzerland. Lottigna is enjoy-

ing the magnificent panorama of Val Blenio, the view is admirable, a foreground of trees and chalets enhance the tableau. Acquarossa, reputed for its ferruginous springs, is a much frequented spa in summer. From Acquarossa the valley is connected by railway to Biasca and by a postal coach service to Disentis in summer. Above the village of Dongio, in a grotto called Casa dei Pagani (Pagan's house) which in the middle-ages served as a refuge and observation post. At Aquila, the first village after Olivone, there is a road for the other side of Val Blenio to villages chiefly engaged in cattle-breeding. Marolta is frequented for the ascent of the Pizzo Molare. Leöntica is the highest village of the valley.

The Ticinese are very attracted to their country. The emigrants never leave without hope of return, their love for the native land never weakens, even after many long years of absence, and Semione, with its beautiful villas, bears witness to the many who have returned. Semione is indeed a nice village with meadows, vineyards, orchards and chestnut-tree forests. Near the village, standing on a small ridge, one can admire the ruins of the Castello di Serravalle, first mentioned in history in 1221. A suspension bridge leads to Malvaglia.

Biasca

Biasca is a very interesting and important industrial town at the end of the Blenio Valley, at the confluence of the Leventina and Riviera, where the river Ticino receives the Brenno. Biasca possesses a church, mentioned for the first time in 1213, as the principal Collegiate church of Val Blenio, Valle Leventina and the lower valley of the Ticino. It is a beautiful monument of ancient architecture, with paintings of the 15th and 16th centuries, and sculptures of Roman origin. Another Catholic church, Rotonda de St. Charles, is a magnificent modern edifice. The Protestant community has also a beautiful temple. South of the town, opposite the railway station, the

waterfalls of a stream from the Pizzo Magno can be admired.

The entire Valle Leventina is travelled along an excellent road and the Gotthard railway line, both presenting galleries, tunnels and daring stone or iron bridges which are remarkable engineering works of art. The river Tessin, or Ticino, is the most important river of the canton, which it traverses and to which it has given its name; it has its source at 2,480m., in the Nufenenpass, or Passo Novena, the highest Swiss alpine pass, in the St. Gotthard massif, and its mouth in Lago Maggiore, 193m., Switzerland's lowest altitude over sea level. The valley of the Ticino, with its grandiose dimensions and tinctures, has no equal in all the alps.

Ascending the Leventina

Pollegio, 3km. from Biasca, is the first village of the Valle Leventina on the left bank of the Ticino, at the foot of the granitic rocks forming the Sasso di Polegio. Bodio, the next village, is the birthplace of Stefano Francini (1796-1857), geographer and statistician. "The Father of the popular education of Ticino and of the Swiss statistics", Federal Councillor, died in Berne in 1857. Then comes Giornico, mostly on the left bank of the Ticino, with meadows shaded by chestnut-trees and vine-growings on trellis work. Two picturesque bridges connect the other side of the village. It is in Giornico, at Sassi Grossi (Great Stones) that on the 28th December, 1478, the celebrated battle took place and where 10,000 Milanese were completely routed by 950 Swiss under the captaincy of Troger of Uri, Frischhaus of Lucerne and Stanga of Giornico. At that place the valley is very narrow and, like they did at Morgarten, the Swiss hurled rocks on their opponents. Near Giornico are beautiful waterfalls formed by the streams Folda, Barolgia and Cramosina. The memorable journey from Giornica to Lavorgo, our next village, through the narrow gorge of the Biashina, is one of the most

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picturesque and audacious stretches of both the Gotthard road and railway line. Before reaching Lavorgo there is an interesting road to Chironico, at the entrance of the Val of the same name, watered by the Ticinello, tributary to the Ticino. Chironico is a beautiful mountain village and the starting point to the ascent of Pizzo Forno, 2,907m. The region has many chamois.

Lavorgo is an important station of the Gotthard line. Here are prosperous quarries of grey granite which is exported in enormous blocks, either rough or cut to different sizes and shapes, and also polished like marble by a special process. Lavorgo is the junction of good mountain roads to several villages with a splendid view of the Leventina:— Colonico, Anzonico, Sobrio and Cavagnano which has ferruginous springs. These villages are situated on the "Strada alta", the old upper road and pathway from Airolo to Biasca.

Faido, with magnificent fir-tree forests, is a favourite holiday resort in summer. On the village square stands a bronze statue of Stefano Francini. Faido, with many villages in the vicinity, is very industrious and noted for its cattle show and market. Just after the village is the superb Piumogna Waterfall. Rodi-Fiesso, another village attracting tourists in summer, is renowned for cattle breeding and the making of delicious cheese. Ambri, 975m., on the right bank of the Ticino, is the Gotthard station of Quinto, on the left bank, at 1,014m., and the greatest parish of the canton. Ambri is in a picturesque position amidst pleasant meadows, at the foot of Pizzo Petrano, 2,667m., church built in 1681, with a very curious architectural steeple. The red lily abounds on the neighbouring rocky slopes.

Approaching the Gotthard Pass

Piotta, 1,012m., a lovely village where ancient houses built of wood can still be seen, is the Gotthard station for Val Piora situated on the south side of the St. Gotthard massif and one of the most beautiful high valleys of Switzerland and visited by a great number of mountain lovers. The valley possesses several small lakes distinguished by their changing colours and the limpidity of their waters in which the neighbouring mountains are reflected. The greatest and prettiest of them is Lake Ritom, 1,850m., 2½km. long and ½km. wide. This region is a painter's paradise. The flora is one of the richest of the Swiss Alps. The road to Val Piora commands a fine view of Ambri's military airfield.

The Ticino is a beautiful canton. Few countries present such richness and so great a variety of artistic buildings as is seen in every village, even in the humblest and most isolated. From the fascinating delight of a sunny countryside to the austerity of alpine

slopes, those villages and hamlets, their churches and houses of gay colours, have a picturesque and charming aspect.

Now on our way to Airolo, on the southern foot of the St. Gotthard and the great road first constructed between 1820 and 1830. Passage of Swiss, Austrian, French and Russian troops in 1798 and 1799. Airolo is a beautiful town, reconstructed after the terrible fire of 1877, and again in 1898 after the disastrous land-slide from the Sasso Rosso. Favourite holiday resort in summer. Like most of the other places we have visited, Airolo has excellent hotels and restaurants.

Important fortifications exist on the slopes of the Gotthard to defend the road and the Italian side entrance of the tunnel.

Soon after leaving Airolo long windings of the road can be seen on the slopes towering the town. They are strengthened by strong granite walls having the semblance of fortifications. The Val Tremola (named Trümenthal in German), "the Valley of Turmoil", is one of the wildest and most interesting of the alps. Its road has more than 20 long bends and a few bridges. The stream that flows through the valley frays itself a passage between rocks and frightening whirlpools. At the end of the valley, one kilometre from the St. Gotthard Hospice, carved on the rock is the inscription "Suwaroii Victorii", to recall the passage of the Russians in 1799. The ancient road section of Val Tremola, now released of traffic by the new road, can be visited with joy and at one's leisure. We choose the recently constructed and impressive great road by-passing the Val Tremola. The meridional side of the road commands at first a grand panoramic view of Val Bedretto and the Valentina, the occasion of looking back and paying farewell to our Ticinese friends. "Arrivederci fino all' anno prossimo!"

Back to the valley

This great national road of the St. Gotthard running its way through gorges and along steep slopes, deep cuttings into the rock, as countless windings, viaducts, bridges, tunnels and galleries against avalanches and falling stones, is a masterpiece of Swiss Civil Engineering.

The passage of the St. Gotthard, for a long time the most important of the Swiss Alps, is also one of the most varied and beautiful if considered in its entire length, from Lake Lucerne to Lago Maggiore; it is the central passage of all the Swiss Alps, where the Alps of Berne, Grisons, Valais, Uri and Ticino rejoin.

The Passo del San Gottardo, 2,108m., near the site known as "Bruggloch", marks the border between the cantons of Ticino and Uri.

The road now goes down in gentle slopes along the valley and river Gotthardreuss to Hospental, 1,484m., in the Ursereu Valley, and where our marvellous journey and most enjoyable day end.

Hospental, where the Furkareuss joins the Gotthardreuss, in lovely position on both banks of the Reuss, is also the winter sports centre for the Gemsstock, 2,961m., and the Gotthard massif. We spent the night at Hospental, the starting point for our next journey through the Furka and Grimsel Passes to Brienz and the Bernese Alps.

From Disentis to the Luckmanier, Biasca, and back through the St. Gotthard to Hospental, the distance is only 123km. (77 miles) allowing plenty of time for visiting places of interest. We recommend to our London friends visiting Switzerland, a day's outing to this beautiful part of the country, leaving an impression and souvenir they will never forget.

(P.S.)

COMMENT

OUTCOME OF THE FEDERAL ELECTIONS

The chart printed overleaf gives a bird's eye view of the results of the Federal Elections and shows how the Swiss people will be represented at the National Council for the next four years. It leads to a few obvious conclusions:

- The elections have hardly altered the representative pattern of the National Council. The four main parties represented in Government have lost only a marginal number of seats. The Independent Party, which represents the consumers, has relatively suffered most from the elections.
- One can't speak of a "swing to the right" just because of the success of the Republicans and the National Action, both advocating the repatriation of excess foreigners, because neither of them existed in 1967. However, the elections do reflect the basic conservatism of the Swiss, their contentment and their wish for continuity.
- The young and Radicals (in the English acceptation) are not represented at all. They voted for fringe and local parties and have not wrested seats at the federal level.
- The existence of 10 parties represented at the National Council could not from the outset have led to any dramatic change. The multiplicity of parliamentary parties and the rule by consensus ensures the harmony of Swiss parliamentary life. Note that there are often more than 10 parties at local level. There was a list of 18 in Zurich.
- The National Action had more suc-