

Really getting to know the Ticino

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Ticino is an area of Switzerland that is not as widely visited by the British, as are places in the Bernese Oberland, Graubünden or the Swiss Riviera. However, there are some interesting railway journeys to take, with some beautiful scenery to be seen.



Pino-Tronzano, the first station on Italian soil on the Bellinzona-Luino line.

All photographs by Anne Williams

EN ROUTE TO ITALY

The line from Bellinzona to Luino in Italy travels around the opposite side of Lake Maggiore to Locarno, and the views are magnificent as the line rises high above the lake. The trains, which run only every two hours, are quiet, and consist of Kolibri stock. Pino-Tronzano is the first station on Italian soil, and is the validity limit of the Swiss Pass. There is absolutely nothing to do when you get there, apart from to sit in the sunshine, and wait for the train to come back! There are a couple of quiet holiday resorts en route at Magadino and San Nazzaro, which might be worth a visit.

THE FLP

The Ferrovia Lugano-Ponte Tresa (FLP) line is a pleasant narrow gauge line, meandering around the edge of Lake Lugano. There is a charming small zoo about 10 minutes walk from Magliaso station, and a chocolate factory, complete with gift shop, which is open to the public at Caslano. Ponte Tresa itself is an interesting little border town - try sitting outside at the cafe opposite the Customs Post, and watch the border guards having fun! A walk across the bridge, which acts as the border, brings you to the closed Italian station, from where the train used to run to Varese, and which is now a restaurant.

The Italian side of Ponte Tresa is much bigger and busier than the Swiss side - and the motorists are definitely Italian!

The train service is very frequent and busy, but twice a day in summer the SNL boat makes the journey from the Swiss side of Ponte Tresa back to Lugano, so a round trip is possible.

FLP train at Ponte Tresa





Old railway bridge near Ponte Brolla on Bignasco-Locarno line

ALONG THE CENTOVALLI

The Centovalli line from Locarno to Domodossola is the best known of the lines in Ticino, and is certainly spectacular. However, some of the through trains are very busy with tourists, so try taking a diversion. If you alight at Ponte Brolla and catch a bus from the adjoining bus stop to Maggia, you can walk back along part of the track bed of the Bignasco-Maggia-Ponte Brolla railway. Although some of the track has been used to improve the road, there are still traces of bridges and a tunnel, particularly as you approach Ponte Brolla.

VAL BLÉNIO

Another walk utilising part of the track bed of a disused railway involves taking a bus from Biasca to Acquarossa,

where the bus station was obviously the railway station in a previous era. The track bed here is easier to find than the one mentioned above, and in a few places catenary posts are still in place, although rather rusty by now. In many places, the track bed is now a footpath-cum-local track, but is unmistakable, and it doesn't take much imagination to picture trains running there. All of the above trips are available on the Swiss Pass, and so incur no extra expenditure.

PRESERVATION IN THE TICINO

There are a couple of preserved railways in the Ticino, and they are definitely worth a visit. The first one and by far the best known is what remains of the former RhB Mesocco line which runs from outside Castione-Arbedo station to Cama (which is actually in Graubünden), gives a discount off its fares to holders of the Swiss Pass, and allows children to travel free. The volunteer staff there speak English, and it is a charming ride through fields and vineyards. The train consisted of an ex-Appenzeller Bahn railcar and coach. My favourite part of the trip was when a man with a flag was set down beside an ungated level crossing, and left there to warn of further trains during the afternoon! There is a small shop at Cama, selling postcards and videos about the railway. How could anyone resist purchasing one?

Acquarossa Station, ex-rail, now bus



The second preserved railway worth a mention is the San Gottardo from Mendrisio to Valmorea. When we arrived at Mendrisio Station to catch this train things did not look very promising. However, the man in the SBB ticket office spoke English, and explained to us, as he



Cama - terminus of Misox line from Castione

sold us tickets for the preserved line, that we had to go under the subway as far as possible, and emerge in the car park. The platform was non-existent, but that's not unusual in Switzerland. We travelled in the coaches of the San Gottardo, pulled by a steam locomotive, through Stabio, and onto the Swiss/Italian border, where we paused for border guards to open the gates, and customs staff (both Swiss and Italian) to board. It was certainly easy to distinguish which was which nationality - the Italians had lots of braid and epaulettes, and swaggered! We were amazed that they felt it necessary to travel on the train at all. The trip to Valmorea goes through attractive woodland, and emerges at the station, where there is a small shop and somewhere to buy coffee. Highly recommended! On certain dates, a vintage electric loco-

motive pulls period coaches along the main line to Lugano - imagine that happening on a very busy main line in the UK. For those of you interested in rolling stock, during our trip we saw various vintage steam and electric locomotives, together with carriages from the Rorschach-Heiden Bahn, Ferrovia Nord Milano, and others.

AND FOR THE FUTURE

well, there are still the closed Lugano tramways to Tesserete and Dino/Cadro to seek out, the Customs Museum, only accessible by boat from Gandria, which sounds interesting, and the Monte Generoso rack line from Capolago. Roll on 2003!



EDITOR'S NOTE - A detailed article on the Misox/Mesocco line by Michael Farr will appear in the next edition.

San Gottardo line at Valmorea