THE SWISS INTERNATIONAL PASS

Part 2 – Ticino to Basel
Graeme Easton

The Alps make a wonderful backdrop to the less than inviting station at Domodossola where the overhead changes from the Swiss 15kV AC to the Italian 3kV DC.

All photos: Graeme Easton

In the Lugano area there are no trains available to cross the border using a Swiss Pass, although the lines to Ponte Tresa and Generoso Vetta (half –fare with a Swiss Pass) come quite close. There are however two cross-border shipping routes that are valid and well worth the trip. East from Lugano there is a once-a-day boat to Porlezza, whilst going south and then west to Ponte Tresa takes you across the border a few times. First stop on this service, just across the lake from Lugano, is Campione d'Italia, an Italian enclave just 2.3 km by 0.5 km, totally surrounded by Swiss territory and where the Swiss franc is the local currency. You can also reach here on your Swiss Pass by taking a bus on SNL Line 439 from the centre of Lugano. If you use the ship, having returned to Swiss territorial waters, it calls at Melide then goes back to Italy at Porto Ceresio. After passing through the narrows at Torazza the twin communities of Ponte Tresa are reached, with the boat stopping at the Swiss village's landing stage and also (once a day) by request at the one, two minutes away, serving its Italian neighbour. From the Swiss Ponte Tresa you can use your Swiss Pass on the irregular services of PostAuto Line 421 that runs alongside the River Tresa (it forms the border) to Fornasette, where it crosses into Italy for the last few kilometres to Luino. For the last international excursion in this area you need to go to almost the very southern tip of Switzerland, where PostAuto Line 523 runs from Mendrisio across the border to the Italian village of Gaggiolo. You cannot use your Swiss Pass in Italy on the through Lugano-Varese buses but it should be valid on the local services that just cross the border to turn around.

Moving to the north end of Lago Maggiore the railway line south from Cadenazzo along the shores of Lago Maggiore is interesting, and not surprisingly has very much of an Italian feel. The Swiss Pass is valid for 2km across the border to Pino-Tronzano, and then at half-fare for a further 13km on to Luino, the rail 'border station' with its occasional PostAuto connection back into Switzerland. Here the overhead changes from the SBB's 15kV ac to Trenitalia's 3kV dc. Many of the trains now continue on to Milan's Malpensa Aeroporto, making this quite a convenient way to get to the Ticino. Crossing the lake we come to the longest non-Swiss rail route available on a Swiss Pass, the Centovalli. Leaving from its underground station at Locarno it takes about half an hour to reach the border at Camedo and then there is a 32km run through Italy to Domodossola. If you haven't travelled this line, all I can say is find the time to go, but take care with the timetable if you want to avoid the panorama trains with their supplements. The views are wonderful for the majority of the route – don't be put off by the underground start and end. As well as the interchange for the Centovalli, Domodossola is the operational border between Switzerland and Italy on the Simplon route, and it is where the electrification changes from 15kVac to 3kVdc. There is usually a reasonable amount of activity going on at the station and I must admit to never having left its confines, although I am assured it is a good place for a glass of wine and far cheaper than Switzerland! It is not unknown for the Italians to take a dislike to railway photographers, so take care. From

With France in the background, *'Vevey'* approaches Montreux in August 2002.

Domodossola we still have another 19km of Italian railway to travel before the actual SBB / Trenitalia boundary at Iselle at the south end of the Simplon tunnel, and from there about another 10km before reaching the Swiss/Italian border in the middle of the tunnel. For a change, you could also take the spectacular PostAuto over the top of the tunnel from Iselle to Brig. Before leaving the Italian border, I'd like to mention one more PostAuto route, that to the St. Bernard Pass. Buses travel through the tunnel all year, but only run to the pass in the summer (from Orsières station). Travel is only free as far as the top of the pass that is about 400m short of the border, but the trip is spectacular and the views into Italy are excellent if you get good weather.

We now reach our final border, that with France. The first crossing is on another recommended line, the metre-gauge service from Martigny. The border between the Swiss line (TMR-Transports de Martigny et régiones) and SNCF is at the appropriately named Le Châtelard-Frontière, 18km from Martigny, but the Swiss Pass is valid for a further 18km into France at Chamonix - Mont-Blanc. If you do go up this line, it is well worth taking a deviation to go up to the Emosson Dam that is on the Swiss/French border. Using a Swiss Pass the PostAuto from Finhaut is one way up. Much more fun (but your pass is not valid) is to go from Le Châtelard VS, first on the most incredible funicular (700m height and 1306m long), then on a 60cm narrow gauge train along a mountain ledge (steam if you are lucky) and finally a 143m high, 261m long mini funicular. Back to our border tour and the next opportunity to travel to France is on Lac de Genève, where there are plenty of ships to Evian, Thonon, Yvoire, Nernier and Tougues. Whilst Genève is right on the border your Swiss Pass is not valid across it although some local services run into France.

From the lakeside town of Nyon there are two potential cross-border routes where you can use your Swiss Pass. TPN, the local bus company, runs a service to the French spa town of Divonne-les-Bains that is adjacent to the frontier. From Nyon station you can take a train on the NStCM to La Cure the present terminus of the line that originally continued to Morez in France. The border runs right through the middle of the station, so depending on where you sit on the train you could arrive in either country! It is difficult to imagine now but until 1958 the line continued onwards with a second station, La Cure France, 300m further on from the current one. There is no question about the next crossing. The line from Delémont to Boncourt was extended the 1.5km over the border to Delle in 2006. Despite the station having a very nice SNCF sign, there are no current connections to the French railways although reopening the line north is planned. Our penultimate crossing is by Basel tram. BLT Line 10 starts and finishes in Switzerland, but on the way to Rodersdorf it travels for about 3km through France, including the stop at

Leymen. To complete our tour BVB Line 50 (a bus) runs to Basel / Mulhouse /Freiburg EuroAirport which is in France, although along a road corridor that is technically Swiss.

The *Swiss Express* Editorial Team and I have taken all reasonable precautions to ensure that the cross-border routes listed in the article are available to Swiss Pass holders. Local circumstances and rules change so it is always wise to check that your ticket is valid before you travel.

Hopefully you have found something of interest in this tour of the Swiss border, and perhaps you'll take your next Swiss Pass to foreign parts. As a challenge to how you might do that, consider how long a tour to all five of the neighbours might take. Start anywhere in Switzerland you like and finish at the same place. In between go to at least one station or PostAuto timetabled stop or boat landing stage in each of Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Lichtenstein. No prizes, but just for interest. It can be done quite easily within a day. 🇨🇭

TOP: The Swiss pass is valid as far as Chamonix - Mont-Blanc on the line from Martigny to St-Gervais-les-Bains-le-Fayet.

MIDDLE: The SNCF station at Delle has no connections to other French stations but is valid on a Swiss Pass.

BOTTOM: Basel tram 232 on route 10 arriving in Dornach before returning to Rodersdorf. It will pass through the French station of Leymen on the way.