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Swiss - Italian round trip by R. Foot

My wife and I were staying in Lugano in October 1995, and had taken the Swiss railway, boat and bus guide with us, and we wanted to arrange a round trip to include the Swiss line from Luino in Italy to Bellinzona. We planned to travel by the metre gauge private line from Lugano to Ponte Tresa (635) and the Italian bus to Luino (633.40). We asked the Owner of our hotel whether he would help us by telephoning the bus company for reassurance that the 11.15 a.m. bus ran on the Saturday as the time table is full of variations for different days. He was pleased to help confirm the service, but was a little doubtful of a successful journey for us.

The metre gauge train ran through some delightful country, and at one point is only a few metres from the start of the runway for the internal airlines. My wife thought that one plane was actually going to hit us as it flew in so low.

At Ponte Tresa we left the train, and was told the bus stop was right by the platform. We bought some bread, local cheese and cakes in the market, and at 11.15 a.m. paid the bus driver

in Swiss francs for the journey to Luino. We then realised we were the only passengers, and had the whole bus to ourselves for the whole journey.

The bus travels along the road on the north side of the river which drains the whole of lake Lugano, and eventually crosses into Italy in a hilly area, finally descending to the shore of Lago Maggiore at Luino.

We first of all located the station, which is some ten minutes walk away, before finding a seat for our lunch. Imagine my surprise to find an Italian locomotive, standing on a short line outside the station, with no protection. The sun was very bright hence the varying shades of black, and the apparent headlight (in the photo).

We then walked onto the station to find the platforms were very long, the first one from the north for half its length being reserved for the Swiss service, and the second and third platforms from the south for half their lengths being reserved for the Italian services.

Beyond these platforms were freight trains consisting of about twenty container wagons



waiting to be hauled north by Swiss 460s in pairs or a Swiss Bo-Bo coupled to a Co-Co, or to be hauled south by large Italian Co-Co locomotives. As the Swiss and Italians use different electric voltages there is a diesel shunter to shunt the incoming locomotives from the front of their trains back to their own end of the station. There are red flags in the tracks halfway along the platforms which no passenger trains are allowed to pass.

After having our lunch on a seat by the lake shore at the north end of Luino, eating some real Italian ice cream, seeing a bride and groom leaving a church, and strolling around the town we returned to the station to board the 4.00 p.m. train (631) to Bellinzona. If anyone wants to run both Italian and Swiss trains on a layout I would recommend they visit Luino as all the tracks are parallel, so not taking up much depth on a base board.

The train travels very slowly in Italy, as the track has grass and weeds growing between the sleepers, but the advantage to the passenger on a bright sunny day is constant glorious views from about twenty metres above the lake shore across lake Maggiore to the distant hills, with the

Above left: Italian loco outside Luino station.

Above: A PTT van in new livery at Lugano station.

Photos by: R. Foot

sun either behind you or to the left. Eventually you can see Locarno in the distance, and the train's speed increases because you have crossed the border into Switzerland, and eventually you reach Bellinzona station.

There always seems to be a train, freight or passenger passing through this station, often two class 460's heading long freight trains, and I counted two pulling 132 Peugeot cars double stacked heading south. I estimated the load was worth about £660,000!!

We then caught the stopping train back to Lugano (601) so that we could take in all the scenery and look at each station track layout.

We bought our train tickets from Luino to Bellinzona to Lugano at Lugano station, paying in Swiss Francs, before we started the journey, and paid for the other journeys in Swiss Francs. My wife enjoyed the whole day, and I proved once again that armed with the Swiss timetables you can have some unusual and very interesting days out in Switzerland.