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The June 2002 issue of Swiss Express highlighted some of the off-line activities available from stations of the international Centovalli line, operated by FART (Ferrovie Autolinee Regionali Tisenese) in the Ticino/Tessin region and SSIF (Società Subalpina di Imprese Ferroviarie) in Italy. The scenery along the Centovalli railway is superb, the deep gorges reminiscent of parts of the Martigny-Châtelard line, as are the trains.

During a week in Orselina, high above Locarno, I not only explored the Centovalli but also took advantage of the circular tour offered as the Lake Maggiore Express. Promoted jointly by FART, SSIF, FS Trenitalia, Cisalpino AG and Gestione Navigazione Laghi Maggiore, this includes Locarno, Domodossola, Stresa and a lengthy journey across Lake Maggiore; it is usu-

ally taken in that order but can be tackled in either direction.

Because a large proportion of the round-trip journey is within Italian boundaries, Swiss Passes and Cards are not valid – indeed no journeys on Lake Maggiore attract Swiss half-fare facilities. As I had an eight-day Swiss Pass and was staying for nine days I chose to do the circular trip on my first day before dating my pass and bought the second-class version for SFr 42 from the Swiss Travel Service holiday representative. (There is no ticket office at the FART station at Locarno and if you do not want to use the machines you must allow time to pay at the main station). Following the times suggested in the brochure, I took the 09.35 departure from Locarno.





Whilst most through trains are operated by the Abe 4/6 units delivered to both companies about ten years ago, it is interesting to note the different operating methods in the two countries. For instance, station masters on the Italian section still instruct trains to call with stop boards and new track panels using wooden

PREVIOUS PAGE: Intragna. ABe 8/8 No 22 *Ticino* arrives from Domodossola to wait for a westbound train to cross. The chef from the adjoining hotel has come to see friends off on the next train to Domodossola. (19.09.02)

ABOVE: Isola Bella: NLM hydrofoil approaching the landing stage with crew perched precariously on the outriggers. (18.09.02)

BELLOW: Camedo. ABe 4/4 No 54, working the all-stations to Locarno waits for a path in the loop by the beautifully-kept station. The station master also provides tourist information and can hire you a bicycle. (19.09.02)

sleepers appeared to be made up on site, with much sawdust lying around! On journeys advertised as having a buffet service, an antiquated trolley (apparently fitted with bicycle wheels) comes on board at the Domodossola end of the line.

Once at Domodossola (due at 11.20) you can choose whether to take the Cisalpino at 11.34 or the regional train at 12.05. Much of the journey is along the lake and

Stresa is reached all too early. Here a signpost indicates to turn right out of the station building and then left at the main road but at the next junction (where the lakeside is reached) the signing runs out. You need to turn right and the piers of the Lake Maggiore boats will soon come into view (I turned left and had an

unwanted walking tour of residential parts of Stresa.)

Passengers on the circular tour are encouraged to stop off at Isola Bella, a picturesque if touristy island,



but with lakeside cafés to provide the inevitable coffee, ice cream or something stronger. There is a frequent service of boats from Stresa, for instance 12.50, 13.30 or 14.00 and the return boat direct to Locarno leaves the island at 15.35, arriving at its destination at 18.35.

For my return to Locarno I enquired about changing to the company's hydrofoil (aliscafo or tragflügelboot) and was able to do that for a supplementary fee of only ₣ 1.60. It is a good idea to take not only your passport but also some Euros, though they are usually only too happy to accept Swiss Francs, even for a coffee on the Italian part of the Centovalli line. The hydrofoil leaves at 16.15 and overtakes the boat to reach Locarno at 17.35.

The Lake Maggiore Express is, of course, geared towards the average holidaymaker but the rail journeys alone are worth the trip. On the FART/SSIF section the busier workings will either have two of the newer units or an old twin car set with a coach or two tagged on behind. On both days that I travelled back to Locarno by train, this formation was provided for the 15.24 ex-Domodossola, one train to travel on if you want to enjoy the older units but to miss if you want to avoid overcrowding; one day half of the already limited first class area was cordoned off for a party.

On the Italian section the older cars are often used for the few stopping trains from Domodossola to Re but in Switzerland they seem to have enough vehicles to provide new stock for both through workings and the hourly stopping service from Camedo to Locarno.

In the height of the summer they bring out the Treno Nostalgico for a Sunday excursion from Locarno (dep 10.30) to Santa Maria Maggiore, charging a supplement of SFr 5. The very helpful stationmaster at Camedo opened up the shed there for me to inspect one of the beautifully restored coaches (numbered 111), which is hauled by ABDe 4/4 No. 17, of 1923 vintage.

I decided on this holiday at the last moment and Swiss Travel Service was unable to book a single room in any of their Locarno hotels. I normally travel with them because their handling of my luggage from Heathrow to the hotel and back to Heathrow relieves me of that responsibility, a help with my back problems.

However I found that Orselina, at the top of the Funicolare Locarno – Madonna del Sasso – Orselina (FLMS), was much quieter and not too out of the way as the journey down took little more than five minutes and hotel guests could buy a return ticket for Fr 2.50 instead of the normal Fr 6.60. The Hotel Mirafiori provided a large and comfortable room with a balcony (if you had time to enjoy the view) and excellent meals at a lower price than comparable accommodation in Locarno. (I mention STS and the Mirafiori simply as a very satisfied visitor.)

However, in this primarily tourist resort you have to plan your itineraries without very early starts or set out hungry, as breakfast is not served until eight o'clock. I did manage to catch the 08.55 departure from Locarno on two mornings, but it was a close-run thing. This trip, additional to the normal pattern of service, made an interesting manoeuvre, passing a train ex-Domodossola at Marone, a station with no loop but only a siding. The west-bound train ran straight into the siding, at the end of which was a signal which changed as soon as the eastbound working had passed. We then backed out onto the main line and resumed our journey.

ADDENDUM FROM THE EDITOR

The Centovalli is a fantastic line as many will know and has many idiosyncrasies. The Marone manoeuvre happens quite often I believe and the buffet trolley often changes trains here. It certainly happened twice on the journeys I made one Sunday. I am still baffled by the Italian service. The timetable shows a very sparse stopping service and yet there always seem to be trains passing in every station and the fast service I travelled on stopped at stations seemingly at random to drop and pick up passengers. I would be interested to learn more about the operating methods employed so, if anyone is keen, get the pen out and start writing.