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CARS THROUGH THE SIMPLON

George Hoekstra



At Iselle, the train stops with the passenger coach opposite a proper shelter, which even has seats.

For many years, there have been facilities to transport cars through the Simplon tunnel from Brig to Iselle. Especially since in the early days of the tunnel the pass could not be relied upon to be open all winter. This presented a problem, as the whole Pass and the village of Gondo on the other side, are still Swiss, inside the border. With the pass closed, they could only be reached via a long detour on Italian soil. The Swiss Confederacy regarded this as unfair, and the Pass was made winter proof. They made a thorough job of it; the Simplon Pass is today practically gold-plated! Not surprisingly, after the new road with its spectacular Ganter Bridge was opened, very few people took the car-shuttle. In due course, the SBB decided the service was no longer commercially viable and axed the service.

Many years later traffic, especially lorry-

traffic, had increased on the pass and the BLS decided to run a service from Kandersteg to Iselle, through both the Lötschberg and Simplon tunnels - a huge time saving. I reported on this in *Swiss Express*. Later with the "Open Access" rules, they even re-instated the service Brig-Iselle. The SBB was unable to do this, as they had sold off all their car transporters from the Gotthard and Simplon services... to the BLS! Again some years later, the SBB decided they could make the service pay if they axed most of the local stopping services from Brig to Domodossola and put the passengers on the car-shuttle to Iselle. They could then catch a local Italian bus to Domodossola! No sooner thought than done: they took the route back from the BLS, bought back some of the car transporters (again, from the BLS) added an ex first class regional transport coach with intensive

2 + 2 seating and hey presto: dual service. Apart from a few trains all the way to Domodossola at the rush hour, anybody wanting to go to Iselle, Varzo or Preglia has to take this service.

As I seemed to remember the car transport ramp was quite a way from the station in Brig, when I thought I would try out the service. Well, first of all, it is along way! You go out the back of the station (following the sign to "Naters"), turn right up the ramp and keep going in the direction of the tunnel, walking by the side of the road. After about 10 min. walk, you reach the train's loco - right behind it is the coach for the foot passengers. Pity the people who have to do this in the rain as there is no shelter on the way. As the entrance to the coach was too low for the ex cargo-ramp it stands at, a special removable step complete with handrail, has been made up! There were 8 cars and 5 foot passengers on our train. On our ride through the tunnel, we made a stop in the middle to pick up some workmen. Iselle is in Italy: Customs and Immigration were present, but they were not interested in us. It is just a few minutes walk down to the bus stop off the main road. Right on time, a minibus from Comazzi turned up and took us through the little towns to Domodossola - an interesting experience. This way, the time from Brig to Domodossola was about an hour. On a through local train it takes about 30 min. Do try it - Swiss Pass is valid. Domodossola is not only the junction for the Centovalli line, but a very old and interesting town in its own right - southern gateway to the Simplon. It has many restaurants, where you can have a two-course meal with wine for 9.50, half the price it would cost in Switzerland!



In Brig, the passenger coach is at the back of the train. For access, the special yellow removable step is needed.

PHOTO: George Hoekstra

Interior of the now demoted ex- suburban first, still with the first class antimacassars on the seat backs!

