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All PHOTOS: Jim Paterson

We entered Ticino via the back door. Rather than take the normal route over the Gotthard into Switzerland's Italian-speaking Canton our route south last summer was by PostAuto from Chur to Bellinzona, on one of the new MAN vehicles as illustrated on P31 of Swiss Express 95. This 2 hour trip took us through the Via Mala gorge, up the Rheinwald valley of the Hinterrhein, through the San Bernardino tunnel and down the Mesocco valley. The descent was spectacular, the sign indicating 8% for 15km giving a clue to what lay ahead. The language changed to Italian as soon as we left the tunnel, although we remained in Canton Graubünden until the outskirts of Bellinzona, the Cantonal capital of Ticino.

Here we encountered heat which had been missing north

TiLo class 524 unit at Locarno, 21/8/2008.

of the Alps and changed to the local TiLo train for the 26-minute journey to Locarno. Since our previous visit, the TiLo services had been taken over by the new Class 524 FLIRT units. However, we had to wait a few days for our first trip on the new type as one of the older Class 560 units was deputising, something which we did not see again for the rest of our stay. Locarno is the terminus of the SBB/FFS branch that leaves the main Gotthard line at Giubiasco south





A FART M-B articulated bus waits outside the depôt at Bignasco, 19/8/2007.

of Bellinzona. Operation of the single track line is very slick with three passenger trains/hour in each direction; two locals and an InterRegio which alternates between Zürich and Basel (or Zurigo and Basilia if you listen to the announcements).

Locarno, attractively sited on the north shore of Lago Maggiore, is the lowest town in Switzerland at 200m above sea level. It is partially built on the left bank of the delta of the R. Maggia, with Ascona on the other bank. Excursions on the lake are popular, however the Swiss Card and Swiss Pass are not valid, and a zonal fare structure applies at the Swiss end of the lake. The bigger town of Lugano, on its namesake lake, is just an hour away by TiLo train, as is Luino in Italy on the opposite bank of Lago Maggiore – both destinations requiring a

Neoplan postbus at Spruga, 21/8/2007.



change of train. TiLo (Ticino Lombardia) is a company in the SBB/FFS group which operates services on both sides of the Swiss Italian border. The new Class 524 trains are multi-voltage to permit operation in both countries and display appropriate signs for use in either Switzerland or Italy, relating to such matters as penalty fares and emergency telephone numbers. Locarno is

also the eastern terminus of the beautiful Centovalli metre gauge line to Domodossola in Italy. On a previous visit it was used to do the Lago Maggiore Express round trip, continuing from Domodossola to Stresa by train, and returning to Locarno by ship. An 811m long funicular climbs from near Locarno station some 173m up to Madonna del Sasso from where there are extensive views. We used this regularly as our hotel was adjacent to one of the intermediate halts.

Less well known are the excursion possibilities by bus from Locarno. The local bus company in Locarno is the Ferrovie Autolinee Regionali Ticinesi (FART) which is also the Swiss partner in the Centovalli railway. It operates mainly in the lakeside communities, but one route goes up the Valle Maggia to Bignasco, a service provided at one time by a metre gauge branch railway, also run by FART, that closed in 1965. The hourly bus service requires high capacity vehicles so articulated buses share the duties with double-deckers – quite uncommon vehicles in most of Mainland Europe. It was on this service that I met my first Solaris, a vehicle built by a rapidly expanding Polish manufacturer, which gave us a very comfortable journey. At Bignasco the wide, flat valley ends, and we changed to the AutoPostale to continue up to Fusio, a service which must be in contention for

the most hairpins in a single journey. From Locarno Station AutoPostale operate to Sonogno in the Val Verzasca and to Spruga in the Val Onsermone amongst other places. All the valleys are very scenic, differing in character but all sharing the region's characteristic traditional stone buildings. At the outer termini, there is time to enjoy a walk and a picnic lunch before catching the bus back. Having visited Spruga previously, we left the bus at Russo, a few miles short of its destination, to catch a connecting service to Vergeletto. The connecting bus was a Toyota Hiace minibus, and unfortunately the driver drove it like a car, with little thought for the comfort of his passengers. However, the destination was interesting and made the trip worthwhile.

For a number of reasons, my wife and I had hesitated to plan our first visit to Ticino, but had no hesitation in returning the following year. Locarno is thoroughly recommended as a destination for anyone interested in using the excellent Swiss transport network in order to seek out some less-visited destinations in this beautiful country. Its scenic InterRegio link (best sampled from a panoramic coach) through the Gotthard to Zürich Hauptbahnhof that we used on our return home, together with easy connecting services to that City's Airport, makes it an easy destination from the UK. Also, being south of the Alps, the climate in Canton Ticino is generally sunnier and warmer than some of the more conventional Swiss tourist destinations.



TOP: *The Madonna del Sasso funicular, from Belvedere halt.*

MIDDLE: *A Solaris Urbino 18 FART waits at Locarno Stazione for its next duty on the Valle Maggia service on 21/8/2008.*

BOTTOM: *The road to Fusio, taken from bus window, 21/8/2008.*

