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CENTOVALLI TO CAMEDO

Jason Sargerson



Intragna and the bridge across River Isorno with an ABPe 12/16 unit crossing.

ALL PHOTOS: Jason Sargerson

The Centovalli metre-gauge line links the Swiss town of Locarno in the Ticino with Domodossola in Italy where it connects with the Simplon main line. The blue and cream trains of the Ferrovie autolinee regionali ticinesi (FART) start out from Locarno underground, but soon emerge into the wonderful scenery of the Centovalli – the hundred valleys.

The line is jointly administered by the Italian Vigezzina (SSIF – Società Subalpina di Imprese Ferrovarie) and the Swiss Centovallina (FART) with 17km of track in Switzerland and 32 km in Italy. This international line was opened in 1923 but was shut from 1978 to 1981 due to severe flooding. The line was electrified from its inception and the current voltage is 1350V d.c. There two main depots – one in Italy at Domodossola and another in Switzerland at Ponte Brolla. FART is also a major bus operator in Canton Ticino.

The key units on the line are the eleven two-car articulated Abe4/6 units dating from 1992/3 owned and operated by both the Swiss (7) and the Italian (4) organisations. These tend to operate the local services at either end of the line. The older Abe8/8 units built in 1959, but subsequently modernised and rebuilt with improved windows and air conditioning, are mainly used for the through services


to Italy as extra coaches can be attached according to passenger demand. Introduced by SSIF in 2007 for the international tourist services are the unique panoramic trains that have an unusual faceted design with angular sides. Built by a consortium that included SKODA from the Czech Republic and the Italian Officine Ferroviarie Veronisi, they were originally three-car ABPe12/12 units with all axles driven but because of passenger demand they had an unpowered trailer coach added in 2009 making them into ABPe 12/16 units. They were described in SE 97.

The starting point for the railway is the underground station in Locarno (193m) adjacent to the SBB/FFS terminus of the line from Giubiasco. Originally the line terminated outside the main station but traffic problems eventually meant putting the line underground with this section being opened in 1990. Trains stop at two further stations underground, S. Antonio and Solduno, before meeting the sunlight at San Martino station. The railway follows the River Maggia up to Ponte Brolla where the line starts to turn left to follow the River Melleza. Until 1965 a metre-gauge line ran north from here to Bignasco and the FART dépôt and workshops are on the old alignment. There is a tremendous gorge at Ponte Brolla and you can see down to people swimming and sunbathing far below the train. It is

a pleasant stroll from Ponte Brolla past the church to the next station at Tegna. The train climbs steadily up the valley and through the wooded countryside. Many of the trees are Sweet Chestnut and Robinia giving the valley an unique appearance. At Intragna the train crosses the River Isorno via a superb viaduct parallel to the road before entering the station. Palm trees stand by Verdasio station where there is one of the region's cable cars up to Rasa. At Palegnedra a dam has created a huge reservoir that stretches back to Camedo. The reservoir is crossed by

another spidery bridge just prior to turning into Camedo station (549m). The line is single track throughout and all the stations have passing loops. Camedo is the end of the line for the Swiss local trains, although the actual frontier is a little further on just before the Italian station of Ribellasca, but through trains carry on to Domodossola at regular intervals. The Italian part of the line is no less interesting with the line reaching 831 metres at Santa Maria Maggiore, the main Italian town on the route. The line drops gradually over the 7km to Marone, then descends quite steeply (1:18) to Trontano then at 1:16 through a series of hairpin bends before reaching the valley floor at Masera and running across the plain to Domodossola at 267m. All this is done without the use of rack.

The journey from Locarno to Camedo takes approximately 40 minutes, onward to Domodossola takes just over another hour. Unusually for Switzerland a regular interval timetable has not yet been established for this line but there are trains roughly hourly from Locarno to Camedo. The international Panoramic expresses run three times daily each way, have limited accommodation so reservations are sometimes necessary, and are subject to a supplement on the Italian section. There are normally five further through trains each day whilst Italian local services are far less regular. Swiss Passes are valid on the line as they are on trains from Domodossola through Italy to the Simplon tunnel and Brig.

This is a unique line in attractive countryside. The small towns and villages served by the line are probably all worthy of a visit just to admire the local church or the architecture apart from the natural history and the many walks. I would recommend breaking the journey at Ponte Brolla, Intragna and Camedo. 

More Centovalli photographs on page 14.



ABOVE: An Abe6/6 at Ponte Brolla depot.

BELOW: Abe 4/6 Approaches Tegna church.





1. At Camedo station, an Abe 4/6 and AbPe 12/16 wait in the sun.
2. An Abe 8/8 at Ponte Brolla station.
3. An Abe 4/6 runs over the Bridge across the reservoir at Camedo.
4. Abe6/6 No 54 at Ponte Brolla station.



SWITZERLAND AND TRANS-EUROPEAN FREIGHT OPERATIONS

Der Beobachter

For Switzerland, adoption of EU law for the rail network is obvious as its main lines sit in the middle of Europe and many trains are to-and-from somewhere else. However, although much EU legislation on railways is binding on member states, not many have yet implemented it in national legislation and legal proceedings for non-compliance have been initiated on several member states. The Swiss Confederation, although not required to, has already largely adopted EU open-access legislation and public purchasing rules. Standing at Olten or Erstfeld you see the results all day long. In October 2010 the EU announced its intention to increase on-rail competition further; for example by standardising open tendering rules for new rail service contracts.

Switzerland does not have a completely independent track authority as EU law demands of its member states; however the admission of open-access freight operators has been uncontroversial so far with no evidence of abuse of competitive situations. The Bundesamt für Verkehr (BAV)

supervises the way in which SBB Infrastructure allocates track capacity on SBB and BLS for competing companies. This is an unusual situation that will continue under the Oct. 2010 announcement for good reasons. One is that the present arrangement seems to work better than elsewhere. Track access rules and charges are seen by competitors to be fair. Another is that as we saw with the new Bombardier Intercity trains, integrated development of track and trains is much more cost-effective than trying to get each right separately. Yet another is that much of the capacity is taken by the Taktfahrplan, both nationally and locally with dense S-Bahn services voted and paid for by the electorate. Often some infrastructure work has been expressly voted and paid for by a local electorate so that given passenger services can operate which then has contractual precedence on the system. The Federal Council has now ordered further proposals to be drawn up by 2012 for clearer legal separation of track and operations. These new proposals include adoption of the EU rules for rail interoperability, also now binding on member