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A DIFFERENT DAY TRIP TO ITALY

John Jesson explores the 'Club San Gotthardo' in the Ticino



Ex.SBB E3/3 No. 8463 just arrived at Malnate.

All Photos: John Jesson

Based at Mendrisio, in the far south of Switzerland, the Club San Gotthardo (CSG) runs over the line that once ran to Castellanza in Italy. The original line was inaugurated in 1926 but was closed on 31st May 1928 by Italy's fascist government. They had erected a metal gate across the railway at the border point of Stabio – S.Margherita. This remained closed for 65 years. On Sunday 12th September 1993, with the collaboration of the Ferrovie Nord Milano (FNM) and the Swiss and Italian authorities, the Club San Gotthardo arranged for the gate to be opened and for a steam train to cross into Italy for some 10m. After this, volunteers worked on renovating the track and a bridge across the river Lanza, as well as replacing 2km of track onwards from the border. Tourist operations started officially on 27th/28th May 1995 after which work continued

on extending the line which reached its present terminus at Malnate – Olona in May 2007. Motive power is provided by either of two Ex.SBB E3/3 steam locomotives Nos.8463 & 8501 or an ex-FNM Bo-Bo diesel No.500-2. On my visit No.8463 (built in 1904) was doing the honours hauling two EW-I coaches one each from the MO and EBT.

Arriving at Mendrisio The Swiss/Italian border, complete with gates and border guard.



station, although it was quite obvious that something was "going on" due to the unmistakable smell associated with steam locos, I could not find any information about the Club. Fortunately the SBB station official spoke English and, after checking, confirmed it was a CSG operating day and indicated where the train would be starting from - Track 7 - on the other side of the station, accessed by the northerly of two subways. The shed where the loco was being prepared was only a short walk away and welcomed visitors.

Once the loco was ready, it backed down onto the two coaches, while those who had been observing and photographing in the little depot followed it along the track. Boarding the train a ticket could be purchased and a very informative brochure in Italian and English was offered. Departure was prompt at 14.00 with a vigorous display from the front end. The first part of the journey is over track that is well-used, as the former international route remains in place on the Swiss side of the border as a line serving several industries, among them a loading area for intermodal transfers for both 'Schöni' and 'Fruit Express'. That this was the first train for a while along its full length was made obvious by the train having to stop several times to change the hand-operated points. At the border, 5.5km from Mendrisio, the gate across the track still exists and has to be opened for the train - although pedestrians can simply walk round it! Entering Italy the scenery became much more rural and pleasant as the route continues through Valmorea (7.7km) to Malnate (13 km). Although all level crossings are un-gated, the procedure for the train to cross is different in the two countries. In Switzerland the train stopped short of the

crossing, whistled, then moved slowly forward over it. In Italy it was the same except two people disembarked, held up red flags to the road users, re-boarding the train after it had crossed.

We were some 15-min. late arriving at Malnate due partly to having to reset points en-route, and partly due to catering for Swiss broadcasters who were making a programme about the trip. They were surprised and impressed to learn that the CSG was known in England. There was little time to investigate the very pleasantly renovated station and the items of rolling stock, including an ex-FNM Bo-Bo electric loco, stored there as I chose to photograph the quick run-round procedure. At this location a high viaduct carries the FNM across the valley. The return was uneventful, and a bit faster, as all the necessary points were now in our favour, although the gate at the border had to be opened. This time a border guard was in evidence, cheerfully breaking all border guard rules by acknowledging a smile and wave with similar actions. On arrival back at Mendrisio the loco gave a very spirited display as it returned to the shed which reminded me of how dirty steam locos can be, especially when burning briquettes of brown coal. Despite this it was an excellent trip, well worth the journey to Mendrisio. The final cherry on my "steam sundae" was returning on an additional SSO (Summer Sundays Only) Zürich train hauled by one of the two remaining locos in "Swiss Express" livery, and which included a 1st Class EW-II coach. It really was pleasant to travel over the Gotthard enjoying natural air-conditioning i.e. with open windows.

The CSG has an excellent website www.clubsangot-tardo.ch. It hosts pictures of its open days; a list of rolling stock; and details (with Euro prices) of trips for residents of Valmorea and Malnate. The club has two sheds at Mendrisio, a small one where the steam locos are prepared, plus a more inaccessible larger one at the northern end of the station, which is home to the rolling stock which is not on display or in use. Its Ae 4/7 No.10997 loco was at Schwyz for several years.

From about the end of 2013 the Swiss part of the line from Mendrisio is scheduled to become part of a new international route. This will diverge westwards from the existing line at Stabio (3.8km), cross the border to Gaggiolo, then on to Bivio Arcisate, before joining the existing Porto Ceresio to Varese line, with onward links to the Milan area. Details were in the June 2011 "Eisenbahn Amateur". This gave no details of the CSG's future operations, but these should not be seriously affected. 

TOP: Ex.SZU Em 836 No. 506 at Mendrisio.
 MIDDLE LEFT: The Swiss end of Valmorea, with signal (not working) and water crane. The purpose of the little yellow trolley is unknown, as is the reason for several wheelsets on display, that in the picture has split-spoke wheels.
 MIDDLE RIGHT: In the small depot at Mendrisio is this small crane. Steel frame and jib, but a wooden cabin.
 RIGHT: No. 8463 being fired up on shed at Mendrisio.
 BOTTOM RIGHT: No. 8463 returns to the depot at Mendrisio after leaving its train in Track 7.

