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A Schaffhausen bus in Busingen, Germany, in April 2012.

Photo: Malcolm Bulpitt

opportunity in high summer to travel at half-fare on a twice-daily PostAuto through the Swiss border at the Umbrail Pass, to its Italian terminus on the Pso dello Stelvio at 2757m high. Also from Zernez the Swiss Pass is valid on the PostAuto to Livigno in Italy, where in the summer you can connect with a PostAuto to Ospizio Bernina and down to Pontresina. Now to what is probably my favourite border crossing, as the southern terminus of the RhB's Bernina line at Tirano is in

Italy, with the border having been crossed just south of Campocologno. Who can fail to enjoy the entry to Tirano down the street and across the square? Once at Tirano, the Italian main line station across the road is off limits for our Swiss Pass, but the summer-only once a day PostAuto to Lugano is valid (seat reservations are compulsory at CHF12) and this runs parallel with the railway for much of the route. At 120km, all but 7km of which are in Italy, this 3 hour journey provides about half of the non-Swiss distance available on a Swiss Pass. Once from Lugano, my daughter and I took this PostAuto as part of a long day, travelling Tirano – St. Moritz – Landquart (via the Vereinatunnel) – Zurich – Lugano. We left Lugano in T-shirts and shorts as it was 30c. The train up from Tirano had open wagons attached at Poschiavo, so of course we jumped in. As we went above the snow line at the Bernina pass we decided too late that bringing a jumper might have been a good idea! Whilst still in the Engadine there are regular PostAutos from St. Moritz across the border to Chiavenna, that once a day in summer run onwards to Lugano. 

The Swiss Express Editorial Team and I have taken all reasonable precautions to ensure that the cross-border routes listed in the article are available to Swiss Pass holders. Local circumstances and rules change so it is always wise to check that your ticket is valid before you travel.

SOUTHEAST FROM ZERNEZ

Michael Donovan takes to PostAutos to explore the isolated Val Müstair



A PostAuto waits at Müstair, Clostra Son Jon stop.

All Photos in June 2012: Michael Donovan

Val Müstair is surrounded on three sides by Italy and Austria and geographically it is part of the Adige Basin that drains into the Adriatic. It is only connected directly to Switzerland by the road over the Ofenpass/Pass dal Fuorn from Zernez on the Rhätisch Bahn Engadin line. The route is served by a PostAuto service (the only public transport that enters the Swiss National Park) to Mals/Malles, in the South Tyrol area of Italy. If the road is blocked, the alternative

route is through Italy and Austria, re-entering the Engadin via Nauders. In this isolated, Romansch-speaking area of Switzerland, the PostAutos perform the same function as the railway network does in the rest of the country. Riding the routes, as the buses stop in all the scattered communities to pick-up and set-down mail and parcels, as well as conveying passengers, brings the tourist closer to the lives and economy of this part of the Confederation.



A Setra PostAuto leaves the Ofenpass for Zernez.

The journey starts at the station at Zernez (1471m) that has recently been completely rebuilt with trains usually using Platform 1. All the PostAuto routes now operate from immediately adjacent to the top of the ramp from the (almost unused) island platform, with shelter between the train and the bus. Leaving Zernez, passing the National Park Centre, the bus heads for the Ofenpass and the entrance to the Park, climbing rapidly up onto the side of the valley. There are many curves and retaining walls, some avalanche shelters or tunnels, and spectacular views of the surrounding mountains. There always seems to be two pieces of work, resurfacing or rebuilding structures, taking place on this section, usually involving traffic light control. This is allowed for within the schedules. Entering the National Park, the first major stop is Punt la Drossa, where the route to Livigno turns off, whilst the next stop is the only place in the park where visitors are allowed to spend the night – Il Fuorn. The road exits the Park at Buffalora, and then continues to climb at a steady grade, with far more gentle curvature, to the top of the Ofenpass (2149m) where there is a hotel/restaurant. Then there is a very steep drop, around some extremely tight reverse curves, sometimes requiring the use of the post horn to warn of the bus's need to occupy the whole road while making the turns!

The PostAuto route serves a string of villages in Val Müstair with Tschierv (1660m), which has a school, being the first centre of population since leaving Zernez. Here, the valley opens out, and the gradients and curves become gentler. The old village is largely on a road that branches off to the north, whilst the main community is strung out over some distance, and as the road leaves the village it performs an s-bend as it crosses the young river Rom. The next community is Fuldera (1638m) where the main road bypasses the village. The PostAuto turns off to run through it, stopping outside the shop and Post Office, where it connects with the local bus to Lü. The bus regains the main road before again

turning off to serve Valchava (1440m) stopping at the Post Office and the hotel – this complete with modern scraffiti, or wall-painting. The next stop is at the main school, at the north end of Sta Maria (1375m), the biggest village so far, and the junction for the road, to the Stelvio Pass. So children do not have to cross the road buses in both directions pull off into a lay-by outside the school. The bus drops down the hill into Sta Maria proper stopping at the Post Office. Entering the old village the road is very narrow and squeezes between buildings that are very close together. A metal plate has been fixed to one of the buildings to protect it from errant wing-mirrors. Having called at Sta Maria Sierva, the valley's hospital, the river is crossed again, now much larger than it was at Tschierv. Visible to the right is a spectacular waterfall, which can be reached by the reasonably fit via a footpath that climbs up the side of the valley, giving views of it and along the valley. Entering Müstair (1273m) the service has three stops: at Somvih, where there is a small garage dedicated to the buses; the Post Office, where buses pull off the road into the forecourt; and, having passed through the narrow streets of the older part of the village, a stop serving the World Heritage Site of St John's Convent/Clostra Son Jon, a place of pilgrimage with wall paintings dating from around 800AD.

Beyond the village the valley opens out as the bus approaches the border with Italy at Müstair Cunfin where there are pull-off facilities for buses, a filling station/shop, and another shop with a restaurant. Formalities are rudimentary for pedestrians and bus passengers alike, being limited to a good stare at passengers as the vehicle passes slowly through. The first Italian community is Taufers (1240m), rather strung out with some narrow, older sections, whilst a small church in the centre, and two churches and a chapel at the far end, were all magnificently restored a few years ago. A tower and a spectacular castle dominate the valley. The delightful and fascinating walled town of Glurns/Glorenza, (907m) follows, with old and new buildings jumbled together. From the south its wall has been breached to enable larger vehicles to enter, whereas at the north (Mals) end of the town the original arch through the wall is retained, this, if anything, being even tighter than the entrance to Sta Maria. Leaving Glurns, the PostAuto then climbs the short distance to Mals (1051m) station (just short of the town centre) from where there is a regular train service to Merano. This is not run by FS but by an independent organisation on behalf of the South Tyrol Region. *See Swiss Tip on page 19.*

This route, like many PostAuto services, is operated as a franchise with vehicles based in Zernez that connect with the hourly Rhätisch Bahn Scuol-Tarasp - Pontresina service. Because trains on this cross at Susch, the connections from and to Scuol-Tarasp are shorter than those from and to Pontresina. The basic service is every two hours in winter, and hourly from mid-May to mid-October. Some operations are more popular than others, e.g. those taking people to walk in the National Park, and these can run in duplicate with the second vehicle displaying 'Extrafahrt' on its destination indicator. There is also one limited-stop service with reservations obligatory each way during the summer, leaving Zernez in the morning and Mals in the afternoon stopping



only at Sta Maria, Müstair Post, Müstair Convent, and Glurns. This bus connects with the *'Engadin Star'*, the Landquart - St Moritz service that uses the north-to-west spur from/to the Vereina tunnel. The normal journey time from Zernez to Mals is around 90-minutes, slightly more in the return direction. This is an unremarkable journey time for a trip that is 40km as the crow flies, however the actual distance is probably nearer 50km because of the bends, whilst the height difference of over 2,000 metres, also adds to the difficulties of the operation. Mercedes-Benz and Setra vehicles that seat around 45 passengers, with under-floor lockers for the post and luggage, are used. The winter service could be operated by two vehicles, and the core summer service by four, but duplication and the *'Engadin Star'* require extra vehicles, so on a normal summer's day about seven buses will be in operation, with a standby vehicle at Müstair Cunfin - a *'Zusatzwagen'* - and presumably another at Zernez. There is a small garage (one bus was inside last June) and servicing facility, including a bus washing machine that moves along the bus rather than the bus being driven through it, at Müstair Somvih. At Müstair Cunfin there is space for overnight stabling, and a team of drivers is based there, so in the event of the Ofenpass being closed, local services could continue to operate. In addition to the buses a post car based in Sta Maria could probably accommodate up to three passengers, and in Müstair there is based a battery-powered tricycle and trailer used for local deliveries.

A near-to-hourly regular connecting service with seasonal and school day variants operates from Fuldera to the tiny village of Lü, which is tucked out of sight of the valley floor, on the north side of the valley. This appears to be a mini-franchise based in Lü, where there is a small garage, with very cramped access and turning arrangements. It operates a Mercedes-



TOP: The Setra bus has just squeezed through the gap at Sta Maria.

BOTTOM: Mercedes-Benzs cross at Mustair, Clostra Son Jon.

Benz mini-bus and two short wheelbase buses – a Neoplan and a Volvo. These vehicles cover a number of unadvertised school runs, one of the larger vehicles usually being stabled at Müstair Somyih between turns, and some summer-dated extra services. The school flows are to and from the schools at Tschier and Sta Maria (from both directions), hence the need for three vehicles. Extra services operate from late June until mid-October. One, a twice-daily operation in high summer – Thursdays only either side – runs from Müstair Clostra, over the Umbrailpass, to Silfserjoch/ Stelvio Pass (2760m), in Italy. This attracts a CHF5 mountain supplement on a return ticket. There are many sharp bends (with much use of the post horn), and an unmade road for part of the distance. The forty-five minutes allowed at its destination on the afternoon run are sufficient to take in the scenery; take photographs; have some quick refreshment and return to the bus. In the morning, only thirty minutes are allowed. On my trip the Neoplan had push-button gear selection, including automatic as an option, although it spent most of the journey back in second gear! Like all the PostAutos on which I travelled, it also had a form of hand brake on the steering column that could be used instead of the foot brake. To avoid conflicts in the narrow streets of Sta Maria, the drivers are in radio communication with a control, which resulted in the bus being held at Sta Maria Sierva until the Italy-bound bus had left Sta Maria proper. The second seasonal service operates on Wednesdays and Thursdays for walkers, outward in the morning from Fuldera to Pra da Vau, and returning late in the afternoon. Reservations are required, so I suspect the mini-bus operates this service.

An excursion by PostAuto into the Val Müstair takes you into both the scenery, and the lives of the Swiss living in this remote area. It is to be recommended. 

TOP: A PostAuto at Glurns, 21 June 2012

MIDDLE: A small Fiat post vehicle at Sta Maria.

BOTTOM: The other member of the Lü fleet - a bus carving, outside the post office.

BELOW: The smallest post vehicle in Val Mustair.

