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FERROVIA MESOLCINESE

Sam Dixon

The Ferrovia Mesolcinese is a metre-gauge tourist line, in canton Ticino electrified at 1,500V dc, that is operated by Societa Esercizio Ferroviario Turistico (SEFT). It links Castione Arbedo on the Gotthard Main Line north of Bellinzona with Cama 13km up the Mesolcina valley, which leads to the San Bernardino Pass. The original 31km line opened in 1907 from Bellinzona to Mesocco and was operated by Societa Ferrovia elettrica Bellinzona – Mesocco. In 1942, it was taken over by the Rhätische Bahn who retained ownership until 2003. Largely as a result of road improvements in the valley, passenger services ceased in 1972 and the Bellinzona to Castione Arbedo section closed. However, the transport of freight from Castione Arebdo to Messocco continued until the Cama – Messocco upper section of the line was badly damaged by severe storms in 1978 and forced to close. Gradual decline in freight to other parts of the line continued, including the loss of the largest customer in 1987. In 1995, SEFT started operating tourist passenger trains, and in 2003 ownership was transferred to them from the Rhätische Bahn.

I visited the line in September 2011 on one of only ten operating days that year. A single return trip was advertised, running outward from Castione Arbedo at 11.25. A large crowd gathered at the small station beside the new modern SBB equivalent, but the departure time came and went. Finally 1958 vintage railcar BDe 4/4 No.6 (ex-RhB No.491) arrived hauling a couple of four-wheel carriages and a couple of wagons. No sooner had it arrived than 1963 vintage railcar ABe 4/4 No.5 (ex Biasca - Aquarosa), which had been stabled in the sidings, set off up the line empty! This was presumably to collect passengers waiting to board at intermediate stations as the railcar was stabled at Cama when we arrived there later. After much shunting, a train was formed with No.6 hauling four-wheel carriages B51 and B52, both built in 1907 for the line, and van Gb71 built in 1963. Departure was very un-Swiss at nearly 30 minutes late, but there was a convivial atmosphere on board with the mainly Italian-speaking passengers enjoying wine and pre-lunch picnic nibbles. The scenery along the line is pleasant, though not spectacular whilst many of the station buildings along the line are particularly attractive. There is a mixture of roadside and countryside running, then, after San Vittore and Roveredo stations, the line crosses the River Moesa on attractive stone viaducts. The journey takes 35 minutes each way. On arrival at Cama, most passengers headed for the local restaurant, whilst the train crew performed some complex shunts to prepare the train for the return journey. A visit to this friendly little line, which primarily operates on Sundays between July and October, is highly recommended. However, the future of the line is not good. The line and the A13 motorway currently bisect the community of Roveredo, and in late 2013 the

motorway will be routed away and the town wants the metre-gauge railway gone as well. This will enable the centre of the village to be completely reconstructed. If the closure goes ahead, the line will be cut in half making continued operation virtually impossible. Go while you can!

Editorial Update

After we had prepared Sam Dixon's article for publication we learnt from Christian Ammann, a Swiss friend of the SRS, that the local villages had petitioned the Federal Government to cancel the concession (valid until 2020) under which the railway operates. It then appears that the Federal Administrative Tribunal did agree that the concession should be cancelled - the first time that this has ever happened in Switzerland. This decision was then followed by SEFT (the operator) deciding that they would make a counter-appeal to the Federal Tribunal in Lausanne. In addition to the plans for the reconstruction of the centre of Roveredo it is also understood that there is a local proposition that the line could be relayed as a standard gauge link from the SBB at Castione, potentially up to Roveredo, in order that the popular TILO services could be extended from Bellinzona to serve the local communities. The last day of operation this year (and possibly forever) will be Sunday 13th October.

OPPOSITE PAGE: FM 6 & 5 at Cama. *All photos:* Sam Dixon
TOP: Visitors admire FM6 at Castione Arbedo
ABOVE RIGHT: FM5 at Cama
RIGHT: The attractive station at Grono
BELOW: FM6 arriving at Castione Arbedo on a mixed train