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Last Tango to Ticino

Tim Mulhall



The road side view of Bellinzona station.

My plan was for a 4-day break to make one last trip over the Gotthard Mountain Route and as a bonus to take a trip on a 'Gotthardino' pre-opening trip through the Gotthard Base Tunnel (GBT). I had booked an early flight to Zürich and into the Hotel International in Bellinzona with the intention of getting there via St Gallen and Luzern using the Sudostbahn's *Voralpen Express*. This was

not to be, as Swiss Airlines texted at 5am to advise me my flight was cancelled. In the end I arrived in Switzerland 5 hours late and so took a direct train from Zürich to Bellinzona. However this resulted in a surprise trip of its own – as we left Erstfeld, a voice announced we were entering the new Base Tunnel. Sure enough we made a fast transit through the 57km tunnel under the Alps! On returning to daylight we parked at Biasca for the next 30 minutes to allow the timetable to catch up with us, eventually arriving in Bellinzona as the daylight was departing. Having dropped my cases at the hotel – opposite the station – I took a relaxing walk through the lovely old town with its three castles and to take in the station itself. I realised I had chosen the perfect weekend for my visit, as the Bellinzona station was reopening after refurbishment that weekend and the whole city was holding a festival to celebrate. The Friday night would kick off with Tango dancing in the hotel foyer until midnight, then on Saturday a whole host of events were occurring at four main locations, as well as a food festival at stands on the streets linking the locations.

An early morning departure from Bellinzona.



Day Two dawned with me picking up the 08:18 service south to Locarno with a 1st Class ticket giving me free access to the Panorama Cars, albeit not of that much use across the flood plains to Locarno, where cloud and rain made a trip around the town less than appealing. Instead I made a jaunty dash for the underground station of the FART to take the 2-hour trip to Domodossola. The views on the first 40-minutes of the journey were wonderful – even with low cloud, and well worth it, although the rough riding of the track, particularly up front in 1st Class made me decide I had no stomach for the return journey. Consulting the map and the SBB Mobile app on my phone confirmed that I could continue around a circuit and return to Bellinzona via the MGB. At Domodossola station, which felt rather less clean and pleasant than its Swiss operated brethren, a train for Brig was due shortly – with nothing else for a further 2 hours, so my stay on the Italian side was necessarily brief. The SBB EMU that carried us back across the border was busy with every 1st Class seat being used – although mainly by SBB conductors! As we coasted into Brig one of the passengers in 1st was asked to leave, after a ticket check revealed that she had no ticket. More fun was awaiting at Brig, where three Swiss Border Police were waiting and took her away, as she seemed to have no papers or passport to be able to prove her nationality.

Brig seemed a far more welcoming location, so I spent an hour in lighter rain wandering around the main town where there seems a surplus of 'English Pubs' – I found three. Perhaps it has a large ex-pat community? After some simple tourist wandering I headed back to the station to dry out, and to undertake some serious trainspotting! The freight trains (BLS, SBB, DB, and private operators) were all double-headed and coming through with quite some frequency, whilst the passenger services seemed to be mainly EMUs, so after an hour I headed out to the forecourt to catch the MGB service to Göschenen. A prompt service stopping at every request halt ensued giving plenty of time for reading, as the scenery was familiar from previous *Glacier Express* trips. Then at Göschenen a quick walk through the underpass to the island platform to await the final leg – the south-



TOP: The next service to Ponte Tressa waits at the low level station at Lugano.

MIDDLE: A SBB EMU at Bellinzona.

BOTTOM: Freight locos await their next duties at Brig.



TOP: SBB Transport police on duty at Bellinzona.

BOTTOM: A quiet shunter at Chiasso.

bound trip back to Bellinzona. It was clear on this trip that much of the infrastructure on both ramps of the old route is being run down. Sidings were empty, there seemed far less freight and the temporary sites were all being cleared and closed. I guess once the GBT is fully open many of these stations will be like ghost towns. I arrived back in Bellinzona just in time to enjoy the final hour of the festival, and tried many of the local cheeses and wines that stalls were offering. The station foyer was this time given over to the SBB Police. As well as offering the usual promotional freebies, they had some rather serious 'hardware' on display, including what looked like a machine gun! The bar and the kiosk in the foyer are certainly handy traveller facilities, but I found the Co-op down in the underpass to offer much better value for food and drinks.

Day Three at last saw a drier morning, with a hint of sun. This was my day to travel through the GBT on the '*Gottardino*', so having made my way to Flüelen, a very pleasant hour was spent at the departure station of the tourist service taking photos along the lakeside - including a quadruple headed train! After the '*Gottardino*' service, I continued heading south and picked three more locations – Lugano, Ponte Teresa and Chiasso to visit. Getting off at Lugano, the walk through the building site, which is all that remains of the current station, was in glorious sun enhancing a view over the town's turrets down to the lake. Having paused for a short while I made my way down to the FLP's local train with its smiley face on its front! This was a smashing 30-minute ride, passing the airport – closed and its runway being re-surfaced as we passed - before arriving at the lakeside terminus. Here a walk around the lake was planned, but coming out of the station there was the bustle of a customs checkpoint, the like of which someone too young to remember Europe prior to the Schengen treaty, could not imagine existed. From the Italian side came hordes of shoppers dragging back mounds of fruit and veg – mainly onions - whilst battered and scratched cars with Italian number plates filled the normally quiet Swiss streets. A walk into Italy was taken, the market toured and then a hasty retreat back to genteel Switzerland! I am sure the other parts of the lakeside communities would have been much nicer, but my patience had been tested and so I grabbed the return FLP service, crossed back at Lugano to the SBB station

and carried on south. I had a mind to get off the express at Chiasso, walk to Lake Como and enjoy a meal at some quaint and scenic Italian restaurant.

Initially that plan seemed fine and leaving the station I spotted a Märklin store and window-shopped as only a big kid can. Then a walk along the quiet Swiss shopping street led me to the Italian Border Post. No obvious walk way existed so I simply followed the pavement, through a customs hall and out the other side. As I began to walk up the hill, along the main road away from Chiasso heading towards Como the pavement ran out, the street lights stopped and I decided to review my plans - Lake Como still seemed very distant on my map! So, I walked back into Switzerland – this time being shouted at by Italian Border guards for walking on the pavement (!), so along

the roadside I walked, back into sanity and Switzerland. No sign of a nice restaurant, so the Kiosk shop supplied a sandwich and drink for me to munch, whilst I carried out some dusk photography and train spotting. As I wandered around Chiasso station, it became obvious how much some SBB stations need to be refurbished. This had broken windows, damaged signs, waiting rooms without seats and all the station furniture of a pre-WWII Border Station. It was at this point that I noticed pairs of Border Guards appearing, and by the time my express service arrived a group of seven were awaiting its arrival. Very shortly they had removed a group of maybe 10 men from the train and were questioning them. Were they tipped off, or was this normal? Either way, I switched platforms and grabbed the local back to Bellinzona, leaving the Express from Milan still at its platform 20 minutes after departure time. The Hotel International was waiting for me and so a final quiet night was had, before picking up the mid-morning train the following day and its connection at Zürich onto my Birmingham bound flight. Whilst I probably covered most of the main destinations in Ticino, I'm left feeling it's not going to be top of my list of locations to return to, although if you want to see busy freight and passenger services, Bellinzona is a great base – and the Hotel is highly recommended. ■



TOP: SBB No. 11198 at Bellinzona.
MIDDLE: The steam loco on display for the Bellinzona festival.
BOTTOM: The early birds already enjoying free samples at 9am in Bellinzona.