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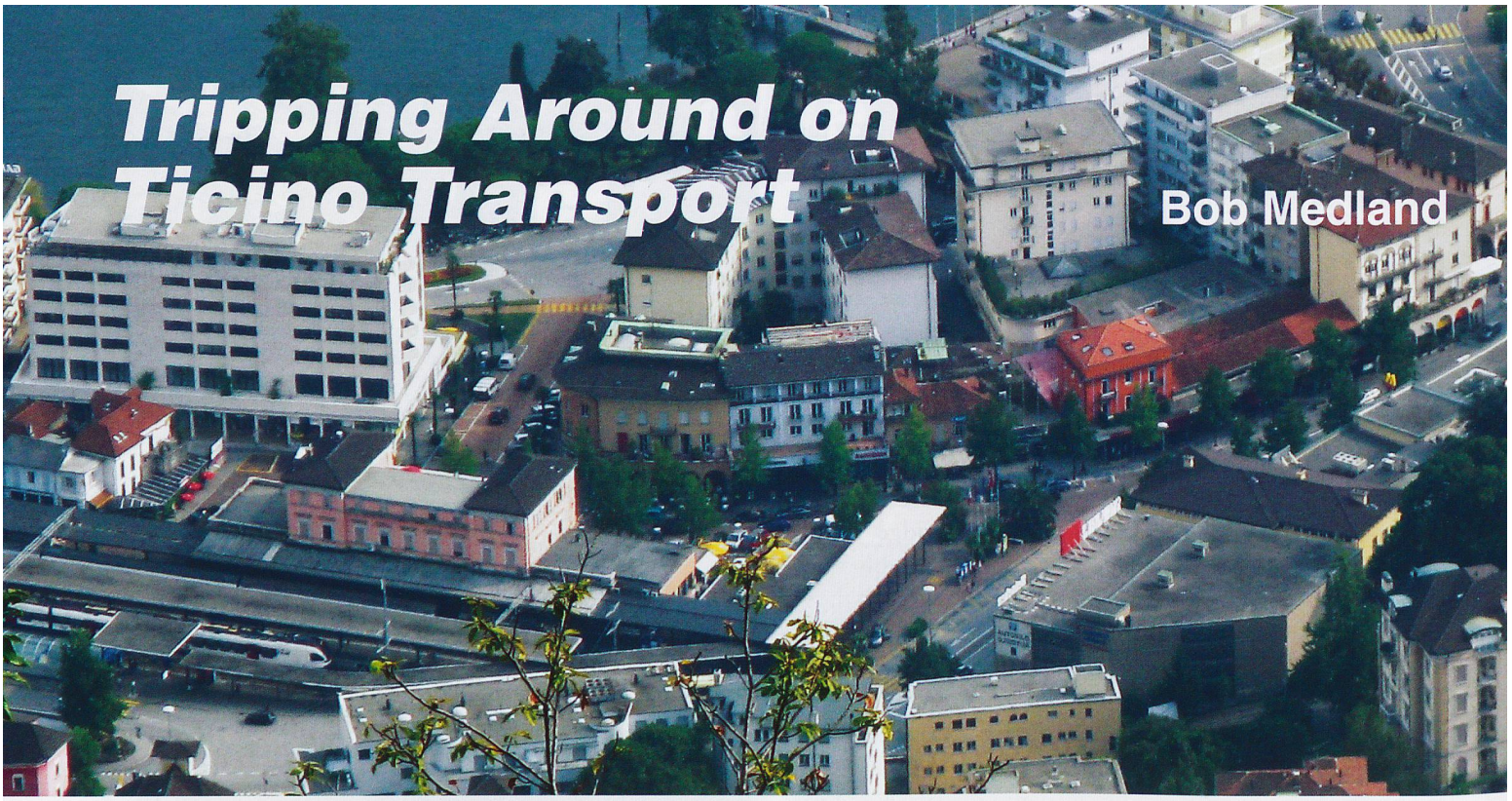
Tripping Around on Ticino Transport

Bob Medland



ABOVE: Looking down on Locarno station from Monte Brè Sopra.
LEFT: The Locarno-Orselino funicular entrance.
BELOW: Locarno station with a TILO unit and a shunter.

In *'Swiss Express - 130'* (June 2017) I described our trip to the remote Val Bavona. The base for this trip off-the-Swiss-beaten-track was busy Locarno on Lago Maggiore – a completely different environment. In addition to exploring the more rural areas of the Ticino we spent some time enjoying Locarno-et-environs where the Madonna del Sasso sanctuary church at Orselina above the town, and Locarno's Monte Bré (not to be confused with the one above Lugano) are a 'must' to visit. The first stage of upward transport is by the FLMS funicular, whose entrance is located in a very matter-of-fact manner in between the shops in the Viale Francesco Balli, just along from the FFS/SBB station. The cars climb the 173m to Orselina on a 30% gradient and date from 1958, making them nicely antiquated compared with so much of Swiss rail transport. The next stage of the climb is a very modern 'glass-cabin' cable car that lifts its passengers almost 1000m to Cardada on Monte Bré from where 360° views are impressive, taking in Lago Maggiore and Locarno, which looked like a toy town, far below. For the return trip we chose Shanks's Pony. Initially down a series of zig-zag paths through the trees the track then led us down one set of stone steps after another – some 4,000 steps my knees told me afterwards.

The next day it was time to move on to our main destination: the village of Gandria, beside Lake Lugano. On arrival at Locarno station we were greeted with the somewhat incongruous contrast of Swiss trains old and new – a tiny, utilitarian shunter alongside the sleek, new TILO unit. The latter swept us up to Bellinzona where we changed onto an unremarkable Regional train to Lugano station from where, despite suitcases, we walked down to the quayside. There were apparently only two ways of reaching Gandria: either on the once-daily, crowded PostAuto *'Palm Express'* that goes through Italy to St Moritz (which seemed impossible to book) - or by the lake transport. No contest. We soon found ourselves sitting on the open deck of the wonderful *'mv Ceresio'*, built in 1931 and the second-oldest ship in the fleet of Società Navigazione del Lago di Lugano (SNL). Carrying the vernacular name for the lake and with a crew of just two, she has an overall length of 32m and carries up to 240 passengers. Far from being just for tourism, the Lago Lugano fleet provides a vital transport facility between Lugano and the land-locked villages along the steeply-sloping edges of the lake. Under an earlier name the SNL once owned the two 850mm gauge railway lines that ran between Menaggio (on Lago Como) and Porlezza (at the eastern end of Lago Lugano) and Ponte Tresa Lombardo (at the western extremity of Lago Lugano) and Luino (on Lago Maggiore). Both lines were opened in 1873, and together with the shipping service linking the two along Lago Lugano, were intended to be a form of an 'Italian Route' across the Swiss Ticino. However the collapse of tourist trade at the outbreak of war in 1914 forced the company to suspend operations and eventually pull out of ownership. The Menaggio-Porlezza line closed in 1939 whilst the western link survived to 1950. In addition to its shipping services nowadays the SNL operates many

bus services in the area, including a minibus to/from Gandria – but how to use it is a bit of a local secret that I'm not about to divulge!

An excellent, alternative form of transport between Lugano and Gandria is again self-propelled – along well-maintained footpaths that wind through olive groves planted originally by the Romans on the slopes above the lake. There is a series of excellent wayside information boards about their history. Above Gandria rises another peak, confusingly also called Monte Bré – Lugano's one. Upward access is by the Funicolare Monte Brè: opened in stages between 1908 and 1912 it comprises two discrete sections: the first is only 196m long, from Cassarate (a Lugano suburb) up to Suvigliana, where you disembark and cross the road to the lower station of the longer, upper section. This is a long, windy route of 1,403 metres with intermediate stops serving villages at Albonago, Aldesago and Brè Villaggio. Again, the best way down is, in my humble opinion, on foot. On a long holiday with heavy suitcases it was helpful that our hotel in Gandria had its own luggage-only funicular up to the road, then on our return to Lugano the use of Switzerland's busiest funicular from the city to the FFS/SBB station was planned. As readers know from the March *Swiss Express* this had been shut for total refurbishment only re-opening just before last Christmas. Having reached the station our return to Genève airport was via the well-known Centovalli line from Locarno to Domodossola, so the first part of the trip involved retracing our route to Locarno. As a former railway property manager I was fairly amazed by the absence of protective fences between the line and the steep-sided lineside vineyards: but this is Ticino (and Italy) not Tonbridge Wells! Someone described Ticino to me as being "where Swiss efficiency blends with Italian chaos". I can't say if that's true but over the border at Domodossola station the contrast of beaten-up Italian trains covered with graffiti, and Swiss cargo trains in immaculate livery, spoke volumes.

1. Departure from Lugano for Gandria on board the '*Ceresio*'.
2. The '*MV Ceresio*'.
3. At Gandria – the direction sign to the jetty!
4. A Hotel luggage funicular at Gandria.
5. The Lugano town funicular before rebuilding.
6. Preserved car No 4 at St Maria Maggiore on the Centovalli.
7. Domodossola station at it's weed infested best!