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RAILWAY WALKS - No 4

John Jesson

FAIDO TO GIORNICO

This walk is between 12 and 13 km long, but I spent two days on it, investigating various possibilities for photo viewpoints. The hourly buses which have replaced the local train service make it very easy to reach locations between stations, but also make it easy to miss out on some unexpected views.

Setting off from the station at Faido, the road runs through the town, while the railway loops behind it to the north-east. Despite spending two days covering the route, I still have to check out the paths nearer the railway. Just beyond the town, the railway crosses over the road and the two run roughly parallel for the next kilometre or so, with a couple of good views of the railway from the road or the farm tracks. The line then crosses the road again and runs through the village of Chiggiogna. There are some opportunities here, mostly in the afternoon when the sun has moved round.

After Chiggiogna the valley closes in, with railway and road running close together and the autobahn just across the river. Photo opportunities are again mostly in the afternoon. I walked north to south, so was at this section in the morning. Perhaps next time I will walk in the other direction! There is a track running parallel to the autobahn for a short distance. As can be imagined, this is a good opportunity for stepping out and getting past this stretch as quickly as possible. Opposite Lavorgo, the track twists away from the autobahn and crosses the water pipes leading to the reservoir. A very steep funicular keeps the pipes company, but it does not look as though it has been used for a very long time. Nearby is the village of Nico, with a bridge across the river. It is possible to continue on either side of the river, but the old road is more pleasant than (again) hugging the autobahn.

Now, the valley becomes very narrow as it approaches the Biaschina. Railway and road are so close together, with the railway somewhat higher than the road, that it is not possible to get any decent shots from the road, but another bridge (Ponte di Sasso) leads back across the river to a track which runs beneath the autobahn. From this track, it is possible to get some photographs of the trains, but it is not a pleasant place to linger. Fortunately, the trains are so frequent that not much time is needed to get several shots "in the bag".

A little further on, the autobahn crosses the river and disappears into a tunnel, leaving the path to continue alongside the river, according to the 1:25000 Carta Nazionale I was using. In fact, the path peters out after a short distance and, as its location is perched on the very steep rock faces bordering the river, and I am no mountaineer, I opted for discretion and retraced my steps to the Ponte di Sasso and the Cantonal road. On this considerably safer alternative, it is no problem to walk through the gorge, but there is little opportunity to photograph any trains on the way as the road is the only way through that is not in tunnel. Once past the tunnels, though, there are several viewpoints, as you are then at the middle level of the well-known Biaschina spirals. It is worth noting that there is a bus stop here, between the two hairpin bends that the road makes to lose height.

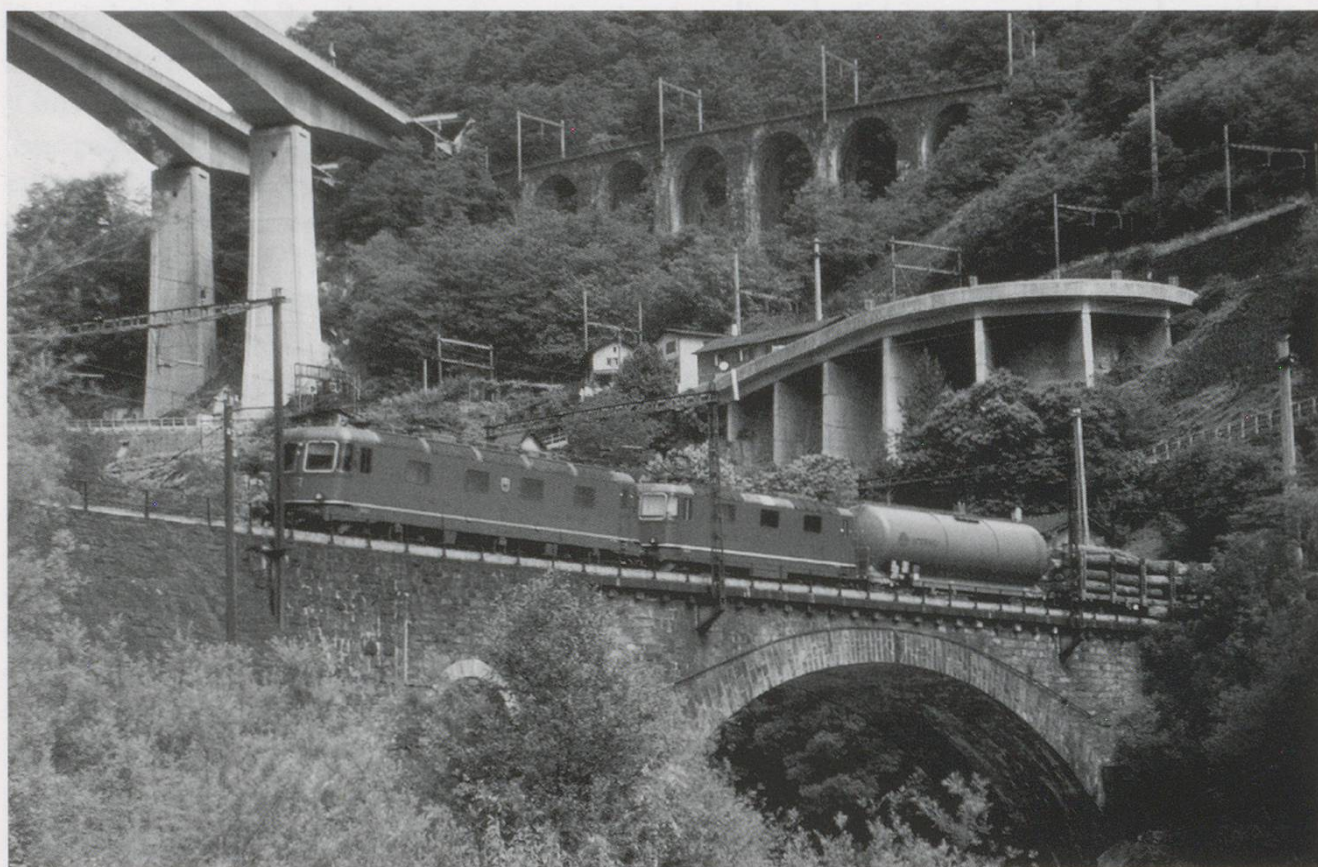
Probably the most photogenic railway features around here are the Pianotondo viaduct on the upper level and the bridge across the Ticino river on the lowest level. To get a decent view of either a little more walking is required. Follow the Cantonal road for about a kilometre, then double back onto a road which drops down nearer the river, crosses it, then leads back towards the Biaschina on the

west side of the river. This road leads to some fields, crossing under the railway to get there. Before then there is easy access to the river bank, from which there is a good view of both features, one above the other. A telephoto lens is recommended, with which it is possible to get good shots of trains on the upper level. The middle level is somewhat obscured, but the river bridge is right in front of you. (see below)

I spent some time here. The location is beautiful, with the river bubbling past, the

complete with an ornamental pond, although I can find no reference to any station at this location. These days, it seems to be used as a store for the maintenance gangs and the pond is rather neglected. Nevertheless, the trains run past and photographs are possible. (see picture right)

A little further on, a mysterious path similarly leads up to the railway. This time, there is no building at the top, and the path stops dead. At one time, it looks like there was a foot crossing here, but no longer. A gate is



Three levels of railway, the Cantonal road and, above everything, the Autobahn. On the lowest level of the railway, an Re 10/10 combo heads a southbound freight. 19/06/99

Photo: John Jesson

autobahn far enough away for its noise not to be obtrusive, and trains every few minutes. After this, almost anything is an anti-climax, but there are still some odd locations to be found. The road back to the river bridge continues as a track on the west side of the river all the way to Giornico and, after a short distance, there is a track running steeply uphill towards the railway. This leads to a building which looks as though it was once a station,

secured to prevent access to the railway, and this gate looks as though it is very old, as the gate posts are made of very lightweight section flat-bottom rail. With one or two more photographs taken, the next stop is Giornico itself. The track becomes a road as it nears Giornico, and comes out right by the old station. The station building appears to be privately used but the platforms, needless to say, are rather neglected.



Although the Re6/6's are supposed to now be freight only they were still working many of the passenger trains over the Gotthard this summer. One example heads past the engineering gang store near Biaschina on a northbound semi-fast working. 19/06/99

Photo: John Jesson

At the south end of the station is a road bridge. Cross this bridge and follow the road uphill to the church and ruined castle of Santa Maria di Castello. The old castle is not fenced in, and can be freely visited. From this vantage point on a rocky prominence on the west side of the valley there are good views of the railway with the two well-known churches of Giornico in the background. The railway curves almost 90° to cross the river, then curves again to resume its course towards Bodio. With a telephoto lens, photographs are possible of trains both crossing the bridge, and hugging the eastern side of the valley.

Giornico itself is a delight. The more modern parts are pleasant enough, but the older parts are well worth a close look. Also worth a careful look are the vineyards just to the south of the town as, tucked away in a sheltered spot, is the body of an old beer van which was once in use by "Löwenbräu Zürich". Although the chassis is long gone, the body seems to be in an excellent state of

repair. For anyone who has the recently-published book about older Swiss freight vehicles, this relic is illustrated on page 59. The town offers several opportunities for some refreshment before catching a bus to either Biasca or Faido, and a train back to base.

This walk is on roads, tracks or good paths all the way, and the close proximity of the Cantonal road means that a bus is never far away in case of need. Although there are plenty of views of the railway, many others are obscured by the thick foliage. In particular, when walking south from the Biaschina hairpins, there is a magnificent close-up view of the lower railway bridge, except that there is a considerable quantity of greenery in the way. Undoubtedly, some fine shots of the Biaschina could be taken from the autobahn, but the authorities would probably have something to say about that. Still, part of the fun is finding the shots that are possible, and this section of the Gotthard south ramp provides a lot of this kind of fun.