

# Beyond the Simplon Tunnel : Iselle di Trasquera to Domodossola

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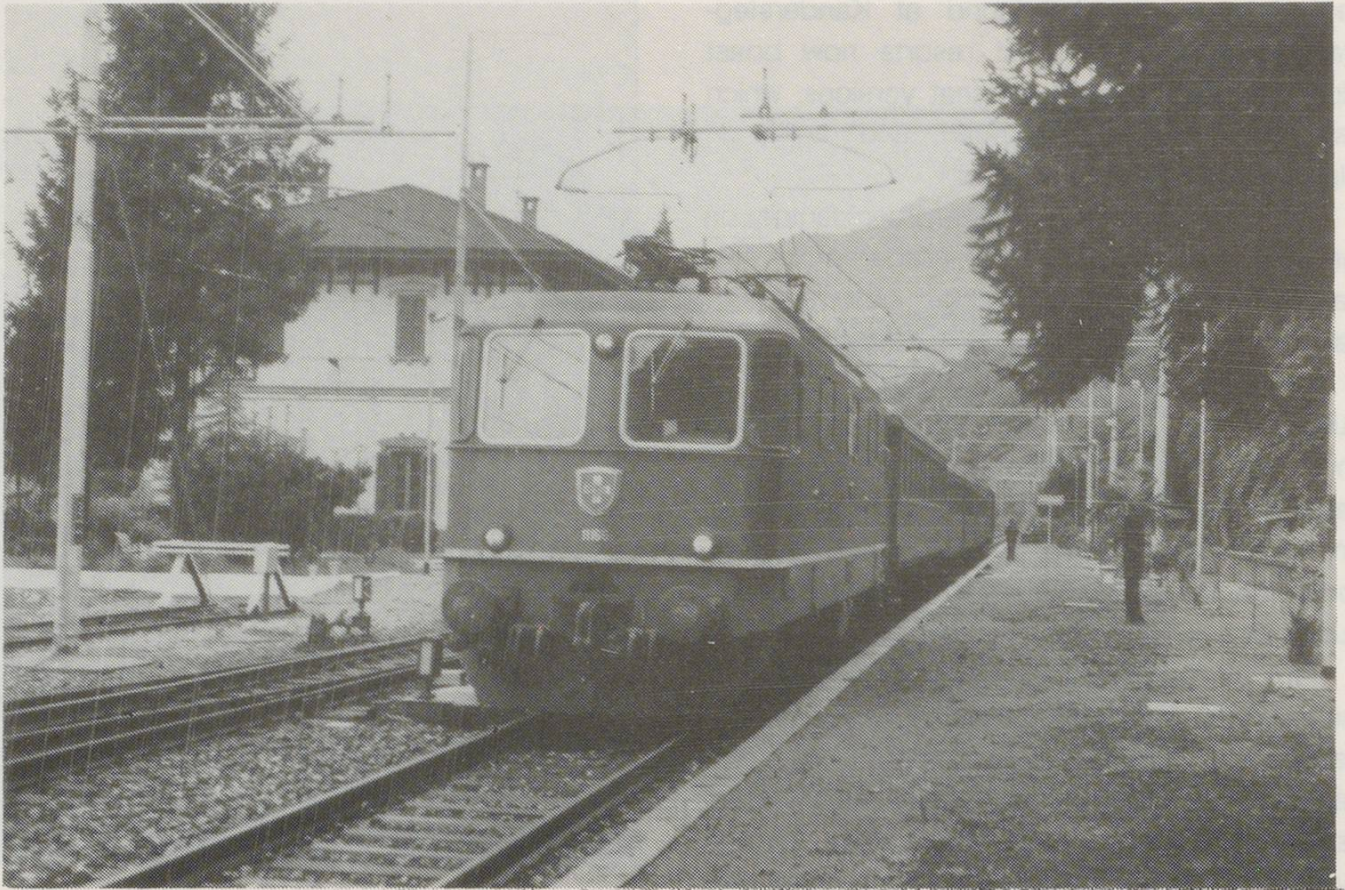
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SBB Re4/4" No.11166 at Preglia with northbound local; 7 September 1982.

*Photo Giles Della Gana*

Beyond the Simplon Tunnel

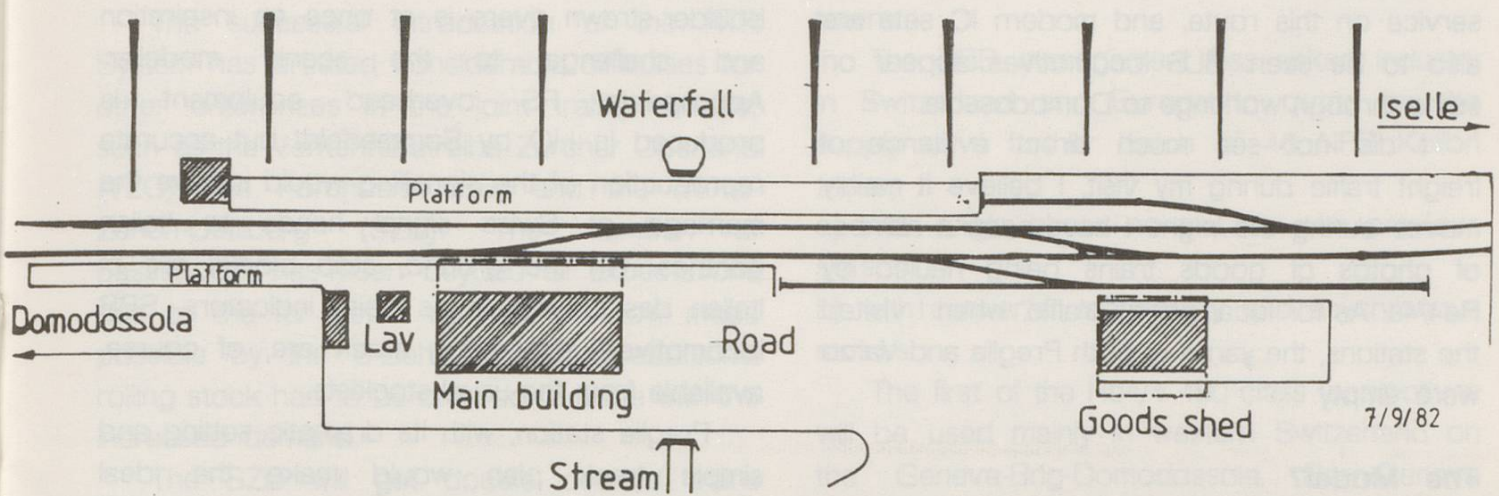
## Iselle di Trasquera to Domodossola

Giles Della Gana describes a section of the FS which is well known to many members since it is covered by the Swiss Pass and is part of a dramatic route between East and south Switzerland. The article is based on observations made in 1982.

**Trains** from Switzerland emerge from the 19.803 km long Simplon I tunnel at Iselle di Trasquera, altitude 628 m asl. At one time the station here was both the international border post and the change-over point from the then Swiss 3-phase ac system used in the tunnel to FS steam traction. This was from 1906 until electrification at 15000 V ac through to Domodossola on 15 May 1930. The large station buildings from those days still remain, with facilities for loading and unloading car ferry trains a more recent addition. The line from here

down to Domodossola was double tracked from 1 November 1922, following the opening of the second bore of the Simplon tunnel on 16 October of that year.

On leaving Iselle the railway enters the 1701.37 m Trasquera tunnel and, on emerging, follows the river Diveria. The Varzo spiral tunnel is now encountered, at 2967.99 m the longest yet least well known of the great spiral tunnels. We now drop down into Varzo station on a tight curve, this is a surprisingly large affair, complete with passing loop. The line now continues down



### Preglia Station

Not to Scale

the desolate, narrow Diverdo valley towards Preglia, passing through a number of galleries built to fend off the avalanches that are prevalent in this area. The river Diveria is crossed above Preglia station, a charming and well cared for spot, complete with palm trees, waterfall and a shrine on the northbound platform. A sketch plan of this station is included with this article.

The rail minded passenger should have noted the Italian features of the railway by now. The catenary, although supplying 15000 V ac at 16 2/3 Hz, is of FS design. Tunnel walls, of which there are many, sport the white diagonal lines that indicate the nearest refuge. Of necessity, signalling follows Swiss practice.

The line continues to fall towards the broad valley of the river Ossola, which gives its name to the well known interchange station; Domodossola meaning "church (or great house) of the Ossola valley". It is here, some 20 km from and 358m below Iselle that the railway's frontier is reached. If the train is a through service the SBB locomotive will come off and be replaced by a FS one for the journey onward to Milan. Passengers for the Tessin will find the blue-and-white metre gauge train of the Centovalli line waiting below the FS platforms to take them onto Locarno and so back to Switzerland.

### The Trains(1982)

All regular traffic appeared to be loco hauled, at least, I did not see any railcars during my visit, although I used a number of local trains. Loco hauled means just that, as the push-pull mode of operation so common elsewhere did not appear to be used. Through, ie international traffic came via Geneva or Vallorbe, the two routes uniting at Lausanne. Trains coming from Switzerland often had coaches from the BLS route added to their formations at Brig.

During 1982 international services comprised the following trains:

|                               |                 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Lernano Express               | Geneva-Milan    |
| Simplon Express               | Paris-Belgrade  |
| The Parthenon                 | Paris-Brindisi  |
| Lombardie Express             | Paris-Venice    |
| Venice-Simplon Orient Express |                 |
|                               | Boulogne-Venice |

and via BLS

|                 |                       |
|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Riviera Express | Amsterdam-Ventimiglia |
|-----------------|-----------------------|

The only one of these trains I was able to use, back in 1980, was the Simplon Express, which seemed to include a fair number of Yugoslav (JZ) coaches.

SBB locomotive types noted on the line during my 1982 visit were Re4/4", Ae6/6 and Re6/6. As will be seen from the summary of

trains in Table 1, there were no inhibitions concerning the use of large locomotives on local services. The SBB Re4/4" has come into service on this route, and modern IC sets are also to be seen. BLS locomotives appear on some through workings to Domodossola.

I did not see much direct evidence of freight traffic during my visit, I believe it mainly moves during the night. I have seen a number of photos of goods trains being hauled by Re4/4s. As for local goods traffic, when I visited the stations, the yards at both Preglia and Varzo were empty.

### The Model?

With its mixture of Italian and Swiss equipment, the Iselle-Domodossola line smacks a little of those "Grand Duchy somewhere in

Central Europe" type model railways. The route, clinging to mountainsides and dodging in and out of tunnels and galleries as it follows the boulder-strewn rivers is at once an inspiration and challenge to the scenic modeller. Appropriate FS overhead equipment is produced in HO by Sommerfeldt but accurate reproduction of the signalling would involve the marriage of Swiss signal heads to Italian gantries. On the ground, stop blocks are of Italian design with Swiss point indicators. SBB locomotives and rolling stock are, of course, available from the usual stockists.

Preglia station, with its dramatic setting and simple track plan would make the ideal centrepiece for a "watching the trains go by" type of layout, if combined with a bank of hidden sidings on which typical trains on the route were assembled

**Table 1 Typical trains on the Iselle-Domodossola route**

Train No.321  
Geneva-Milan-Venice  
Date 7 September 1982  
SBB Re6/6 11647 *Bex* (Green)  
51 85 21-70 029-5 SBB  
51 85 21-70 219-2 SBB  
51 85 19-70 032-3 SBB  
51 85 92-70 004-2 SBB  
51 85 19-70-016-6 SBB  
51 85 19-70 025-7 SBB  
51 85 22-70 025-2 SBB  
51 85 21-70 043-6 SBB  
51 85 21-70 029-3 SBB  
51 85 21-70 099-7 SBB

Train No.4290  
Domodossola-Brig  
Date 7 September 1982  
SBB Re4/4" 11166 (Green)  
51 85 20-43 056-3 SBB  
51 85 20-39 125-3 SBB  
51 85 39-33 551-5 SBB  
50 85 92-33 074-2 SBB

*All SBB coaches were in all green livery.*

Train No.422 Lemano  
Milan-Geneva  
Date 7 September 1982  
SBB Re4/4" 11323 (Green)  
61 83 21-90 016-3 FS @  
61 83 21-90 063-0 FS @  
61 83 21-90 048-1 FS@  
61 83 18-90 904-0 FS #  
61 83 18-90 953-7 FS #  
61 83 95-90 902-0 FS #  
@ EF Orange  
# Red/Cream

Train No. 4926  
Domodossola-Brig  
Date 7 September 1991  
SBB Ae6/6 11480 *Montreux* (Green)  
50 85 00-33 539-5 SBB  
50 85 29-33 193-8 SBB  
50 85 29-33 272-0 SBB  
50 85 38-33 063-2 SBB  
50 85 92-33 104-7 SBB

*The above set of coaches (but less postal van 50 85 00-33 539-5) was noted forming Train No. 4922 Domodossola-Iselle, hauled by loco 11647.*