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# Rack to the Edge

David climbs a mountain and almost leaves Switzerland



Having an interest in wildlife as well as railways I was tempted to visit the only rack mountain line in Ticino. I have a book that lists Monte Generoso as a good place to see typical birds of the Alps such as golden eagle, wallcreeper, rock bunting and rock thrush but with a warning to avoid fine days at weekends when crowds flock to the summit. I therefore chose a fine sunny weekday to make this trip.

On 9<sup>th</sup> June 2005 I travelled south from Erstfeld on the 07.25 which allowed me to take a short break at Bellinzona and also pay a short visit to Chiasso, shorter than planned as arrival was 7 minutes late. I just had a brief view of locos as diverse as 474010, 840003, 189989 & Ae4/7 10997 at the depot, 753704, an exile from the Czech Republic, 182596/602 working for TXLogistics and an Italian class 656 plastered in graffiti being shunted by SBB

dual voltage Ee3/3 934559.

I returned north to Capolago-Riva S.Vitale in time to join the 11.15 Monte Generoso train from outside the main line station. This particular train starts from Capolago Lago, about 3 minutes walk away where it connects with a boat from Lugano. I was unable to purchase a ticket (this line is not included on the Swiss Pass but there is a 9 franc reduction for "seniors") in time to ride over this short stretch but due to the absence of signs showing directions to the landing stage my passion for studying maps and timetables before venturing anywhere new paid dividends as I was able to direct a Swiss gentleman from Thun.

Only a handful of people had joined at the landing stage but the 2 car unit, Bhe4/8 No.12 (one of four two car units) propelling a trolley for cycles and parcels, was quite full by



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Bhe4/8 No 12 at Capolago Riva-S. Vitale

**THIS PAGE**

**UPPER:** Looking back across Lago di Lugano at the start of the climb.

**LOWER:** Passengers alighting at Bella Vista, 6.1km into the climb at 1222m.

All photos are by David Adams  
09.06.05

the time it departed 4 minutes behind schedule. The railway is fitted with Abt rack through-out, even on the level section at the start. Almost immediately the line starts climbing, first over the Gotthard main line and a main road and then under a motorway on the hillside. Much of the 8.7km (9km from Capolago Lago) climb is through woods but the first view, not too far into the climb, is through a clearing looking to the South West across the Lombardy plain. The total climb is 1,308 metres but following a "U" turn the first intermediate station at San Nicolao is reached after climbing 433 metres. Here we passed

unit No.11 on its descent. Maximum speed is 14kph and 5kph is required over all point-work. The steepest gradient of 1 in  $4\frac{1}{2}$  comes on the continuing climb to Bella Vista, the next station where several people alighted. A 1 in 5 gradient is sufficient to take the line from there to Generoso Vetta where we arrived in 38 minutes, just 2 minutes late. On this latter section a pair of Chamois watched







Generoso Vetta station (1592m) with units 12 & 13 waiting to return to Capolago. The view is to the south/south west across the Lombardy plain in Italy.

the train pass and then suddenly ran off into the woodland. The final approach to Vetta is more open, giving a hint of the spectacle at the summit.

On alighting from the train there are viewing terraces on the level with a hotel and restaurant. I took the ultimate challenge for a "senior" and decided to climb to the summit where the views are slightly better. This is literally the edge of Switzerland as the border with Italy is actually at the summit. It was a further 109 metres in height mostly at 1 in 2-4 so I was very conscious to take deep breaths to combat the altitude and my low fitness level. I made it in 30 minutes with frequent short stops on the climb, even those younger and fitter appeared to take little less. It was well worth the effort for the panorama to the north is absolutely breathtaking.

Immediately below is Maroggia-Melano, one stop to the north of Capolago and the causeway at Melide leads the eye round to Lugano. Further distant there is a small sec-

tion of Lago Maggiore in view near Locarno and to the east the northern part of Lago di Como can be seen. On a clear day the Alpine chain can be seen from the Mont Blanc area to the west right round to the summits in Graubünden and probably into Austria in the east, a remarkable distance of well over 200 miles and all from just 1701 metres (5,580 feet) above sea level, just over a mile high. On this particular day the western end of the chain could only partially be seen due to distant cloud cover which also obliterated the Matterhorn. But from that point eastwards both the Jungfrau and the Mönch (at least 60 miles distant) could be clearly seen and the pointed summit of the Finsteraarhorn was easily identified. Lesser known peaks (by me) to the east were also clearly visible. The view south across the Lombardy plain in northern Italy was much hazier, air pollution I suspect, and the view did not quite extend to Milan which can also be seen in clearer conditions. For the more energetic there are pathways in the summit





area, some of which look quite challenging, involving steep ascents and descents in relatively short distances, and offering several walking itineraries.

As for the wildlife, well that was a disappointment probably due to the considerable number of visitors that had arrived on following trains. During the hour I spent at the summit taking in the wonderful view and scanning the limestone outcrops for birds I had the briefest glimpse of what was probably a rock bunting and, apart from a passing hooded crow, the only other sighting was a black redstart which paused in front of me just as I was about to descend. Golden eagles and wallcreepers evade me yet again.

The walk down to Vetta station took just 10 minutes and the journey down to Capolago was less crowded. I headed north to Lugano on one of the several class 560 units that have been transferred from Winterthur as a result of the increase in frequency since "Tilo" took responsibility for Ticino/Lombardy local services. I had 20 minutes to inspect the FLP station at Lugano where trains to Ponte Tresa start before continuing to Bellinzona behind 460021. From there I took a 560 unit to Cadenazzo and then another along the Luino

The view from Monte Generoso summit (1701m) looking north. The Melide causeway can be seen bottom left and following the lake to the right leads the eye to Lugano. Lago Maggiore can just be glimpsed in the distance on the left and the Jungfrau, Mönch and Finsterahorn peaks are some 60 miles distant in the centre.

branch to San Nazzaro. I headed for the landing stage (unsigned) and asked directions in a local shop. Fortunately I was heading in the right direction (south) and had only another 100 metres to go. From there I took the motor vessel "Delfino" for the 15 minute crossing to Locarno on a very choppy lake. While waiting 484008 (dual voltage Swiss/Italian) passed by on a northbound intermodal, one of 8 such locos seen in the Bellinzona area that day.

After walking to the church of San Antonio at the back of the town to see Pallid Swifts at their most northerly breeding sight I joined the 17.39 hauled by 11214 back north. The stop at Biasca allowed inspection of the stored Ae6/6's by the waterfall which included 11401, 11412, 11418, 11481 and two others. And so back to Erstfeld for another excellent evening meal at the Frohsinn and the unexpected sighting of the day, a stoat (*marder* to the locals) running about the goods yard opposite the hotel.