

## **RAILWAY HERITAGE IN ITALY A CASE STUDY: THE “ORCIA VALLEY RAILWAY”**

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In Italy the exploitation of the railway heritage is a very recent development, due to the fact that only the remains of the Roman and the Medieval Age were considered as History.

In Italy historical trains have developed independent of the railway preservation movement which was establishing all over the world, leaving from Great Britain in 1951. We can say that it happened in spite of that movement, very little known.

What the 1980s and the 1990s have seen accomplished is the demand for steam trains by groups who would charter them for special occasions, at times on the secondary railways, at other times on the national network and usually for travelling into the countryside.

This lack of knowledge of what was happening abroad led to the demolition of many historical trains, in particular after the asbestos scandal during the mid 1990s, when it became known that this mineral fibre provoked cancer to workers of the factories where it was manufactured; given that this material was used as an insulator, a great deal of the old rolling stock was demolished.

Above all, however, in Italy there has been no culture of industrial archaeology until recent years, because of the fact that the Roman and the Medieval age were considered the most important in Italian history. Consequently, the vintage train was not seen as a relic of history, but rather as an old scrap, just as the old railways that were being closed to the traffic have been considered ruins.

Rather than *preserved railways*, in Italy there are some *tourist railways*, on which historical trains run. A few of these lines belong to a local railway company: the main example are the Sardinian Railways (*Ferrovie della Sardegna*), where the “Small Green Train of Sardinia” (*Trenino Verde della Sardegna*) runs usually during the summer, operated by normal rolling stock and for charter trains by old carriages and steam locomotives on lines closed to the ordinary traffic.

The State Railways (*Ferrovie dello Stato*) run some vintage trains all over the peninsula on lines opened to normal traffic, both charter trains and trains realized every year in some occasions, for example village festivals. For such purpose, they have just restored some epoch trains: steam engines with vintage wagons, electric or diesel locomotives and railcars.

Moreover the State Railways operate two tourist lines, closed to normal traffic, where a tourist service run for some holidays with the support of two voluntary associations. These associations are joined in the Italian Tourist Railways Association (*Ferrovie Turistiche Italiane*). The two lines are called: The Railway of Basso Sebino (*Ferrovía del Basso Sebino*) located near Milan in the northern part of Italy, 10 km long, in exercise since 1994; and the Orcia Valley Railway (*Ferrovía Val d'Orcia*), located in Tuscany, 52 km long, in exercise since 1996.

This paper analyses the Orcia Valley Railway and the attempt to develop historical trains for tourists purposes.

## **Foreword**

In Italy the exploitation of the railway heritage is a very recent development, due to the fact that only the remains of the Roman and the Medieval Age were considered as History. This article addresses the results and problems of the Italian tourist railways and vintage trains, assuming as case study the Orcia Valley Railway placed in Tuscany, the region of Florence. The Orcia Valley Railway is one of the few examples of preserved railways in Italy, where old diesel rail cars and steam engines with vintage carriages run in a very beautiful landscape. Just the link between railway history and environment is the basis of the "Nature Train" service.

In the territory around the railway the Natural Artistic and Cultural Park of the Orcia Valley was founded, in order to exploit the resources of a land, where the dynamics of day to day life are still inspired by and integrated with traditions of the past.

## **Italian tourist trains**

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relic of history, but rather as an old scrap, just as the old railways that were being closed to the traffic have been considered ruins.<sup>1</sup>

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Other local companies sometimes run historical trains on rail tracks open to traffic, such as the Domodossola-Locarno railway near the Swiss border, the SATTI company near Turin, the Genua-Casella company, the Railways of the Po Valley (*Ferrovie Padane*) near Ferrara, the LFI around Arezzo, the Railways of Calabria (*Ferrovie della Calabria*) on a narrow gauge line in the highlands of Sila.

The State Railways (*Ferrovie dello Stato*) run some vintage trains all over the peninsula on lines open to normal traffic, both charter trains and trains realized every year in some occasions, for example village festivals.<sup>3</sup> For such purpose, they have restored some epoch trains: steam engines with vintage wagons, electric or diesel locomotives and railcars.<sup>4</sup>

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This paper relates to the latter, the Orcia Valley Railway in Tuscany, where the “Nature Train” (*Treno Natura*) runs. The line was opened in 1872 and closed to the normal traffic in 1994.

## **The Nature Train project**

The starting point to realize a tourist train service on the Siena-Asciano-Monte Antico-Buonconvento-Siena circuit dates back to 1990, when on this route a rail ring of particular interest was discovered, in a period when an environmental sensitivity began to spread. The tracks run right into the woods and along river embankments into areas

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<sup>1</sup> Maggi (1997), pp. 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> Internet: <http://www.railtouritalia.it>.

<sup>3</sup> Internet: <http://www.ferrovieturistiche.it>.

<sup>4</sup> Baldi (2001).

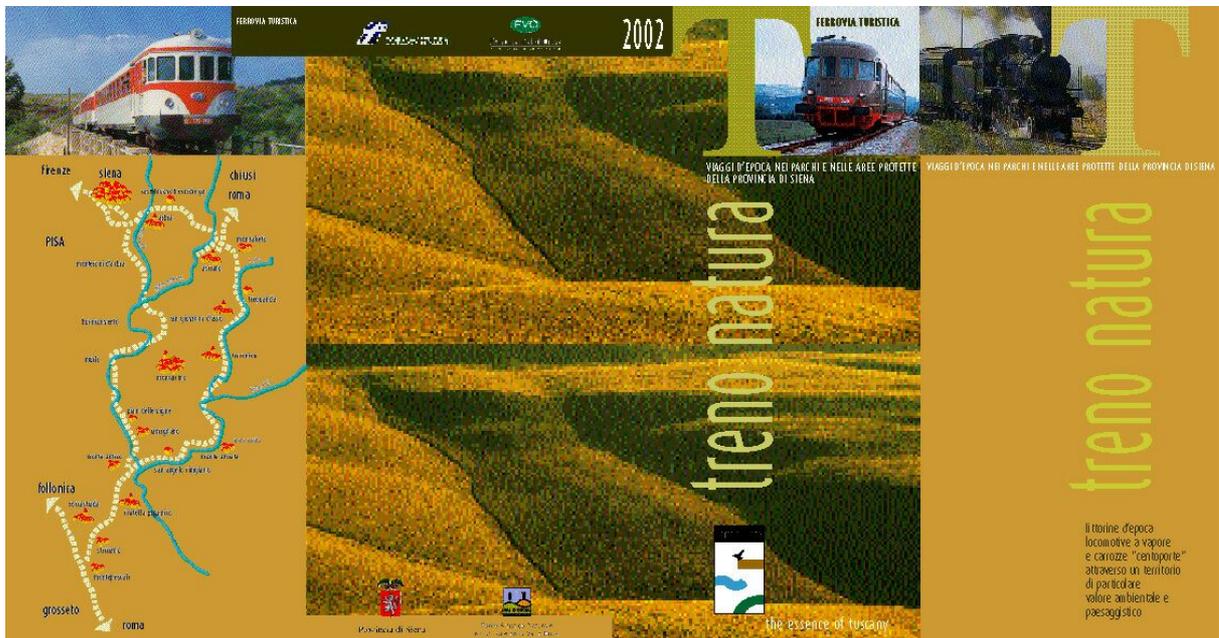
<sup>5</sup> Ferrovie del Basso Sebino (1996).

that cannot be reached with roads in the territory of the Natural Artistic and Cultural Park of the Orcia Valley. The Siena Provincial Council resolved to finance what appeared as an innovative enterprise in the Italian panorama, by implementing a new way of combined travelling: train and trekking, the so-called “Nature Train” (*Treno Natura*).

Unfortunately, soon after the opening ceremony in September 1991, the project was abandoned, until the most interesting section of the rail ring, between Asciano and Monte Antico, was closed to the ordinary rail service in September 1994. The protests that were aroused by the closure of the railway moved the Siena Provincial Council and the State Railways to re-launch the Nature Train project, which originally was a charter train, managed by a travel agency.

The system did not meet the coveted success and therefore in 1996 began its activity the voluntary association called Orcia Valley Railway (*Ferrovia Val d’Orcia*). By means of an agreement with the State Railways, in Siena was put together a group of volunteers, made of railwaymen in early retirement owing to the State Railways restructuring process. Since 1996 the Nature Train was characterized by the implementation of a regular service in 30-35 non-working days during the months of May, June, September and October on the Asciano-Monte Antico route, called Orcia Valley Railway.<sup>6</sup>

### Brochure 2002 of the Nature Train



<sup>6</sup> Maggi (2000), pp. 9-10.



despite the lines and the trains are still the property of the State Railways, the voluntary association is in fact the sole referring body of the Nature Train business.

The number of passengers has been greatly increased between 1996 and 2005: from 2.000 to almost 9.000, in 30-35 days of effectuation.

### Passengers in the Nature Train 1996-2005

year	Number of passengers
1996	2.046
1997	2.354
1998	2.387
1999	3.041
2000	2.943
2001	5.240
2002	9.357
2003	7.510
2004	8.925
2005	8.520

The passengers of the Nature Train are interested in the sight of the landscape, in the meals in the countryside, in the historical travel at “slow speed” by old rail-cars or steam locomotives and vintage wagons. The travel is imagined as realized in the 1950s, the last period of the ancient Italy, before the spread of motor vehicles and the diffusion of well-being; some uniforms relating to that age are worn by railwaymen and volunteers.

The initiative has an educational aim, too: that of getting schoolchildren used to respecting the environment as well as getting them to utilize public means of transport; for many of them it is the first time ever on a train.

The local section of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI) has given great support to plan and set up some footpaths around the railway, thus connecting all the stations in order to combine train travelling with trekking: there are several routes of different lengths to suit the different age-groups and also cyclists. Thanks to the CAI members, a specific project for schoolchildren has been developed, which encountered a great success.

Beyond the fundamental role of volunteering, the agreement between Siena’s Provincial Council and the State Railways is significant because it shows a real interest for the historical train on the part of the regional authorities.

Since 2001 the Provincial Council of Siena has begun to hand both the financing of the Nature Train and the management of the project to the Natural Artistic and Cultural Park of the Orcia Valley, instituted in 1996. It is a private body that operates in the territory where the railway runs, created by all the municipalities of the area. The Orcia Valley Railway thus has become one of the park’s greater attractions.

Speaking again of the link with the territory, it must be pointed out that a great deal of

emphasis has been put on the promotion of the historical trains as part of the tourist promotion of the area. Whilst the voluntary association has purchased two horse-hauled carriages to start a historical service by combining a “train and animal traction” ride.

**Images of the steam and diesel trains on the Orcia Valley Railway**





### The horse-hauled carriage



### Towards a preserved railway

To accomplish a real tourist and preserved railway some structural investments around the line are now needed to make it a welcoming centre for visitors. A complete plan should be studied to highlight the cultural value of the railway and the train as monuments of industrial archaeology, thus developing the area as a working museum. This development can be achieved by recovering the old rolling stock, and by restoring the stations without leaving out the main focus of the initiative: nature and the beautiful environment.

In short, until now it has been important to prove to the provincial, the regional and the national authorities, as well as to the railway administrators, the worth of the tourist railway, and to stimulate a favourable feeling about it, because there has been no interest for the recovery of the railways in Italy; now the time is ripe to extend the project, also because of the great appreciation received by the public.

Since 1997 useful footpath routes joining the stations has been set up; the priority must now be given to the restoration of the stations to be equipped with tables and benches as relaxing areas, as well as boards with information and sketches about the peculiarities of the area and the feasible routes for excursions in the surrounding landscape. It would also be advisable to open at least one restaurant-bar along the route.

Some old diesel rail-cars are already available, but rolling stock must be increased in number. A sufficient collection of vintage carriages must be found in the right color of their service period. It is also necessary to find more steam engines which are obviously more appreciated by passengers.

At this point we have to tackle a fundamental issue for the future of the tourist railways in Italy: the growth of the voluntary railway service. At the moment, volunteers are devoted only to selling tickets on the train. It is thought that the saving of costs achieved thanks to the support of volunteers in railway jobs, may enable the tourist railway to be operated almost without public contribution, at least after the first period of investments.

The experience of the Nature Train represents a first attempt to recover the railway heritage. Together with the vintage train, now we need to save other mechanisms of the railway world, some of which remained untouched in the Asciano-Monte Antico line, because of its shutting down realized before the modernization of the equipments. Indeed, in the other railways, the old mechanisms were completely replaced in a few years, and none of them has been preserved by the State Railways, a firm rich of memory but not attached to its preservation.

A lot of railway equipments, which represented the result of important studies and researches realized by the best engineers of the XIXth and the first years of the XXth century, were replaced by the introduction of new electronic technologies for the movement of trains, except for the Orcia Valley Railway. On this line there are still old signals with semaphorical wings, which were adopted at the beginning of the XXth century and were used until the 1980s. Two of these signals are placed near the station

of Monte Amiata.

Other remains of industrial archaeology are the points hand-operated, existing at Monte Amiata and Monte Antico. These points were turned by hand, after the insertion of a key; indeed there was a system of keys, numbered and linked one to the other, in order to maintain a safe movement of the trains.

Other remains to be considered in an inventory of industrial archaeology are the depots for locomotives at Asciano and Torrenieri, the latter realized in 1865, when the first stretch of the line was opened.

### **Asciano and Torrenieri depots for locomotives**





The station of Torrenieri has a great architectural value and it demonstrates that in the mid XIXth century was very strong the will to obtain a pleasant look for the railway buildings, which arrived as a breaking off in the stationary life of the countryside lasting from the medieval times. Now there is a project by a private enterprise to restructure this station, which will be transformed in a virtual and actual museum, in order to realize a centre for the exposition of wine and other products of the territory, linking history, landscape and cooking.

#### **Torrenieri station (1865)**



Also the goods stations, where all the products of the Orcia Valley Railway and the Mount Amiata countries passed for almost a century are important for the industrial archaeology of the line. Their spaciousness demonstrates a remarkable traffic of commodities.

We can then remember the columns for the water supply of steam machines, the revolving platform to turn the locomotives at Asciano, still hand-operated as in 1865 when it was built. Other remains are the tunnels, some of which have the structure of the XIXth century. Some tunnels, however, were rebuilt, above all in the entrances, because of the destructions of the second world war. For the war damages, the original structure of the main bridges was also modified, such as the viaduct of Montalceto and the bridge on the river Ombrone near Monte Antico. This last bridge was rebuilt in concrete instead of bricks, while in the viaduct of Montalceto the design was completely changed, with three large archs in concrete, instead of the nine small archs of the former bridge made of bricks.

Finally, the numerous trackmen's houses still existing along all the line, once seat of work and residence for the railwaymen and their families, and now abandoned. Together with the station buildings they could be restructured and used for restaurants, hotels and hostels.

All the railway remains just listed are works of the past which have to be considered by the schoolchildren and the tourists who visit the Orcia Valley territory, because they had a great importance in the contemporary history of this beautiful land.

### **The Orcia Valley Park**

Placed in the southern part of Tuscany, the Natural Artistic and Cultural Park of the Orcia Valley (municipalities of Montalcino, San Quirico d'Orcia, Castiglione d'Orcia, Pienza, Radicofani) is a land far away from the main roads and traffic jams, where an old bond has existed between people, their traditional crafts and the land, enabling them to maintain a dignified relationship between man and the environment which is now often hard to find. Since 2005 the Orcia Valley territory was declared World Heritage, by the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).

In the Orcia Valley the perennial erosive action of the atmospheric agents has created the startling and extraordinary slopes and ridges known as "calanchi", and the strange clay knolls known as "biancane", which make such an unmistakable impact on the landscape of the Orcia Valley that several Communes have issued a preservation ordinance on them.

In the past this lunar landscape put wonder or even fear into the hearts of such famous writers as Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne as they travelled across the Orcia Valley on their Grand Tour around Europe. Today it has become famous thanks to several painters and thanks to the international cinema and television. But the Orcia Valley is not only the softly rolling clay hills of the Sienese crete and "calanchi". From

Bagno Vignoni a beautiful rocky gorge of woods and Mediterranean bush stretches towards the sea, after touching upon the immense vineyards of Montalcino, where the highly esteemed *Brunello* wine is produced.

A close link exists between the Orcia Valley and the Mount Amiata. The peak, 1734 metres high, is covered by woods and grasslands, with numerous and important botanical and faunistic characteristics. The small towns of Amiata are situated on hilltops, between 600 and 800 metres above the sea level, near water sources. The historical centres are today perfectly looked after and valued, in a territory where history and art are linked by nature.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the Communes around the railway, the landscape varies, and the tourist can find many villages, castles, parish churches and abbeys, works of art and traditions. A visitor to this territory needs to understand this context, if he wishes to understand and appreciate the strong ties between agriculture and the environment. The result of this understanding is a high quality production, not only of wine, cheese and olive oil but also honey, meat, typical salami, cereals, handicrafts. All of which represent the bond which exists between the environment and man's work.

### **By the windows of the Nature Train**

Most of the beautiful landscape just described can be seen by the windows of the Nature Train, travelling from Asciano to Monte Antico along the Orcia Valley Railway.

At about two kilometres from Asciano station, the railway cuts through wide valleys, over high viaducts and through long tunnels. The countryside to the right of the line is marvellous and the eye reaches as far as the interesting formations of rocks that surround the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore.

Trequanda station marks the beginning of the Asso Valley. The train runs between low hills with the famous colours of the Sienese Crete and reaches the town of San Giovanni d'Asso, dominated by its medieval castle.

The line, running through some of the most enchanting countryside of the region, passes through the monumental station of Torrenieri-Montalcino, built in 1865, and enters a richly cultivated area with the River Asso nearby.

Far away, to right of the train, can be seen the town of Montalcino, surrounded by green hills covered with the vineyards that produce the famous wine *Brunello*.

In the fields, the livestock grazes peacefully, undisturbed by the sound of the train. Near the line, one can often see some examples of wildlife such as pheasants, hares, foxes, wild-boars and deer. After the tunnel of Casalta, the line enters the Orcia Valley and reaches the small village of Monte Amiata Scalo. A little further on can be seen in the

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<sup>8</sup> Internet: <http://www.parcodellavaldorcia.com>.

distance the town of Castelnuovo dell'Abate, built near the old Abbey of Sant'Antimo, while to the left, Mount Amiata dominates the scene with the hazy shapes of villages covering its slopes. The valley continues to widen and the railway runs past the vineyards and orchards of Villa Banfi after which it reaches the station of Sant'Angelo Scalo. The Orcia Valley continues to run towards the Maremma and the train, passing under the castle of Poggio alle Mura, home of the glass museum, crosses the River Ombrone and reaches the station of Monte Antico.

The long Orcia river, that began many kilometres back, finishes after a further 300 metres and its smooth waters flow into the River Ombrone that then runs slowly into the Mediterranean sea.

The Orcia Valley Railway joins the other one that come from Siena via Buonconvento and continues until it meets the Tyrrhenian Railway under the medieval village of Montepescali, near the town of Grosseto.

### ***Conclusions***

On the wave of the positive example that was set by the Orcia Valley Railway in Tuscany, a number of railway lines to be recovered for tourist purposes have been singled out from the north to the south of Italy. Sometimes the plans envisage the tracks' reconstruction. But no railway runs at the moment, except for the cited Sardinian Railways, Railways of Calabria and for a small tract of a Swiss railway near the border, the Mendrisio-Valmorea line.

Therefore, the tourist railways are finally gaining momentum in Italy, too; even if there has been a great delay compared to other European countries, a strong impulse in this direction is therefore expected in the next few years. A "rightful" circle has been started and the reform of the local public transport should bring further attention to leisure travel, with the devolution of funds to the local authorities.

However there are still many explicit or undeclared resistances: from some Transport chairmen who seem unwilling to understand these projects, to the town and provincial authorities who consider the train beyond the interests of the local government units, because, so far, it has been managed and subsidised by the State.

For the State Railways, and for other railway companies, it would be advantageous to act purposefully towards local government units, which always lack experienced personnel in railways, but it would be also advantageous to avoid considering the running of such trains as a mere matter of carriage charter. What an old train can do to promote the service in the secondary railways is amazing; a tourist railway would have an even greater impact. The great success of public allows all the Italian volunteers and train lovers hope in a good future for preserved railways and historical trains.

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