

# Italian Railway Heritage— The Tuscan *Nature Train*

Stefano Maggi

In Italy, preservation of railway heritage is a very recent development because only Roman and medieval remains were considered 'history.' This article describes the *Ferrovia Val'd Orcia* (Val d'Orcia Railway) in Tuscany as a case study of the problems facing Italian tourist railways and vintage trains. The Val d'Orcia Railway where old diesel railcars run and steam engines haul vintage carriages through beautiful scenery is one of the few examples of preserved railways in Italy.

## Summary of Italian Railways until Today

A national Italian railway network was only formed in the 1860s due to the late national unification in 1861, and delayed economic development. However, some of the more developed regions like Piedmont, Lombardy and Tuscany already had small networks totalling about 2200 km. After the Italian State was established, the new government viewed railways as essential links in connecting the different economies and societies of the new nation.

Before 1865, different sections of railways were managed differently due to different pre-unification histories. The State railways, especially those in Piedmont, existed together with lines owned by private companies and each received very different concessions. Sometimes the infrastructure belonged to the State while the operations were entrusted to private societies, which received a public grant for each kilometer of line managed or sometimes a guaranteed revenue for their shares.

In 1865, the government decided that railway construction and operation should be entrusted to five private companies. However, the system almost immediately collapsed and the State had to spend huge sums of money in 'ransom' and to balance company budgets. This bad experience resulted in a long public debate about a new system of organizing railways.

Finally, in 1885, the government entrusted operations to three big companies while retaining ownership of lines, permanent installations, while the rolling stock was sold to the companies.

The Italian peninsula was divided longitudinally to encourage north-south traffic and overcome the considerable differences between these two regions of Italy. The eastern network was entrusted to the *Società Adriatica*, which managed 4300 km of lines, while the western network was entrusted to the *Società per le Strade Ferrate del Mediterraneo*, which managed 4100 km of lines. The third company, *Sicula*, managed 1100 km of lines in the Italian islands. Each company was granted a 60-year operations lease, subdivided into three periods of 20 years each<sup>1</sup>.

This system collapsed within a few years too and after repeated financial bailouts, the State nationalized the entire network of 13,000 km in April 1905—relatively early compared to railway nationalizations in other European countries<sup>2</sup>. Initially, an autonomous State railway administration called *Ferrovie dello Stato* with a board of directors that had the freedom to take managerial decisions was established, but it soon came under tight political control.

Railways have been very important in Italian history for political, economic and social reasons; railway works consumed the largest part of the public purse and led to the creation of fundamental political alliances, while railway workers formed the largest labour bloc nationwide.

When Italian industry began to boom around the turn of the century, railway workers formed the core of a growing left-wing socialist movement. Railwaymen seemed to embody the social modernization following in the wake of new lines linking isolated rural towns and regions with national life in the cities.

The first national strike in Italy was by

railwaymen in 1905 and the more conservative classes were afraid of their rebellious attitude. Strikes became a 'normal' feature of Italian railways in following years, paralyzing the nation's life more and more.

The railways remained under direct State management until 18 April 1985 when privatization started with the establishment of the autonomous *Ente Ferrovie dello Stato* (Italian State Railways), 80 years after the 1905 nationalization. The goals of the new autonomous railway company were economy and efficiency and the Minister of Transport and Navigation, Claudio Signorile, only retained supervisory powers<sup>3</sup>.

The establishment of Italian State Railways was the first big reform in the Italian administration and the reform started a series of changes that led to the privatization of other government sectors. The financial crisis in late 1991 forced the government to adopt decisive measures to privatize big public enterprises and Italian State Railways was transformed in 1992 into Italian Railways (FS), a company with the entire capital held by the State. In the past few months, FS has been split into four divisions: passengers, freight, regional transport and infrastructure.

## Railway Heritage and Historical Trains in Italy

In Italy, development of tourist historical trains was independent of the then little-known railway preservation movement that started in the UK in 1951.

Development of Italian tourist trains started in the 1980s and 1990s when groups of steam enthusiasts would charter steam trains for special outings to the countryside on secondary lines or on the national network.

Due to this tourism origin and lack of knowledge about the preservation movement, many historical trains went to

the breaker's yard, especially in the mid-1990s when the cancer-inducing properties of asbestos—which was used extensively in old trains—became known. The problem was further exacerbated because many Italians only considered Roman and medieval relics as historically important and so there was no culture of industrial archaeology until recent years. Consequently, vintage trains were treated as old scrap<sup>4</sup>.

Tourist railways typically belong to local railway companies. One principal example is the *Trenino Verde della Sardegna* (Small Green Train of Sardinia) run by *Ferrovie della Sardegna* (Sardinian Railways). It operates mostly during summer with normal rolling stock, but special charters with old carriages hauled by a steam locomotive are run on lines closed to normal traffic<sup>5</sup>.

Other local companies such as the Domodossola–Locarno Railways (SSIF)

near the Swiss border, the Turin Local Railways (SATTI), the Genoa–Casella Railway (FGC), Padane Railways (FP) near Ferrara, Arezzo Railways (LFI), and Calabria Railways (FC) on a narrow-gauge line in the Sila highlands, sometimes run historical trains.

FS run a few charter and special vintage trains on normal lines<sup>6</sup> and they have just restored some steam engines, vintage wagons, electric and diesel locomotives, and railcars for such purposes<sup>7</sup>.

Moreover, FS has been operating the 10-km *Ferrovia del Basso Sebino* (Basso Sebino Railway) located near Milan<sup>8</sup> since 1994, and the 52-km Val d'Orcia Railway in Tuscany since 1995, in conjunction with two voluntary associations comprising the *Ferrovie Turistiche Italiane* (Italian Tourist Railways Association)<sup>9</sup>. The rest of this article describes the *Treno Natura* (Nature Train) running on the Val d'Orcia Railway.

## The Val d'Orcia Railway: A Century of History

The decision to build a railway line between Siena and Grosseto was made in 1859 just before the unification of Italy in 1861. At that time, Grosseto was a village of some 4000 people that became almost deserted in summer, when the public offices, etc., were transferred to the hills of Scansano to escape the ravages of endemic malaria. There were no railway connections in the Maremma region and the nearest lines stopped at Livorno and Siena.

The route of the line was difficult and the planners tried to avoid a line based only on Maremma traffic which was an unknown factor. As a result, the line was routed to service the mountainous Amiata area, a population centre in the Maremma region, and to run through the Asso and Orcia valleys.



*Nature Train* running past flowering trackside *Opuntia* cactus

(Author)

### Map of Circular Route of Val d'Orcia Railway



The first section from Asciano to Torrenieri was opened in May 1865 and the next stretch as far as Monte Amiata Station was opened in August 1871. The entire line entered full service on 27 May 1872 with a grand official ceremony attended by the Minister of Public Works and the highest municipal authorities<sup>10</sup>.

The railway played an important role in connecting the Maremma region with the rest of Tuscany. It was also useful for freight transport. For example, cinnabar ore from the nearby mercury mines was carried in special carts to Monte Amiata Station, where it was loaded on the trains. Restaurants inside almost every railway station became social meeting places for the local residents.

The Siena–Buonconvento–Monte Antico Line was completed much later in 1927 partly on the roadbed of the old tracks at the Murlo Mine, which were constructed in 1877 to carry ore to Monte Antico Station.

This railway was managed by a private company until 1956 when it joined Italian State Railways, which closed the Siena–Buonconvento section 10 years later. The line was completely reopened for passenger service in 1980.

### The Nature Train

The starting point to operating a tourist train over the Siena–Asciano–Monte Antico–Buonconvento–Siena circuit dates back to 1990 during a period of increased environmental sensitivity. The railway tracks run through woods and along river banks in areas of the Artistic Natural and Cultural Park of the Val d'Orcia that cannot be reached by road. Running a so-called *Nature Train* combining train travel and trekking seemed like a good way of seeing Italian nature and the Siena Provincial Council resolved to help finance the idea. The original *Nature Train* was a charter managed by a travel agency but the

business was abandoned soon after it opened in September 1991. Then the most interesting section between Asciano and Monte Antico was closed to ordinary rail service in September 1994. Protests caused by the line closure motivated the Siena Provincial Council and FS to relaunch the *Nature Train* project as a charter managed by a travel agency.

However, the train operation was not a financial success and in 1996, FS agreed to hand over operations to the Val d'Orcia Railway, a voluntary association of retired railway workers and other interested people who now run regular *Nature Train* services on 15 to 20 holidays during May, June, September and October over the Asciano–Monte Antico route<sup>11</sup>.

Most *Nature Train* services use 50-year-old diesel railcars but sometimes old steam engines haul vintage wagons dating back to the 1910s and 1920s. The timetables have been arranged to connect with ordinary train services at Siena, Asciano and Monte Antico, so the train is easy to reach from Florence, Rome, and Grosseto. Special rover tickets permit travel for a whole day on trains comprising the circuit with no restrictions on intermediate stops.

Tickets are sold on the trains by volunteer staff who explain the scenery to passengers through a speaker system; the volunteers also design advertising and publicity materials; staff a bookings and information bureau; organize village festivals; and sell books, travel guides, postcards, etc.

The *Nature Train* covers more than 50% of its costs from the farebox, which is better than the 35% average for branch lines, and the Siena Provincial Council subsidizes the remaining 50%. Instead of just running some trains with no specific connection to infrastructure, the project's philosophy is to invigorate a proper tourist and preserved railway<sup>12</sup>.

Although the *Nature Train* is subsidized by the Siena Provincial Council and despite the fact that the lines and the trains are owned by FS, the voluntary association is actually the sole manager of the business.

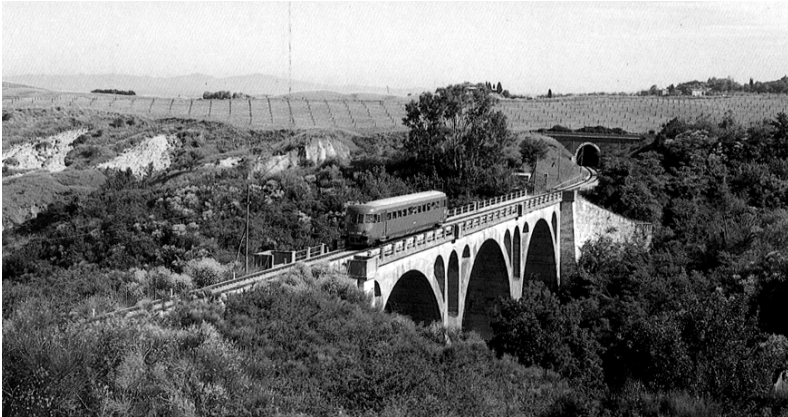
The number of annual passengers between 1996 and 2001 has increased greatly from 4700 to about 7000, most of whom are interested in the landscape, meals in the countryside, and historical travel at slow speeds in old railcars and vintage wagons hauled by steam



Steam hauled *Nature Train* at Torrenieri Station

(Author)





*Nature Train* diesel railcar crossing Montalceto Viaduct

(Author)



Torrenieri Station will be renovated as an entrance to the Artistic Natural and Cultural Park of the Val d'Orcia.

(Author)

locomotives. Some see the travel as being like that in the 1950s before widespread motorization—an impression that is enhanced by the period uniforms worn by the railwaymen and volunteers.

The project has an educational aim as well—familiarizing schoolchildren with the environment and with using public transport, which is a first for many of them. The local section of the Italian Alpine Club (CAI) has given great support to the plan and has marked out some footpaths along the line in order to combine train travel with trekking. There are several routes to suit the different age groups and cyclists. A successful project for schoolchildren has also been developed thanks to the CAI members.

Beyond the fundamental role of volunteering, the agreement between the Siena Provincial Council and FS is significant because it demonstrates a real interest in the historical train on the part of the regional authorities, despite overall Italian backwardness concerning heritage preservation. Following Siena's example, in 2000 and 2001, other local authorities in Tuscany have promoted historical trains, but regular services like the *Nature Train* are not presently planned.

As a demonstration of how the Val d'Orcia Railway Association managed to persuade the institutions of the importance of linking rails and landscape, from 2001 the Siena Provincial Council has started handing both the financing of the *Nature Train* and the management of the project

over to the Artistic Natural and Cultural Park of the Val d'Orcia, a private body created by all the municipalities of the area that operates in the territory of the railway. As a result, the Val d'Orcia Railway has become one of the park's greatest attractions.

The intense summer heat of July saw decreased tourism to the region so *Nature Train* runs were stopped in mid-June and resumed in mid-September. But due to the train's increasing popularity, summer services have been increased by two extra runs in July since 2001.

Support for closer links between tourist railways and scenic tourism has emerged at the national level, too. In 1999, the Minister for the Environment, Edo Ronchi, allocated funds to rebuild some stations and to open entrances to the Park from the stations.

The Val d'Orcia Railway Association itself has decided to restore the historic Torrenieri Montalcino Station, which dates back to 1865 and was built by the most talented local architects of the time. The station was the terminal for the line to Grosseto between the opening of the first section in 1865 and the completion in 1872; many buildings like the engine depot are still in good basic shape but require some renovation.

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### **'Building' a Preserved Railway**

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To create a real tourist and preserved

railway—assuming that the present railway is just a start—some investments are needed. A comprehensive plan to develop the area as a working museum should be studied. This can be achieved by restoring the old rolling stock and stations without losing the main focus on nature and the environment. In short, the great popularity of the railway so far can be used to extend the project in the longer term into the realm of heritage preservation and industrial archaeology. Footpaths between stations have been marked out since 1997 and the priority now is to equip the stations with tables and benches, information boards on the locality and feasible excursions routes, etc.

Until the 1980s, when the line was still in active operation, some stations had passengers refreshment facilities. Perhaps at least one restaurant or bar should be reopened along the route. Moreover, some station buildings could be transformed in hotels and hostels. A railway restaurant in the mid-20th century style might be popular with visitors, promote the railway and bring revenue too. It could offer chances for organizing festivals, wedding receptions, etc., thus linking the train with regional foods, which are very important in Italy and in Tuscany in particular!

Although seven out of 25 *Nature Train* services each year are steam hauled, increasing the number of services and charters will require more rolling stock



Turntable at Asciano Station on Val d'Orcia Railway

(Author)



Water column for steam locomotives on Val d'Orcia Railway

(Author)

beyond the available diesel railcars. A sufficient collection of vintage carriages in the right livery is needed along with more steam engines.

Another fundamental point to tackle is the personal growth of the volunteers. At the moment, volunteers are mainly devoted to selling tickets onboard but they should be able to take on the role of guard, stationmaster, fireman, engine driver, etc. Volunteers could also handle the rolling-stock restoration and preservation.

Perhaps the cost savings of using volunteers could enable the tourist railway to operate on a day-to-day basis without public money.

### Industrial Archaeology on Val d'Orcia Railway

In Italy, old railway rolling stock, stations, bridges, tunnels, etc., have only recently begun to be seen as having artistic and archaeological merit. Conversely, the economic value of vintage trains is coming to be understood so the problem is how to preserve old railway heritage while keeping a tourist dimension. The experience of the *Nature Train* is a first step on this journey.

Some of the best technological achievements of the best railway

engineers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been replaced by new technologies but many of these old technologies can still be seen on the Val d'Orcia Railway. For example, the line still has two mechanical signals near Monte Amiata Station. Other examples are the hand-operated points at Asciano and Monte Amiata that rely on a system of numbered interlocks to keep the trains moving safely.

The stations still have the railway telephones imported from the USA in the 1920s to replace the railway telegraph.

Other parts of the historic inventory are the 1865 locomotive depots at Asciano and Torrenieri. Torrenieri Station itself is of great architectural value and demonstrates the strong 19th-century determination to build attractive railway stations symbolizing the interface between the rural idyll and the new modernity.

Also the size of the goods yard that handled all the products of the Val d'Orcia and the Mount Amiata regions for more than a century is an important industrial heritage demonstrating the remarkable goods traffic.

Other important artifacts include water columns, hand-operated 1865 turntable, and tunnels, some of which were extensively rebuilt at the portals after WWII.

The viaduct at Montalceto and the bridge over the River Ombrone near Monte Antico were redesigned and rebuilt in concrete instead of brick after the war too.

Finally, there are the numerous abandoned wayside cottages that housed the track workers and their families.

### The Landscape—Railway Resource

Val d'Orcia in southern Tuscany is far from main roads and traffic jams. There is an old bond between the people and the land, enabling them to maintain a dignified relationship with the environment that is now hard to find.

The landscape is characterized by startling and extraordinary *calanchi* slopes and ridges. The strange *biancane* clay knolls have such an unmistakable impact that several have preservation orders on them.

In the past, this lunar landscape put wonder and even fear into the hearts of writers like Dickens, Hawthorne and De Sade on their Grand Tour. Today, the area is famous thanks to painters like Dario Neri, Aleardo Paolucci and Aleandro Luzi and cinema and TV.

But the Val d'Orcia is not only the softly rolling clay hills, there are beautiful *Ilex* groves, springs and woodlands. The small

