



WE TRAVEL ON Gotthard Panorama Express

Lucerne to Lugano

Tara Wells is on track for some of the best views in Switzerland



From top:
The Gotthard
Panorama
Express passes
the village of
Wassen; the
first leg across
Lake Lucerne.

It's not the quickest way to get from Switzerland's mountain-enveloped Lucerne to its Med-like southern city of Lugano. For that, an Intercity zooms at 200km/h through 17 minutes of Gotthard Base Tunnel blackness. But the scenic route is worth lingering over. The slower *Gotthard Panorama Express* is a breath of Swiss mountain air from a cushy train seat.

THE ROUTE

To get through the alpine barrier between German-language northern and Italian-speaking southern Switzerland, there's still a tunnel. It takes eight minutes at slow speed to travel 15km of the Gotthard Tunnel (not to be confused with the Base Tunnel).

This train trip always begins by boat. A bunting-decorated steamship with Belle Époque interiors usually putters passengers across Lake Lucerne's three-hour length. A technical issue means that it's replaced today by a multi-decked motor vessel. Mount Pilatus drops away. Medieval villages dot the shore. The meadow where the first iteration of the Swiss Confederation was signed in 1291 swings into view.

Hop off the boat and on to the *Gotthard Panorama Express* train at Flüelen. Then take a run-up to the late 19th-century alpine tunnel. For that, the train spirals around Wassen village three times; its Baroque church shrinking further into the gorge the higher the train climbs.

Pop out the tunnel's far side into the Swiss canton of Ticino. Lugano embraces a lake but the area feels as distinct as another country. Not Italian exactly – too clean and orderly for that – but shopfronts hang garlands of salumi instead of wurst.

AMENITIES

The way to distinguish between postcard-worthy scenery and AI fakery is to see it for real. But social media pics posted from the train's complimentary (sometimes patchy) wi-fi may yet be accused of the latter (Switzerland really is blemish-free). All that's between you and the view is high-ceilinged windows. There's also a carriage with openable windows, especially for photos. Occasional audio commentary pipes through the carriage and the Gotthard Tunnel's go-slow becomes an audiovisual show about its construction. One multilingual tour guide per carriage is on hand to answer questions.

Plenty of travellers means plenty of bags. Check bags (free) into the luggage compartment between Lucerne and Lugano (or vice versa). If alighting elsewhere, use in-carriage luggage racks.

DINING

It's lunchtime on the boat between Lucerne and Flüelen, whichever direction you're travelling. Its restaurant serves a selection of regional meals as the captain makes his rounds saying *grüezi* (hello). While there's no need to reserve a seat for boat travel, it's best to book a table if dining. On the train, passengers are served at their (most definitely reserved) seats. Try the cold meat platter, washed down with grappa or a hot choccie. Drinks and dining are at an additional cost.

ACCESSIBILITY

While many Swiss trains have wide-opening doors at platform level, the *Gotthard Panorama Express* is not one of them. There are two stairs up to a relatively

narrow door. Passengers with reduced mobility can request assistance in advance via a dedicated helpline. For help navigating train stations, the SBB Inclusive app is gold for vision- or hearing-impaired travellers.

SUSTAINABILITY

As of this year, the *Gotthard Panorama Express* – like every train operated by SBB (Swiss Federal Railway) – is run on 100 per cent renewable electricity. It's part of SBB's contribution towards the Paris Agreement, aiming to cut 90 per cent of its emissions by 2040.

Boats are notoriously harder to go green. One steamboat operated by the Lake Lucerne Navigation Company, provider of the Lucerne to Flüelen section, will switch to a solar power-derived synthetic fuel in 2027. It's unclear whether it will run the Panorama Express route. Replacing the out-of-action steamboat *Stadt Luzern* is the *MS Diamant*, powered by a hybrid diesel/electric engine, reducing emissions by 20 per cent.

ONE MORE THING

From January 2026, the *Gotthard Panorama Express* will operate daily during its annual April to October season. On Mondays before then – or if travelling during its off-season – catch the hourly *Treno Gottardo* for the same panoramic route. No reservation required.

The writer was a guest of Switzerland Tourism. First class between Lucerne and Lugano costs 164 Swiss francs (about \$310). A first-class Swiss Travel Pass starts from 389 Swiss francs (about \$735) for three days. Both have a reservation fee of 24 Swiss francs (around \$35). gothard-panorama-express.ch



Large windows are ideal for mountain gazing.


THE VERDICT
8/10

Stunning scenery is enough to stop passengers in their tracks but the *Gotthard Panorama Express* makes the trip beautiful inside and out.



Passengers are served food and drinks at their seat.