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Parenzana

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Parenzana...once

On 20 September in 1876, the eagerly awaited Istrian railway was solemnly opened. However, its main purpose was to effectively connect the military port of Pula with its interior of the torn apart Austro-Hungarian Empire (on one part extending from Lombardy to Hungary and Galicia, while on other part from the Adriatic to large Middle European rivers of Elbe, Oder, Vistula, Dniester and the Black Sea). Disappointed Istrians sulkily shook their heads since it was mainly built for the army purposes without any direct economic and commercial contribution to the "ordinary" people. This railway with its route running in the middle of the peninsula not only neglected the most densely inhabited north-western part of the peninsula but scarcely contributed to the local trade growth. Although the coastal towns, on one hand, enjoyed the advantages of economical and frequent maritime excursions, on the other hand, the communication between the cities in



11/09 12/09 13/09

21°C 18°C 21°C

16°C 14°C 14°C



hinterland was reduced to minimum. Due to a lack of methods for launching the Istrian products on the market, they unjustifiably remained in shadow for a long time. These products included wine and olive oil from fertile hills around Vižinada, Grožnjan, Motovun, together with fruit, vegetables, cattle and the well-renowned stone from Momjan, Triban, Sveti Stejpan or Višnjan. Being aware of the significance of connecting these places with Trieste and Istrian railway, in 1880 the representatives of municipalities from the Mirna Valley sent a petition to the Minister for Trade in order to thoroughly consider this issue. By carefully avoiding a direct answer to this question, Vienna organized a meeting for all municipalities interested in order to reach the final agreement. In these efforts, the count Pieter Walderstain played an important role and on this occasion elaborated the first integral and professional study on this issue. Despite all this, almost eighteen years had to pass before the government on 16 December 1898 passed a proposal in the parliament to build the Poreč-Trieste railway line. Finally, in 1900, the first public tender for construction works on the Trieste-Buje section was published in the official journal of the Austrian Railways. The next year another one was published in the Osservatore Triestino for the continuation of construction works on the Buje-Poreč section. The winner of the first public tender for the execution of works on the section between Trieste and Portorož was the Butorazz & Ziffer Company, while for the works on Portorož-Buje section the winner was Filip Zupančič Company from Ljubljana. On the second public tender the winner for the execution of works on the Buje-Vižinada section (one of the most demanding and, at the same time, the most attractive railway line sections) was the Brunetti &

Liss Company, while the works on the Vižinada-Pula section were taken over by Antonio Pellegrini & Giorgio Strohmeier Company from Vienna. Although 20 years were needed to start with the project realization, the narrow-gauge railway line (76 cm in width) was built in less than two years. The 123 km-long railway line included 9 tunnels (with an overall length of 1,530 m), 11 bridges, 6 viaducts and numerous accompanying facilities, such as railway stations, warehouses, water supply stations, banks, etc. On 1 April 1902, the first train ran from Trieste to Buje (59 km), later on, on 15 December, it managed to run also from Buje to Poreč (46 km). This railway line at first did not have any special name, but it accidentally adopted the name that appeared in February 1902 in a circular letter describing the first railway line section extending up to Buje in February, which was published in Trieste National Railways newspaper. This circular letter emphasized the fact that the railway would soon reach Poreč and so it was called the "Parenzana", which has been preserved till nowadays, yet in its Italian version of "Parenzana". At the modest speed of 20 km/h, or only 10 km/h at ascent, which was almost equal to the speed of walking, the Parenzana enabled passengers to easily get off the cars, while the youngsters sometimes even jumped off the train thus avoiding payment of tickets. By ignoring all this, it should be said that Parenzana used to ride though the fabulous landscape, luckily and to the delight of the local inhabitants, for whom Parenzana used to be very often their first train travel in their life. In its short, but meaningful life period, it experienced various problems, i.e. from passengers' dissatisfaction with the timetable - punctuality, prices, number of cars to the difficulties and dangers caused by the strong bora wind.

However, on 31 August 1935, when it went on its last ride, nobody believed that the "ferrata" stopped to operate and entered forever in the history of the local people. Having survived the First World War and the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it operated only for a short period under the Italian rule, but to tell the truth, it only vegetated on the rails for increasingly rare passengers and unimportant freight. After 33 years it ceased to operate under the pressure of increasingly strong competition: faster and cheaper road traffic. However, even its symbolical 33 year-long operation and 33 marginal Istrian cities, which Parenzana connected with the rest of Europe, were not enough to prolong its lifetime. Soon after it finished



operating, Parenzana was put up for public auction where almost everything was sold, cars and locomotives ended up on other railways in Italy; as regards its rails, a story which authenticity has never been verified tells that they were dismounted and loaded on a ship to Abyssinia, but ended up at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea for unknown reason. Luckily, the memories on the legendary railway did not sink together with that ship. The still well-preserved and proudly survived viaducts, bridges, tunnels and stations together with a large part of the trail winding along the Istrian peninsula are still strong witnesses to the small legendary railway, which along with all its disadvantages, had also a lot of advantages, for example its modest, but vital connection of various multicultural values of the territory where it used to run.

PARENZANA TODAY...

Around 70 years later, relatively little, but not enough remained of the architectural miracle of the most romantic local railway which was slowly and firmly winding for 33 years through the attractive and hilly landscape of the Istrian hinterland, cultivated by hard-working Istrian farmers with their bare hands. Its rails have almost disappeared (expect for the pair of rails still adorning a small bridge over the Bazuje stream, near the Marušići hamlet); locomotives and cars became museum samples and were sold to other railways a long time ago. Nevertheless, the Parenzana route is together with its only survived heritage, i.e. nine tunnels, six bridges, viaducts and stations, an inevitable spot on the map for everyone who wants to discover and get to know Istria. You can learn a lot about Parenzana in three museums in Izola, Koper and Livade which were dedicated to it. Nevertheless, looking for the railway can be a miraculous experience where a short walk changes into walking down the stairs of its rich history. There are many different ways to discover its secrets: either you can simply follow the signs of informative brochures designed for walkers or you can enjoy and take part in a creative, entertaining and original research tourism adventure, i.e. "Parenzana Code". This adventure includes, along with a map and compass, a special guide and cards for decoding. Finally, you can discover it simply by walking along it, going up and down the trail, through the hilly landscape, covered with vineyards, oil trees and fabulous small towns. By every step you take, you gain a new experience.



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