

Travel and Adventure: Ticino is Switzerland's La Dolce Vita

by Athena F. Lucero

TICINO, Switzerland - "We're on our way to Italy," my husband kept saying. It certainly seemed that way. After all, I bought each of us pocket-size Italian dictionaries. But our Swiss Air flight from Los Angeles to Zurich told us otherwise.

BEAUTIFUL TICINO - This is one view from the roof of a tiny church at the top of 3,000-foot Mount San Salvatore, next to Lake Lugano, Switzerland. The mountain offers spectacular 360-degree views of the lake and the surrounding mountains. The Italian border is across the bridge. CNS Photo by Athena Lucero. LAKE LUGANO - Parco Civico Villa Ciani, the city park, was once the private residence of aristocrats and is now a popular draw to the Lake Lugano waterfront. Flowerbeds are meticulously maintained to maximize colors year-round. CNS Photo by Athena Lucero. LOCARNO'S OLD TOWN - Bright multistory buildings shade the labyrinth of narrow pathways in Locarno's Old Town. Fashion boutiques, jewelers, art galleries and markets are their modern-day occupants. CNS Photo by Athena Lucero. CHESTNUT ROAST - Fall is the annual Chestnut Festival in Ascona, Switzerland. Visitors line up to purchase delicious fresh roasted chestnuts roasted by a young man. CNS Photo by Athena Lucero. It was early October when we journeyed to Ticino (pronounced te-CHEE-no), a Mediterranean paradise in Switzerland with palm trees, sparkling lakes and sunny skies practically year-round. Just north of Italy, Ticino is Switzerland's southernmost canton and all things Italian - the language, the food and its relaxed lifestyle. Combining all this with the orderliness of the Swiss was a rare chance to experience two countries in one.

True to Swiss punctuality, our plane's arrival was better than on time - it was 30 minutes early. From Zurich, we caught the train and headed south, meandering through the towering Alps.

Our ride to Ticino was unrushed with time to doze, stretch our legs and take in landscapes of Alpine villages nestled in the forested mountainside. Before we knew it, conversations of fellow passengers changed from German to Italian - a sure sign that we'd reached Ticino.

It was after sundown when we pulled into Locarno station, but the star-filled sky was enchanting. It's no wonder Swiss from the north and other Europeans gravitate to this exotic corner of Switzerland, which boasts the country's mildest climate.

Our itinerary included Locarno, Ascona, Bellinzona and Lugano - a sampling of Ticino at its best.

Locarno and Ascona, neighboring villages on the banks of Lake Maggiore, share the Alps as their backdrop. Summerlike days called for walking the tree-lined promenade and exploring ancient alleyways and churches around the Old Town. Multistory, 15th century buildings shaded the labyrinth of narrow cobblestone pathways. A mix of fashion boutiques, markets, jewelers, art galleries and upscale restaurants were the buildings' modern-day occupants, where shopkeepers greeted us with the warmest "Buon giorno!"

Ascona is one of Switzerland's most exclusive resorts, with a village ambience that is extraordinary. We sat mesmerized during a symphony concert performance inside the 16th century Church of San Francesco and absorbed ourselves in the spirit of the annual Chestnut Festival, when locals celebrate the bounty of the region's ancient forests. Chestnuts are part of the delicious, and truly Ticinese, autumn meal.

The "sapori autunnali," or tastes of autumn, included wild game (deer), wild mushrooms, the German side dish spaetzle and brussels sprouts. In Locarno, a leisurely walk through the Citta Vecchia (the Old Town) led us to the Piazza Grande, one of the largest and most famous squares in Switzerland. Each August, it turns into one of the largest outdoor cinemas, swarming with thousands of people attending its world-famous International Film Festival.

Visits to Verzasca Valley in the nearby mountains where the River Verzasca flows like liquid jade, and the lush Brissago Islands on Lake Maggiore (owned by Russian Baroness Antonietta Saint-Leger in 1885 and now Ticino's botanic park), connected us with the area's rich flora and natural beauty.

Our day trip to Bellinzona, the capital (less than 30 minutes by train), was a fascinating crash course on the history of the once-independent Republic of Ticino. Bellinzona became a medieval battle zone in 1513 when the Swiss fought for control of the Italian-speaking region discovered after the first road was built over the Gotthard Pass, the only route connecting northern and southern Europe. Ticino eventually joined the Swiss Federation in 1803, when it could no longer rule itself peacefully.

We wandered the grounds of the three great castles overlooking the city, which in 2000 was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The mood was alive at Bellinzona's centuries-old marketplace, held each Saturday in the Old Town. Our eyes feasted on colorful food stands, we sampled local salamis and cheeses that were as good as homemade, and witnessed this weekly affair as a time for friends and family to gather and socialize.

Lugano, surrounded on three sides by Italy, made our Ticino experience complete. Originally a tourist resort on Lake Ceresio (also Lake Lugano) that attracted aristocrats in the late 19th century, it is still that and more. Now an important banking and financial center, Lugano is second only to Zurich for the highest number of banks in Switzerland. We felt right at home in this metropolis with a laid-back style.

Naturally, reminders of Swiss organization prevailed with clocks ticking on just about every corner, especially along the Old Town's Via Nassa, its luxury-shopping street.

Our stay at the elegant and historic Splendide Royal hotel transported us to another time. Built in 1887 overlooking the lake, it plays a major role in Lugano's history with a legacy that began during the Belle Epoch. It remains the town's pulse of activity from hosting heads of state to exhibitions and international events.

Modern mixes well with the old in Lugano. Boats transport visitors to the historic grottos, simple taverns accessible only by boat on shaded banks of the lake where diners enjoy casual meals of local sausages, salamis, cheeses, soups and wines.

Across the lake, the ancient fishing village of Gandria hangs over the water on a steep mountainside. Streetless, stairways led us from one terraced level to the next. At Locanda Gandriese, a family owned restaurant, we lingered over a sumptuous lunch of grilled fish and a heavenly polenta made with butter and wild mushrooms, a guarded family recipe prepared by Mama herself.

Back at the lakefront, other sites are within an easy walk, including the funicular to the top of San Salvatore, a 3,000-foot peak and the symbol of Lugano. From the roof of a tiny church, dramatic 360-degree views of Lake Lugano and surrounding mountains made our trek worthwhile.

Beyond Lugano are short excursions to the wine country in Mendrisio, home of historic Valsangiacomo Winery, Ticino's first wine dealer founded in 1831 and operated today by the family's sixth generation. And for fans of author and Nobel Prize laureate Herman Hesse, there's The Herman Hesse Museum in romantic Montagnola, where he lived, painted and wrote "Siddartha" and "Steppenwolf," among other works. Opened in 1997, the museum is the first of its kind in Switzerland.

A delightful surprise was finding that our dollar went a little farther with the Swiss Franc, worth almost a quarter more.

We really did find the good life in Ticino - a stretch of the Mediterranean Riviera in the middle of Europe (and Switzerland's best-kept secret).

IF YOU GO

For complete information about traveling to and lodging in Ticino, visit www.ticino.ch, www.myswitzerland.com and www.swissairlines.com.

Suggested lodging in Ascona and Locarno, Hotel Ascovilla, 011-41-91-785-4141, www.ascovilla.ch; in Lugano Splendide Royal, 011-41-91-985-7711, www.splendide.ch.

Herman Hesse Museum, www.hessemontagnola.ch.

Historic Valsangiacomo Winery, www.valswine.ch.

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