

Ticino – Italy, Swiss Style

This most southern canton looks and feels Italian with palm trees, sparkling lakes, the culture of the evening passeggiata, excellent coffee and ice cream as well as a laid-back atmosphere. But it is very much part of Switzerland. The roads are in perfect condition, the streets are clean and the busses and trains run on time. The language is Italian but you can get around with German, French or English. Oh and of course, you pay Swiss prices with Swiss francs.



Mike, my husband and I recently spent a few days in Ticino and concentrated on the northern side of Lago Maggiore where you can find the renowned towns of Locarno, Ascona. We stayed in nearby Brissago in the Villa Cesar hotel. <http://brissago.sunstar.ch/home-en-US/>. It is very close to the lake which is good as the mountains rise up steeply from the water. There are two reasonable restaurants in Brissago, on the lake and very close to the hotel. The hotel also offers half-board. Your choice of accommodation would probably depend on whether you arrive by car or by public transport. We came by car and thus Brissago which is out of town, was a good base for us. The trains arrive in Locarno but public transport is very Swiss so busses and boats run frequently and efficiently. Therefore staying in another location is not a problem. (<http://www.ascona-locarno.com/en/Trasporti.html>)

We drove over the Simplon pass and travelled through Italy – on a long and very narrow mountain road – to Ticino via the Centovalli valley. Close to Locarno, we visited a tiny delightful village called Rasa. It is perched on a natural terrace at 900 meters and has just 14 permanent inhabitants and a small restaurant. Time has stood still; the houses are authentically preserved with their stone walls and roofs and you will find that life is far removed from the hubbub of the modern-day world. A popular train for tourists runs through the valley from Locarno to Domodossola that crosses viaducts, deep ravines and thundering waterfalls. The stop for Rasa is ‘Verdasio’ from where you take the cable car which runs every 20 minutes during the summer months. <https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-ch/centovalli-onsernone.html>

The first day of our trip we bought a day travel card for the boats and explored the Swiss side of the Lago Maggiore. Most of the lake is in Italy, only the most northerly part belongs to Switzerland and both Ascona and Locarno lie on its shores. We found the villages on the Eastern side uninteresting until we came to Magadino where we found the reserve of “Bolle Magadino” close to where the boats dock. This area protects one of the last natural deltas in Switzerland and hosts large flocks of migrating birds. It can be visited in an easy 2-hour walk with panels explaining the fauna and flora of the park.

<https://www.ticinotopen.ch/en/parks/protected-area-bolle-magadino>

Locarno is the main city on the north side of the lake and is the hub of transport in this region. It has many chic shops and, a bustling town center with the Piazza Grande - home of the famous film festival in August each year. To escape from the crowds, we took the funicular to the “Sacro Monte Madonna del Sasso”. It runs every 15 minutes, but a more pilgrim-style



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approach would be to walk up the many chapel-lined steps for 30 minutes to reach the church. From the top you see the sparkling mountain-framed lake that stretches out in front of you. Just at the top of the Funicular is a nice and very reasonably priced Ticinese restaurant with fabulous view from the terrace.

Ascona, in my view, has more atmosphere. It is the perfect lake town. Palm trees and pristine houses, painted in fresco colours line the pedestrian promenade. Just back from the promenade is the renaissance-like old town with boutiques, galleries and antique shops. It boasts many hotels and restaurants and would be an excellent base for exploring.



The next day, we walked down the Verzasca valley. The Verzasca river flows down this valley with startlingly clear water that spills over smooth boulders into luminous emerald pools. The valley is 26 km long and you can walk all or part it. We started in Laverezze, about half-way up where there is plenty of parking as it is a popular swimming spot. We took the bus to Sonogno at the top of the valley, another delightful typical Ticinese village where we bought provisions for our picnic lunch. There are few restaurants along the way but there is nothing nicer than to eat a picnic lunch by the side of the river and put your feet in the ice-cold water. There are tiny hamlets strung along the valley and the walk is mostly flat or downhill.

We drove back along the Route National from Locarno via Bellinzona which is much more interesting than the motorway. We had some amazing views of Swiss technology where the road and railway converge in and over passes and viaducts.