

BAZAAR

escape

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Hidden depths

Uncover an oasis of serenity and charm, where the Italian Lakes meet the Swiss Alps. Plus: peruse *Bazaar's* spa guide, from ayurvedic massage at the Connaught to Dior treatments aboard a Highlands-bound train; and follow Isla Fisher on her perfect day in Perth.

Secret source

Helena Lee explores an undiscovered part of the Italian Lakes tucked beneath the Swiss mountains, where crystal-clear waters, brisk alpine air and awe-inspiring landscapes set the scene for both adventure and relaxation



This page, clockwise from left: a statue at the Hotel Eden Roc. The Ponte dei Salti in the Valle Verzasca. The pool at the Hotel Eden Roc. A dining area in Hotel Giardino. Opposite: Lake Maggiore

TICINO MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST CHARMING HOLIDAY DESTINATION you've never heard of. Named after the river that flows into Lake Maggiore and often unfairly overshadowed by its more famous neighbours, this Italian-speaking region of Switzerland – the country's southernmost canton – has a unique sensibility that draws on both cultures.

While Lugano and Locarno are the magnetic centres of Ticino, the town of Ascona is also delightful, situated only an hour-and-a-half drive from Milan's Malpensa airport and featuring an attractive waterfront lined with cafés and restaurants. We had been looking for somewhere to visit in late August but couldn't quite find a suitable destination, wanting to protect our five- and eight-year-old daughters from the intense sun of southern Europe. Italian-bordering Switzerland, with its sheltering mountains and valleys, perpetual breeze and balmy heat, seemed to offer a respite. We could eat outside in the evenings, yet be sufficiently comfortable to sleep without air-conditioning.

For the first few days, we stayed at the Hotel Eden Roc, part of the Tschuggen Collection, which has a touch of the nautical about it. Founded in 1971, it is the only hotel in Ascona that runs directly to the shore of Lake Maggiore; the main attraction is its access to the water, which gives guests the ability to take part in any number of aquatic sports beside a spectacular horizon made up of interlocking mountain ranges.

We spent our time shuttling between its three pools and four restaurants. La Casetta – a lake house specialising in seafood on the grill – is not only a beautiful setting, but also historically significant as the location for 'Operation Sunrise' – discussions between senior German officials and the Allies in 1945 that aimed to achieve the unconditional

surrender of the German army in Italy, hastening the end of the Nazi regime – a fact proudly displayed on a plaque by the terrace.

The hotel's main dining space, Restaurant Eden Roc, served superb Mediterranean food, but the cherry on the cake was the live music each night in the bar, where our girls would dance while we sipped cocktails created from the hotel's home-made limoncello.

Conceived by the internationally renowned local designer Carlo Rampazzi, the indulgent spa was a relaxing adult diversion, as was the art-filled sanctuary of Casa Epper. Formerly a house belonging to a pair of artists, it is now a place where visitors can relax and reflect, whether by popping into the gallery, wandering through the banana-trees and sculptures in the garden or playing a casual game of *bocce*, a Ticino version of boules.

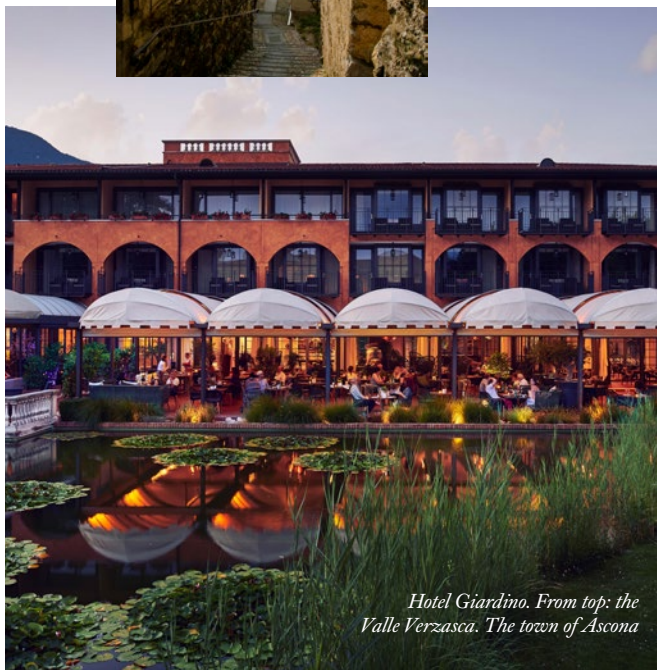
Our home for the rest of the week was Hotel Giardino, about a 15-minute bike ride from Ascona. Its courtyard is an impressive reimagining of a Mediterranean garden, defined by two huge carp ponds fringed with long grass and lemon-trees; it leads towards the outdoor pool, surrounded by a carpet of lawn. All activity centres around this area, overlooked by two restaurants – the more casual Hide & Seek, and the two-Michelin-starred Ecco. The whole establishment is an incredibly friendly intergenerational haven.

There is, admittedly, something of the kitsch about Giardino. The rooms are bright, decorated in brat green, grape purple and fuchsia pink. Yet the hotel has an abundance of charm and the service is impeccable. Perrier-Jouët Champagne on ice was waiting for us on arrival, while nectarines and pears were replenished in our rooms every day. Ticino wines – in particular the white Merlot – were a happy discovery, and the dishes at Ecco were exquisite

(morsels of pike-perch from the lake, venison with beetroot and sorrel ice-cream). Each night, we'd take an aperitif with the kids out on our balcony and admire the pines and the palm-trees behind the terracotta rooftops.

One day, we climbed aboard Giardino's motorboat and bounced across waves glinting from the afternoon sun. We swept past slick villas at the foot of Monte Verità ('mountain of truth'), a location once frequented by Hermann Hesse, DH Lawrence and Isadora Duncan, and home to a colony of bohemian German settlers in 1910, who together formed





Hotel Giardino. From top: the Valle Verzasca. The town of Ascona

‘We jumped into the water, enjoying the freedom and fresh air of lakeside living’

a counter-culture dedicated to nature, philosophy and the arts.

Halfway across, we stopped to admire the lowest and highest points of Switzerland – two small islands, Isole di Brissago, and the Dufourspitze – that were simultaneously visible. Then we motored at speed, hair flying behind us, towards Ascona, where we ambled through the cobbled backstreets studded with little cafés that are the setting for a jazz festival each June, held in association with Ascona’s partner city, New Orleans.

On the days we didn’t have anything planned, we rode on the hotel’s bikes along the water to Ascona or Locarno, where we sat in the piazzas eating picnics we’d put together from local markets. Sometimes we stopped at the picturesque Lido, where we hired paddleboards and jumped off platforms into the water, enjoying the freedom and fresh air of lakeside living.

One of the great attractions of the hotel is its head concierge Claudio Caser, who comes across as a relaxed Monsieur Gustave H from *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. He regaled us with tales of Roger Federer, Boris Becker and ‘Madame’, who ran an empire of jewellery factories, spent her latter years living in hotels and was notorious to many European GMs. His passion for the region, its personality and communal culinary rituals was infectious.

We spent a day with him exploring Ticino and following the Verzasca river upstream through the valley, traversing crags and ravines. Our first stop was the Contra Dam – a terrifying man-made wonder, familiar from the opening sequence of *GoldenEye*, when James Bond freefalls the 220-metre height. The hydro-electric

power plant has also become a favourite spot for bungee jumpers and rock climbers, and induces vertigo in not just the faint-hearted. We passed Corippo, the smallest community in the country with a mere 13 inhabitants, before going on to the Ponte dei Salti near Lavertezzo, a beautiful but hazardous undulating bridge. The emerald-green river runs below, channelled by extraordinary rock formations smoothed down by years of lapping water.

About 10 minutes’ walk away from Sonogno, the last village of the Valle

Verzasca by the foothills of the Swiss Alps, is Grotto Efra, which is a side-of-the-road restaurant that sits in the shade of the towering conifers and maples. Originally used as natural larders for storing meats, cheeses and wine, such grottos – found throughout the area – evolved to become restaurants serving traditional Ticino fare.

The scene at Grotto Efra was particularly lush, with the mountains a vibrant green from the heavy rainfall of spring. We took a seat at one of the huge granite tables, while the children played on the swings in front of the Froda waterfall. Luca, the proprietor, brought out an array of dishes: polenta e spezzatino – cuts of beef stewed with tomato, carrots, celery and onion – and trota in carpione, which was trout poached in a bouillon of vinegar, wine and herbs, wrapped in foil for three days. We rounded the meal off with creamy goat’s cheese and a shot of local Nocino, a sweet liqueur made from walnuts and grappa. At Efra, which was founded in 1941, the owners work hard to protect the region’s culinary culture; there’s not a pasta shape in sight.

I couldn’t help but wonder, by the end of our week’s holiday, whether Ticino was Switzerland’s best-kept secret.

Hotel Eden Roc (edenroc.ch), from about £350 a room a night. Hotel Giardino (giardinohotels.ch), from about £740 a room a night. □