

South Switzerland's Surprises

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Way south of Zurich the Swiss speak Italian, love pasta, drink white Merlot and eat al fresco in December: Michael Edwards reports.



Surprisingly George Clooney doesn't own a villa on the palm-fringed shores of Lake Lugano: even though it's that sort of chic and civilised place. In days gone by Sophia Loren and Clark Gable relaxed with Lugano's stylish cafe culture, even in winter. Protected by the Alps from chill winds the Italian speaking Cantons of Ticino and Graubünden are often warmer than Italian cities lying further south.

Compact and cultured, as you would expect of Switzerland's third financial city, Lugano has cleverly used its wealth to build a sense of community. Every city likes to think that it's welcoming but Lugano makes visitors feel at home. Monday to Saturday the tourist office provides English speaking tours with different themes, often free, or if the tour includes a cable car ride the whole experience is at significantly discounted cost. Early visitors to Lugano, looking across the lake towards sun-bathed Mount Brè christened it Paradiso.

Lugano's jewel is the newly opened Lugano Arts and Cultural Centre, memorably abbreviated to LAC. As well as art exhibitions, drama productions and an eclectic range of music, on Thursday evenings there's an aperitif / dinner event. English is spoken widely so you soon feel part of Lugano rather than just a tourist.



The Hotel International au Lac, at the heart of this small city, and with views over the Glacial Lake, is the place to stay: recognised by UNESCO as a “Historic Hotel” and paying tribute to the elegance of La Belle Époque of the first decade of the Twentieth Century. You’ll have to book well in advance for Room 221: visitors love the grandeur of its restored Louis XVI grandeur.

Heading South from Ticino, Lake Como is real George Clooney territory. He has a villa there as do Madonna and Donatella Versace. The Swiss Rail Travel Pass that took you from Zurich Airport to Lugano includes the Bernina Express Coach, though it is wise to pay for a seat reservation. After lunch in Italy’s beautifully preserved city of Tirano, it is time to head back into Switzerland.

“From lemon ice-cream to eternal snow” is the mantra of the red Bernina Express Train, UNESCO listed, that climbs up to the Bernina Pass through the Alps. A circular viaduct, enabling this slowest of Expresses to keep ascending, is just one of the spectacular sights of this line which will soon celebrate its 110th birthday. In winter, when snow drifts can reach the heights of the power lines, snowplough trains run regularly to keep the lines clear. Twice a year, usually during January or February, you can take a ride on the original 1910 steam snow plough.

Stay a night or two at the historic Albergo Albrici, a small ten-roomed Hotel, on Poschiavo’s small square. Its restaurant serves superb regional dishes - think veal, pasta, mortadella, pana cotta - and local red wines with the depth of a vintage Bordeaux.

Take a guided tour round Poschiavo to see how a closed order of nuns still needed a peep-hole through their high-walled community to communicate with the world. Then visit Casa Tome, a museum showing village life since the 14th Century. Over time the small town has become grateful for the catastrophic floods of 1987 which caused them to undertake much restoration, including re-laying the roads in their original cobbled patterns.



Just a five-minute train ride away lies Lago Poschiavo. Cruise the lake on the MS Sassablo, a community project run by volunteers where your Captain may well be the local policeman. This is a lost valley, a finger of Switzerland, between snow-capped Italian mountains: even few Swiss folk know of this paradise. Lunch on the terrace of the elegant Le Prese Hotel, overlooking the lake, is one of life's great gastronomic experiences.

Study the timetables and you can take the Glacier Express up to Alp Grüm, where the station also operates as a Hotel and Restaurant. Here Romansch is spoken, Switzerland's fourth language, and the menu has a distinctive Germanic flavour. You can dine early, watching clouds drift through the valley towards the glacier before catching the last train at 7pm. Head past the mountain top glacial lakes before descending to the stylish ski town of Pontresina with its choice of 22 hotels. Alternatively, you can stay the night, at 7,300 feet, in one of Alp Grüm's rooms, each named after a local mountain.



The Bernina Express is not just for Railway fanatics. It offers some magical opportunities to gather family and friends for unforgettable experiences. You can charter an open-topped carriage for a journey past roaring mountain streams, bell-clanking Alpine cows, hanging valleys, cobalt blue glacial lakes and snow-tipped mountain peaks. Another option is a 1920s Pullman coach with an elegant piano bar and catering of your choice. The British have always enjoyed the Swiss Mountains in style playing both cricket and polo on St Moritz's ice plateau. Today the Bernina Express is taking that tradition to new heights.

South Switzerland fact box

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Accommodation

[Hotel International au Lac](#), Lugano

[Albrici Auberge](#), Poschiavo

[Le Prese Hotel](#), Lago Poschiavo

[Hotel Alp Grum](#)

[Saratz Hotel](#), Pontresina

Getting there & getting about

[Swiss International Airlines](#) fly from many UK airports to Zurich.

A Swiss Travel Pass will not only cover the rail journey south to Lugano it also provides free use of Public Transport in most towns and cities as well as free admission to many museums.

Learn about the [Bernina Express](#)

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