

The Med in the Alps

Ascona on Lake Maggiore blends Swiss and Italian cultures and makes the most of the surrounding water and mountains

by Christopher Silvester – consultant editor for *Spear's*



WAKING UP IN my room at the Hotel Eden Roc, Ascona, I gazed upon the magnificence of Lake Maggiore ('Greater Lake'), the northernmost of the Italian lakes. With the mountain slopes and the village of Ronco sopra Ascona visible to my right, I looked out across a row of palm trees towards the lake's horizon.

This lake with the Italian name, into which the Swiss river Maggia flows, is 65km long, and most of it is in Italy. But I am staying in Ascona, a village at the lake's northernmost tip, in the Swiss canton of Ticino. Ascona is semi-detached, across a canal that runs between them, from the town of Locarno, to which I have travelled by rail from Zurich Airport, a picturesque journey of just over two hours, with a brief change of trains.

Ascona-Locarno is a curious hybrid of national cultures. The atmospheric and the sub-tropical climate conjure up memories of the Mediterranean,

while the soaring slopes that surround the lake and the meadows to be found at higher altitudes are Alpine in character. The food is Italian, with plenty to satisfy pasta-lovers, but it also has a mountain identity.

Built in 1971, the Eden Roc today has three sections, 95 rooms and four restaurants: the Eden Roc restaurant, where breakfast is taken, serves French cuisine for dinner; La Casetta, in a separate villa, offers 'the best of lake and shore'; La Brezza is more Mediterranean in style and cuisine; and Marina has gone for a retro Seventies look and a refined menu of pasta, meat and fish. The hotel's spa runs beneath the different sections.

About 20 minutes by speedboat from the Eden Roc are the Brissago Islands, and a little beyond that is the small town of Brissago, with its cigar factory. The islands themselves are definitely worth an excursion.

Elsewhere beyond the confines of



The colourful village of Ascona sits between Lake Maggiore and the imposing Alps

the Eden Roc, there is a distinctive Ticinese cuisine waiting to be sought out in the many 'grotto' restaurants. Typical Ticinese dishes include pork ribs, pork cheeks in beer sauce, and risotto with pan-fried fish fillets and sage. 'Loto' risotto rice has been cultivated since 1997 on the headland between Ascona and Locarno.

To get a true sense of the region, you need to ascend to the peak of the Cardada mountain, 'the Pearl of Lake Maggiore'. It's just a five-minute drive up from Locarno to Orselina, where you board a cable car for a five-minute ride up to Cardada at 1,340 metres. From there you can hike up or take the chairlift to Cimetta at 1,670m. The view from this point is spectacular.

After a 30-minute hike down a mountain path, we reached the hostel-restaurant Capanna 'Lo Stallone', where we ordered beer and a mixed platter of cheese and charcuterie, followed by a selection of polenta gratinata dishes. The hostess offered us a homemade grappa and a homemade limoncello.

The Eden Roc hotel provides electric-assisted bicycles for its guests. We cycled past other hotels, crossed the Maggia river into Locarno, passed through the cobbled Piazza Grande of the Old Town, which plays host to a weekly market as well as open-air concerts and open-air screenings during the annual film festival. 📍

Hotel Eden Roc, Ascona, offers double rooms from CHF315 (approx £250), based on two people sharing on a B&B basis. Tel (+41) 91 785 7171 | Web edenroc.ch Swiss flies direct from Heathrow to Zurich. All-inclusive fares start from £74 one-way. Tel 0345 601 0956 | Web swiss.com