

Weekend Travel

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PICTURE: YVONNE GORDON

Lake Maggiore magic

Set between the Piedmont and Lombardy regions of Italy and Ticino in Switzerland, Lake Maggiore is a magical escape best experienced under sail...

Words by
Yvonne Gordon

As mornings on lakes go, this one is almost perfect. A blue sky lends its colour to the surface of the lake, the sun adds sparkle, and a breeze pushes warm air across the deck. In the distance, lakeside villages sit peacefully under green hills and send churchbell sounds out onto the water, all under the background of the Alps. We are on a small yacht and it would be the ideal setting for sailing. We even have sails. The problem though, is that most people on the boat can't work out how to hoist them...

It's all good-humoured though. Sailing instructor Tony Meier is asking the crew — one beginner, two people with some experience and myself — to work out how to pull up the main sail. I am not allowed to answer as I've sailed before — he wants the others to learn how to rig the boat. They find the halyards (ropes), hoist both sails and we glide from the mooring out onto the lake, the 'beginner' now somewhat confidently at the helm, as Tony talks us through how to set the sails.

We're at the Swiss end of Lake Maggiore. We ask Tony if we're sailing to Italy — Switzerland to Italy sounds like an impressive passage but the border is actually just 3km away. Located on the south side of the Alps, Lake Maggiore is divided between the Piedmont and Lombardy regions of Italy, and Ticino, the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland, where the language, food and culture is Italian but some of the precision — and prices — are Swiss.

I've come to Ticino to explore the lake by boat — an interesting (and carbon-friendly) way to experience a body of

water like Lake Maggiore, rather than driving around it.

As we whizz around the lake on the 7.65m (25ft) yacht, there are three other boats from the sailing school on the water. We go into 'race' mode any time one of them looks like it will pass us out. Time whizzes past just as fast and after a fun few hours, it's time to sail back to base at Ascona. You can do lessons by the hour, day or week, and it's a relaxed way to learn sailing — a contrast to the cooler, greyer waters of home. You learn some theory before setting afloat, and it's hands-on as everyone gets to work the sails and steering.

Back on shore, Asconautica sailing school (asconautica.ch; lessons from €30 per hour) shares the lakefront terrace of the Hotel Eden Roc Ascona — although you don't have to be a hotel guest to book lessons. The whole area enjoys a microclimate, with palm trees along the shore and flower beds full of pinks and reds, even in autumn.

Based at the hotel for a couple of days, I find its outdoor swimming pools overlooking the lake a good spot to ease aching muscles from watersports. It's a luxury hotel but the atmosphere is relaxed and sports are encouraged — with ebikes, kayaks, paddleboards and activity programmes for guests. You'll also find Moving Mountains, a healthy programme inspired by the lake and Alps with yoga, sunrise hikes, lake fishing and paragliding on the lake in the summer; snowshoe hiking, ice bathing, ski/snowboard touring and chestnut roasting in the winter.

Another day, I visit the other side of the lake for kayaking at the Bolle di Magadino Nature Reserve from Campofelice Camping Village, a 15-hectare campsite with a beach

and watersports centre. The water is crystal clear, and a duck escorts us as we leave the marina. Up close, the nature reserve looks wild, filled with trees and green scrub. A row of birds sit on a driftwood tree trunk in the water, and nearby, some cormorants on navigation buoys dry their wings. At intervals, the peaceful scene is interrupted by the noise of small planes taking off over the lake.

As we paddle towards the shore and admire hillside villas, kayaking guide Tazio Pese says that seeing the lake from the water gives a unique perspective on everything around it: "You can see so many houses you can't see normally from the road or because they are hidden in forests. Where we go kayaking, people say 'Wow, it's incredible' because things change so quickly to another point of view."

The water is clear and we can see the bottom, but Tazio says the lake's level is around 1.5m lower than usual, because of less snow in winter and less rain this year.

After the kayaking, I walk some of the nature reserve's trails. This wetland at the deltas of the Ticino and Verzasca rivers is home to 300 bird species, plus warty newts, grass snakes, Italian tree frogs and butterflies. I don't see these, but I spot a tiny lizard and find a bird hide at the end of a path. The reserve is a popular stop for migrating birds in spring, where they rest before crossing the Alps.

I also go standup paddleboarding from near the Maggia River delta with Wilson Sup, which runs tours (wilsonsup.ch; tours from €40pp; board rental from €22 per hour). Setting off from the beach, we paddle to the delta. We can only paddle a short way up the river — the river bed

becomes stony due to low water levels, but we stop on a beach, soak up the surroundings and examine the lake floor through the clear waters. It's another relaxing way to see the lake.

One of the highlights is the Brissago Islands, a short ferry ride from Ascona. The lavish botanical gardens on the larger island were created by Russian baroness Antoinette de Saint Léger who married Anglo-Irishman Richard Fleming. They bought the 25,000sqm island in 1885 and filled it with trees, plants and flowers from around the world. There are palm and bamboo gardens, forests and giant ferns, all thriving in the mild subtropical climate. Saint Léger regularly hosted writers and artists — James Joyce visited in 1919. There are paths through the trees plus Roman baths, a small beach and a restaurant on the terrace of Villa Emden — the perfect spot from which to survey the lake and plot further adventures.



Above: Lake views at Hotel Eden Roc; and (main) exploring Lake Maggiore with Asconautica sailing school

Get there

The nearest airports to Ascona are Milan (1hr 40min by car or 2hr 40min by train) and Zurich (2hr 40min by car or train). Aer Lingus and Ryanair fly to Milan from Dublin, Aer Lingus and Swiss fly to Zurich. aerlingus.com; ryanair.com; swiss.com.

More info

Yvonne was a guest of Hotel Eden Roc (tschuggencollection.ch/de/hotel/hotel-eden-roc) where doubles start from €393 per night. The hotel runs two-hour kayaking tours to the Maggia Delta from €25. Ferries (laketlocarno.com; €20 return) run from Ascona to Brissago Island (isoledibrissago.ch; entry €10). For more visitor information, see Ascona-Locarno Tourism (ascona-locarno.com).



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