

Edited by Helen Coffey

Travel

THE ULTIMATE BOOZY
AUSTRALIAN ROAD TRIP
IN MONDAY'S
EVENING STANDARD



Go Italian — in Switzerland

You can take in all the glamour and beauty of the famous lakes but without the tourist hordes, discovers **Holly Rubenstein**

DO YOU long for the glitz, glamour and spectacular beauty of the Italian Lakes, without the accompanying congestion and crowds? Simple — just cross the border into Switzerland.

I'm sitting on a shore amid swaying palms, admiring the vast shimmering waters in front of me framed by lush green mountains. Elegant yachts bob on the gentle waves and sleek speedboats zip in and out of the marina, emptying chic families dressed in linen and sporting wide-brimmed hats. It's alluring, achingly romantic ... and the best part? I've not seen one coachload of tourists all day.

On the northernmost tip of Lake Maggiore, the second-largest of the Italian Lakes, you'll find Ascona, a picture-postcard, pastel-hued village across the border in Switzerland. This true hidden gem exudes luxury — it's home to some 40 millionaires and a refined culinary and cultural scene to match — but despite its many charms it remains largely untapped by British tourists. Ascona's pedestrianised waterfront promenade hugs the shores of the lake, lined with photogenic cafés, restaurants and bars. Its hillside Old Town has a

medieval and Renaissance history, and the high bell tower of its 16th-century basilica church can be seen — and heard — throughout the village.

Winding cobbled streets full of smart fashion boutiques, flourishing galleries and shaded gelaterias lead down to the lake. Southern Switzerland enjoys a consistently Mediterranean microclimate, which makes it ideal for sun-worshippers — and wine producers. The Swiss are extremely proud of their vino, so much so that they prefer to keep it mainly for themselves, exporting only 1.5 per cent of production. For wine buffs, the selection of interesting Swiss tipples is a particular thrill.

While Ascona is by no means sleepy, I managed to nab my terrace table with a jaw-dropping lake view at Albergo Carcani, one of the village's most popular Italian restaurants, without a reservation. In fact, in my time here, I have never once had to queue. There's a sense of ease, space and calm that is simply impossible to find in Como and Garda in the summer season.

A five-minute stroll along the water's

edge leads me to the ultra-luxurious Hotel Eden Roc Ascona. It's the only five-star right on the shore of Maggiore, and is ideally situated for enjoying all the water-based activities on offer. I decide to embrace the high life and hire a swanky Riva yacht, complete with its own Swiss skipper, to visit the alluring Brissago Islands (also reached from Ascona by a 20-minute direct ferry).

Three degrees warmer than anywhere in the vicinity, these two islands are positively subtropical, and a show-stopping botanical garden has flourished there for more than 100 years.

In its heyday, the larger, inhabited island, Isola Grande, was a haven for artists, musicians and writers including author James Joyce. These days, the majestic Palladian villa at its heart accommodates a small number of guests, a café and a restaurant.

Most day visitors spend an afternoon admiring the 1,700 species of exotic flowers and plants, which are divided thematically into regions. I walk past giant agave plants, azaleas and Venus fly traps, through a bamboo forest, and

past shimmering ponds teeming with terrapins, to reach the prettiest corner of the island. Housing magnificent Roman baths surrounded by arresting views, it's steamy here, and there's a floral fragrance that permeates the air. It feels more Polynesian than Swiss.

I take the wheel on the boat ride back to Eden Roc, arriving windswept and ready to recline on the hotel's plush loungers. With a turquoise pool to one side and the dark-blue lake ahead, offset by rows of deep-purple lavender and bright-pink hydrangeas, it's as if the saturation has been amped right up — the ultimate “no filter” view.

Before I settle down I have to fit in a dip in the lake, which during the summer months is a refreshing 20 degrees. The glacial water is so clear that I spy shoals of minnows as I swim. It is very different to being in the sea. It's still and safe — and your eyes don't sting.

From here, looking back towards Ascona, I can see Monte Verità (the Hill of Truth) towering over the village. Since the start of the 20th century this verdant green prominence has attracted creatives in search of tranquility, serving as a spiritual refuge and a site for many different utopian communities, all dedicated to finding the “perfect” life they felt was attainable in this unparalleled spot.

These days the commune has become a museum and conference centre, but the feeling here still lingers. Ascona delivers La Dolce Vita, Swiss-style, and then some.

DETAILS: ASCONA

● easyJet (easyjet.com) flies from London Gatwick to Milan Malpensa from £52 return.

● Hotel Eden Roc Ascona (edenroc.ch/en) has double rooms from £245, B&B.



Lakeside luxury: top, Ascona in all its pastel-hued charm. Left, Eden Roc offers five-star digs

TAKE 5 AVOCADO TOASTS IN SYDNEY

Bills
Australian restaurateur and breakfast over Bill Granger is widely credited as the man who first put avocado toast on a menu when he opened his first café in 1993. Sample the original at one of Granger's three Sydney cafés, where it's still served with lime, coriander and a sprinkle of chilli flakes. Granger & Co serve the same dish in London. bills.com.au, grangerandco.com

ounds of Alexandria
ounds' avocado toast comes heaped with an heirloom tomato, coriander and basil salsa, chilli labneh, tahini, feta and fresh lime, and is served at one of Sydney's most Instagram-friendly locations. The complex used to be home to a pie shop, and now houses several restaurants, a florist and a farm. egrounds.com.au

ee Blue Ducks
k up the scenic Bondi to Coogee with a stopover at this laid-back eatery in Bronte, whose avocado toast comes with a tomato and basil salad. The restaurant's suggestion and side of corn fritters. eblueducks.com

shund Coffee
formed Avocado — a glorious of crushed avocado on ed charcoal and quinoa bread, with fresh tomato, tabbouleh, cheese and a poached egg to brings hungry Sydneysiders to a friendly café in Hunters Hill in oves. shundcoffee.com

mah
by their Malaysian other's cooking, the founders mah add South East Asian o familiar favourites. Their avocado comes with nori and ooked onsen egg. mah.com.au

Valerie Teh