

## BURT WOLF TRAVELS & TRADITIONS TICINO, SWITZERLAND



At the very center of Europe, surrounded by France, Germany, Austria and Italy, sits a confederation of 26 democratic states known as Switzerland. The states are called cantons, and the most southern is Ticino. Just north of the Italian border, it is one of the most beautiful parts of Europe. Snow-capped, alpine peaks ease down into mountains covered with thick forests of laurel and chestnut trees. Thousands of waterfalls flow into lakes that twist their way through the mountains that are the key to Ticino's history.

Ticino is the only Swiss canton that is located entirely on the southern side of the Alps and through much of the year, it has a mild and sunny climate. It is one of the cantons in Switzerland where the official language is Italian and right there is Ticino's most fascinating aspect: a blend of the warmth of Italy with the efficiency of Switzerland. Passionate people and their phones work.

The capital city of Ticino is Bellinzona. It's been inhabited since prehistoric times and with good reason. Let's say you were looking for a nice place to live during the Neolithic period about 7,000 years ago. You'd want a spot on a high hill so you could get a good look at any conquering hordes that might be coming into the neighborhood. You'd also want your hill to have a dependable source of fresh water, just in case you were stuck up there during a long battle and if you could get the landlord to paint every two years, you were golden.

### The Castles of Bellinzona



Two thousand years ago the valley of Bellinzona was one of the most important gateways on the trade route between Italy and the rest of Europe. To be the ruling power in this valley was worth a fortune. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the two great families of Milano, the Visconti and the Sforzas, constantly battled for control.

The Dukes of Milano took what the Romans started

and built it into a chain of three fortresses that extend across the Bellinzona valley floor. The highest is Castello di Sasso Corbaro. Midway up is Castello Montebello. The lowest fortress is Castelgrande. All three are connected by a wall—not a Great Wall but not bad—and all three are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

In the end, however, the castles were unable to stand up to repeated sieges and by the early 1500s had been conquered by the Swiss Confederation, which at the time was made up of the three original states of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden. Each of the states took one of the castles.

The highest castle is also the home of an excellent restaurant *Osteria Castello Sasso Corbaro*, which is only fitting since the castle once belonged to both the Visconti and Sforza families. The Visconti and the Sforzas were serious eaters and kept written copies of their family recipes. Martino di Rossi collected the recipes and used them to publish the most important cookbook of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. He replaced the heavy oriental spices with local herbs. He also set up the idea of a pasta course. The man was a genius!

### Bellinzona

Below the castles, the town of Bellinzona looks very much as it did during the Renaissance. On Saturday mornings, there's an open-air market and if you're lucky, you'll hit town on



one of the days when Ticino's answer to the Mamas and the Papas—*Gruppo Canzoni e Costumi Ticines*—is giving one of their informal concerts.

By the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Swiss dominated the northern part of Ticino. But the Dukes of Milano still held the town of Bellinzona. The Milanese felt threatened by the growing influence of the Swiss and decided it was time to fight. On December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1478, their soldiers marched into the small town of Giornico, just up the valley from Bellinzona. On a hill high above Giornico, 200 Swiss troops and 400 local partisans watched the Milanese arrive and then, with-

out the slightest warning, sent down hundreds of huge boulders that crashed into the Milanese encampment. The Milanese were crushed, and at the same time, defeated. The encounter became known as "The Battle of the Stones." It was the first major success for the Swiss and eventually led to their control of the entire Ticino.

### The Church of St. Nicolao



A stone's throw from the center of Giornico is St. Nicolao. Built there in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, it is the best-preserved Romanesque church in Ticino. The frescoes inside date from 1478 and are some of the few remaining works that show a Pagan influence on Christian art.

There is a painting of three heads represents the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. But the three heads have only two pairs of eyes. It is a pagan technique for indicating a mystic bond. It makes the point, but in a way that was offensive to the Catholic Church. Pagan symbolism was not acceptable and almost every example has been destroyed. This is an unusual find.

The church was built over a point where two rivers cross. Recently, Swiss scientists discovered an intense but unexplained electrical energy beneath the structure.

### Locarno

The force field in the Church of St. Nicolao may be hidden, but the energy of the town of Locarno is right up front. Locarno has been a resort since the time of the ancient Romans and if you had been gladiating day after day during the busy season, or marching along with the Roman legions and needed a break, Locarno was the perfect spot. These days, the thing to do is sit at one of the cafés that face out on Lake Maggiore, have an espresso and take a ride on the Centovalli Railroad. If you purchase a Swiss pass in the United States, you can use it on the Centovalli trains, which run through the day and take you from town to town in one of Ticino's most beautiful valleys.

### The Village of Rasa

At one point I got off the train and took a cable car to Rasa. This village was built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is almost three thousand feet above sea level and is only reachable by cable car or a two-hour uphill hike.

A sign in the center of town directs you to a series of footpaths. But instead of giving you the distance, they give you an estimate of the time it will take you

to get there based on a speed of two miles per hour.

Ticino has also become a center for extreme sports like bungee jumping. The Centrovalli Railroad has special tours that guide you to the locations.

Since 1993 people have been bungee jumping from the railroad bridge above the Isorno River. They tell me that it is a sensation best experienced in the company of another jumper in what is known as tandem bungee. I think the ideal companion for a jump would be a psychiatrist.



### Ascona



Just across the river from Locarno, tucked into a sunny bay, is the town of Ascona. Its history as an artistic and cultural community goes back to the time of the Renaissance. During the early 1900s, a hill above the town known as Monte Verita became home base for a society interested in alternative lifestyles. The place attracted philosophers, artists, writers, nudists, anarchists, and vegetarians. It's like Woodstock, only everybody stayed.

## WHERE TO EAT

### GABBANI

VIA PESSINA  
CH-6900 LUGANO, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 911 30 80  
[WWW.GABBANI.COM](http://WWW.GABBANI.COM)

### LOCANDA GANDRIESE

CH-6978 GANDRIA, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 971 41 81

### OSTERIA CASTELLO SASSO CORBARO

CH-6500 BELLINZONA  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 825 55 32

### RESTAURANT PRINCIPE LEOPOLDO

CH-6900 LUGANO, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 985 88 55  
[WWW.LEOPOLDHOTEL.COM](http://WWW.LEOPOLDHOTEL.COM)

## WHAT TO RIDE

### CENTOVALLI

FERROVIE AUTOLINEE REGIONALI TICINESI  
VIA FRANZONI 1  
CH-6601 LOCARNO, SWITZERLAND  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 756 04 00  
[WWW.CENTOVALLI.CH](http://WWW.CENTOVALLI.CH)

### CABLE CAR TO MONTE SAN SALVATORE

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CH-6902 LUGANO-PARADISO  
[WWW.MONTESANSALVATORE.CH](http://WWW.MONTESANSALVATORE.CH)

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### SWITZERLAND TOURISM

TOLL-FREE: 1-877-794-8037  
[WWW.MYSWITZERLAND.COM](http://WWW.MYSWITZERLAND.COM)

### TICINO TOURISM OFFICE

TEL: +41 (0) 91 825 70 56  
[WWW.TICINO-TOURISM.CH](http://WWW.TICINO-TOURISM.CH)

### BELLINZONA TOURISM OFFICE

VIALE STAZIONE 18  
6500 BELLINZONA  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 825 21 31  
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FAX: +41 (0) 91 785 19 41  
[WWW.MAGGIORE.CH](http://WWW.MAGGIORE.CH)

### LUGANO TOURISM OFFICE

POSTFACH 2533  
6909 LUGANO  
TEL: +41 (0) 91 913 32 32  
FAX: +41 (0) 91 922 76 53  
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## Verzasca

The Locarno and Ascona area is also the perfect place to begin a visit to the valley of Verzasca. Verzasca is a deep narrow gorge being cut even deeper by rushing streams of emerald green water.



The way to get there is by postbus, which in Switzerland is an extremely efficient form of transportation. In 1849, Switzerland established a national postal service carrying mail by horse, carriage and sleigh. It was a cross between Santa Claus and the Pony Express. In 1906, they extended their service to include passengers. Their yellow buses are a familiar sight all over the nation and haven't changed their look since 1921 when the first bus started navigating through Switzerland's mountain passes.

One of the villages we passed was Corripo. Welcome to the 1500s. Small granite stone buildings and a four hundred-year-old church hang from the canyon walls. Every stone is protected by the government as a national treasure.



My first stop was a small bridge built by the ancient Romans. Over two thousand years old, in perfect shape, and it's never had a tollbooth.

The valley is a popular hang-out for swimming, hiking and biking. The buses run every hour so you can hike for a while and then pick up another bus when you're tired.

The rural roadsides of Ticino are peppered with small open chapels that are dedicated to minor saints, and local folk heroes who hope to be sainted. Like Lorenzo di Lago, who was venerated for his abstinence. He never ordered dessert though it was usually included in the price of his meals.

## Lugano

The city of Lugano was built on the edge of a bay facing two mountains that rise out of a lake. The warmth of the sun and the restful beauty of the surrounding Alps have made it a health resort and tourist attraction. People call it the "Rio of the Old World."



The best time to walk Lugano is first thing in the morning. Start on the lakefront promenade and watch the sun rise over the mountains. Then turn into the old city, a pedestrian area with many small shops.

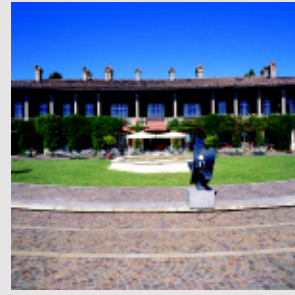
At the end of the main street is the Church of Santa

## WHERE TO STAY

While I was in Ticino, I stayed at the Villa Principe Leopoldo, a five-star hotel and member of the Relais & Châteaux Group. It's named after Prince Frederic Leopold, a descendant of one of the great families that ruled the German empire when it was first formed in 1871.

The house was built in the late 1800s as a summer residence for Prince Leopoldo's father and the prince lived here until he died in 1931. The villa remained a private home for European aristocracy until 1986 when it was turned into a hotel. Fortunately, the villa has lost none of its royal charm.

It is located on top of a hill with a fantastic view of Lake Lugano, the nearby mountains, and the Alps. Under the direction of General Manager Maurice Urech, who was named European Hotel Manager of the Year, it's become one of the most respected properties in Europe. The villa has thirty-seven spacious and elegant rooms with private terraces overlooking Lake Lugano. Across the street is a building known as the Residence with forty-one more rooms and restful views of the garden and the park.



### VILLA PRINCIPE LEOPOLDO & RESIDENCE

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Maria degli Angioli. A former Franciscan monastery, it was built on the lakefront in 1499. Inside is the most famous Renaissance fresco in Switzerland, a majestic and expressive presentation of the Passion of Christ.

Just down the block is the Piazza della Riforma. The Piazza is a large square lined with cafés. On one side is the town hall, which was built on a slightly shifting foundation and like the Leaning Tower of Pisa, it leans a little more each year. And like most political institutions, depending on where you stand, it leans a little bit to the right—and at the same time, a little bit to the left.

While you're in the neighborhood, stop into Gabbani. In 1937, Domenico and Juliet Gabbani opened a small delicatessen and butcher shop. In the seventies, their son Lino took over the business and started adding additional shops. Today there are six stores. Gabbani is a good place to taste Ticino. Through most of their history, the Ticinese were mountain people and their cooking resembles that of the Piedmont in Italy.

Across the street is a shop with the cheeses of Ticino. They're often named after the villages in which they are made—Piota, Bavona, Bedretto. They are served with a pinch of salt, a twist of pepper and a drizzle of olive oil.

### Gandria

At the edge of the old town is a dock where boats leave for the little villages that line the shores of Lake Lugano. They navigate through a landscape that looks like it came

off a postcard. Get off at Gandria, a fishing village with a history that goes back to the ancient Romans.

The small houses that line the narrow streets date from the Middle Ages. A headcount in 1590 indicated that 330 people lived in Gandria. A census in 2001 turned up only 215 people. An ominous trend. If it keeps up, in 900 years, Gandria will be empty. Get here as soon as you can!

I went to Gandria to eat at the restaurant *Locanda Grandriese*. It's in a house that was built during the 16<sup>th</sup> century as an inn. There's a small bar, six tables inside, and five tables on the balcony that hangs out over the lake.

Most of the town's fishermen have left for better-paying jobs in the cities. Fortunately, the fish stayed behind. The catch of the day was a fillet of salmon trout with boiled potatoes and seasonal vegetables. They also make just about every local specialty you can imagine: veal shanks with polenta ... rabbit with polenta ... mushrooms with polenta ... sausages with polenta and as a special if you order a day in advance ... polenta with polenta!

The peaceful sail back to Lugano takes only 30 minutes.

### Monte San Salvatore

When I got back to Lugano, I took the cable car to the top of Monte San Salvatore—one leaves every 15 minutes and the trip to the top takes only 12. At the top, there's a 360-degree view of the Alps, Lake Lugano and the Lombardic plain in Italy.





STEAMED SEA BASS WITH CANDIED TOMATOES  
AND PARSLEY OIL  
*Makes 4 servings*

- 4 tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch thick slices*
- 2 teaspoons chopped garlic*
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves*
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper*
- 1 cup arugula, chopped*
- ¼ cup chopped fresh Italian parsley*
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil*
- 3 tablespoons chopped Kalamata olives*
- 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil*
- 2 cups water*
- 4 6- to 7-ounce sea bass fillets*

Preheat the oven to 300°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Lay the tomato slices on the baking sheet and sprinkle the garlic and thyme leaves evenly over the slices. Season the tomatoes with the salt and pepper to taste. Bake the tomatoes in the oven, rotating the baking sheet every 30 minutes for 2 to 2½ hours. The tomatoes should be dry and crispy. Remove the baking sheet and allow the tomatoes to cool completely, then transfer the candied tomatoes to a plate and set aside.

Mix together the arugula, parsley, basil, olives, and olive oil together in a bowl. Season to taste with salt and pepper and set the parsley oil aside.

Pour the water into a large skillet and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Season the sea bass with salt and pepper to taste and lay, skin side down, in the simmering water. Add more water, if necessary, to make the level of the water come half way up the sides of the fillets. Cover the skillet and simmer until fish just cooked through, 5 to 8 minutes, depending on the thickness of the fillets.

To serve: Divide the candied tomatoes between four dinner plates. Lay the fillets next to the tomatoes and drizzle the parsley oil over and around the fish.

*Recipe courtesy of Hotel Principe Leopoldo & Residence,  
Executive Chef Dario Ranza*

STUFFED PEPPERS  
*Peperoni stufati ripieni*  
*Makes 4 servings*

- 4 medium sized red bell peppers*
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper*
- 1 pound ground beef*
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese*
- ½ cup crushed tomatoes*
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil*
- 4 fresh basil leaves, for garnish*

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Cut the stem ends of each of the peppers, ½-inch from stem, and reserve. Scoop out the veins and seeds and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Season the beef with the cheese and salt and pepper to taste, mixing until the mixture is just combined. Divide the ground beef between the four peppers and place the “tops” on the peppers.

In a medium roasting pan, add the tomatoes, olive oil, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Place the peppers upright in the tomato sauce and cover the roasting pan with foil. Bake the peppers in the oven for 1 hour. Remove the foil and cook for 10 minutes more, or until the peppers begin to lightly brown.

To serve, cut each pepper in half, lengthwise, and put 2 halves on each of four dinner plates. Spoon sauce over peppers and garnish each with a fresh basil leaf.



*Recipe courtesy of Osteria Castello Sasso Corbaro,  
Executive Chef Athos Luzzi*

## MUSHROOM RISOTTO

*Risotto al Funghi*

*Makes 6 servings*

*5 tablespoons olive oil*

*4 tablespoons butter*

*2 cloves garlic, chopped*

*½ pound fresh porcini mushrooms, wiped clean and thinly sliced*

*½ pound fresh chanterelle mushrooms, wiped clean and sliced*

*Salt and freshly ground white pepper*

*2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley*

*5 cups beef or chicken broth*

*1 shallot, chopped*

*2 cups Arborio rice*

*½ cup white wine*

*¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese*

Heat 3 tablespoons of the oil and 2 tablespoons of the butter in a large skillet and cook the garlic over medium-high heat until fragrant, 30 seconds. Add the mushrooms and sauté until the mushrooms have softened and lightly browned, 6 to 8 minutes. Season to taste with the salt and pepper, sprinkle in the parsley, and continue cooking 1 minute more. Cover the skillet and keep warm over the lowest heat.

Meanwhile, bring the broth to a boil and reduce heat to medium-low to keep hot. Heat the remaining oil and

1 tablespoon of the butter in a large heavy-bottomed deep skillet over medium-high heat. Add the shallot and sauté until translucent, about 1 minute. Add the rice and “toast”, stirring constantly, for 10 seconds. Add the wine and continue stirring until all of the liquid has evaporated. Add the broth, one ladle-full at a time, stirring constantly, until rice has absorbed almost all of the broth. Continue adding the broth, ladle by ladle, until all of the stock has been absorbed after each addition. It is very important to stir constantly to achieve the proper creamy consistency. Once all of the stock has been absorbed, add the cheese and the remaining 1 tablespoon butter. Season the risotto to taste with salt and pepper.

To serve, divide the risotto between six warmed dinner plates and arrange some of the mushrooms over each portion of risotto.



*Recipe courtesy of Osteria Castello Sasso Corbaro,  
Executive Chef Athos Luzzi*

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