

Sunny side of Switzerland

A quaint and charming town steeped in history, rich culture and pristine nature, Lugano is a picture perfect holiday destination

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

Lugano lake

After a long haul flight to Zurich, I took a train to Lugano and then a bus to reach my hotel. However, I was not tired or jetlagged; I guess the scenic treat en route to Lugano did the trick.

Meadows with wildflowers, majestic snow-clad mountains and beautiful conventional architecture interspersed among the greenery were not just picturesque, but also an excellent precursor to what the travel itinerary had for us.

Nature Beckons

“Welcome to the sunny living room of Switzerland!” said my guide Patricia Carminati at the start of my walking tour of Lugano. And perhaps this is where the charm of this town lies. Best explored by foot, at the heart of the town is the expansive lake of Lugano. The promenade here is dotted with a burst of flowers that frame the lake beautifully for many Instagram worthy pictures. There is a park that runs alongside the lake which was developed in the late 1970s after the city of Lugano acquired several sculptures on display in an exhibition of outdoor works. This collection has grown both through acquisitions and donations and today you can admire many of the important works created in the second half of the 20th century. The lake itself is clear with boats lined up and framed by the large mountain ranges of Monte Brè and Monte San Salvatore. There are several species of birds that you can spot, including swans, ducks and egrets. A lot of effort has been put into protecting this lake.

In 2006, a project was launched to restore the lake floor ecosystem that involved reshaping an area of the lake and diversifying its habitat. The lake floor saw additions of aquatic plants, tree stumps and bundles of sticks that aim to increase cover and reproduction areas for fish. I also suggest that you visit the beautiful park, Parco Ciani, that has been named after the brothers Giacomo and Filippo Ciani who renovated the 17th cen-



Lugano funicular to the Monte Bre and Lake Lugano, Switzerland



tury villa still present inside the park. The Ciani brothers are believed to have found Lugano to be a haven for their liberal ideas and the villa has hosted events of some of important figures of the Italian Risorgimento. The park and villa were acquired by the municipality of Lugano in 1912 and eventually opened to the public. The best time to visit is during the spring as the park has a burst of flowers in all hues.

All about art

At the heart of the city, overlooking the lake, is the stunning LAC or Lugano Arte e Cultura building which is a relatively new arts centre that hosts visual arts, music and performing arts. I was told by my guide that free music concerts are also held here in the evening. The building itself is magnificently designed with varied kinds of seating options across its two levels. You can sit on the floor, on the stairs or inside the 1,000 seat theatre to enjoy the shows. The open glass windows provide a dialogue between the interior and exterior and the exterior whitish hued façade reflects the colour of the lake water. The green stonework within the building comes from India and the wood panelling on the walls is an acoustic feature. This is a one-stop shop as far as all kinds of art is concerned and the variety ranging from jazz and classical music to theatre and opera, is intended to attract all generations. Located almost adjacent is the elegant Hotel International Au Lac that opened in 1906 and has a small museum displaying a lot of furniture and artifacts as well as typewriters from the days gone by. Also do stop at the 13th-century Cathedral of San Lorenzo, the former Franciscan Church of Santa Maria degli Angioli that has one of the biggest frescos of Switzerland. Simply walking around the town will get you up close with the nuances of the Ticino architecture.

Gastronomy Matters

In the Ticino region, the locals take a lot of pride dining in their grottos. A grotto was a natural cellar in the rocks that used to work as a store for cheese, salami and wine in the past. Today the concept of a grotto has changed to mean traditional restaurants set in quiet places amid gardens, which always have an al fresco seating space in the shade of huge trees. The main intent of the grotto is to protect local wine and food and hence this is what is served here. So you can sample delicacies like homemade

Parco Ciani



Fact File

Reach: Lugano has its own airport that is serviced by Darwin Airline and Swiss International Airlines. However, a popular choice is to fly to Zurich and take a train journey to Lugano that will take you through scenic views and takes under three hours. Bookings can be made on <https://www.sbb.ch/en>

Stay: Lugano has several hotels and resorts and a good choice is The International Au Lac Historic Lakeside Hotel, a family owned property that dates back to 1906 and is opposite the lake and in the midst of the old shopping lanes. To commemorate its 100 years, the hotel has opened a centenary museum on the first floor with objects and family memorabilia.

Tips:

- › You can buy a local SIM card for 20 Swiss Francs.
- › Lugano is relatively cool throughout the year so make sure you keep a jacket.
- › The place has a lineup of events through the year, check <https://www.myswitzerland.com/en-in> for more information.

sausages, salami and mortadella, vegetable minestrone soup, risotto, roast beef, polenta, hard and creamy cheese as well as sample the local Merlot wine. In fact, if you are shopping for food souvenirs from here, you can find a blue and red branding on many products that indicates that it has been locally produced. Even heading to the town square for a meal is a good idea—this is where the locals gather for a meal and there are numerous small restaurants that dot the square that is surrounded by beautiful buildings and overlooks the lake. And for some more retail therapy, walk into the narrow lanes past the square and you will see several stores. Do stop at Vanini, a store that retails Swiss chocolates since 1871. The store is lined with all kinds of chocolates and you can taste before you buy so you know what you are buying. Local souvenirs are best at the chain coop store as well as manor departmental store. At the end of my stay, I was so glad that my first ever visit to Switzerland was to Lugano—it was everything and more of the perfect image I had of the country I always wanted to see and set the right tone for my explorations ahead. □