

## TRAVEL

Get a taste of five-star living on a short break to charming Ascona with its wealth of luxury hotels, Michelin restaurants and designer boutiques

RAJ GILL

# Millionaire lifestyle



**DREAM GARDEN** Giardino Ascona hotel



**FINE DINING** Beautiful food at Aphrodite



**WATER VIEW** Of islands on Lake Maggiore

**The village of Ascona counts 40 millionaires among its 5500 residents, making it the ideal place to enjoy a taste of the high life.**

Situated on the shores of Lake Maggiore in Switzerland's Locarno district, right on the doorstep of Italy's Piedmont and Lombardy regions, it also offers a perfect blend of the two countries' cultures.

In fact, Italian is the main language, although locals switch between it and German at a rate of knots.

Ascona boasts a large number of five-star hotels. We picked the luxurious Giardino Ascona, a short walk from the lake, the Maggia river and golf and tennis clubs.

With an award-winning spa and a Michelin-star restaurant, what more could we ask for?

The Tuscan-style villas that make up the hotel beautifully reflect the Italian influence, as do the Mediterranean gardens with their heavenly scent of lavender.

We flew from Glasgow direct to Milan, then caught the train to Locarno, from where hotel staff whisked us off to Giardino Ascona.

We visited in October, when the weather was surprisingly mild, and our first stop was the annual Chestnut Festival down on the lakefront.

While chestnuts were the star of the show, there were also stalls selling other local produce, including wines, cheeses, polenta and vegetables.

Local craftsmen and women selling wonderful handmade goods and little

bands dotted around the place belting out folk music from a time long gone added to the quaint atmosphere.

Ascona boasts a great quality of life for locals all year round.

The promenade is lined with cafés, restaurants, bars and jewellery stores. There is also a little street off the main drag known as Ascona's "Fifth Avenue", dotted with little designer boutiques with hefty price tags.

Despite the obvious wealth, everyone is friendly and the atmosphere is relaxed and welcoming.

On the first night, we had dinner in our hotel's restaurant, Aphrodite.

The menu, created by chef Christian Scharrer, offers the finest Mediterranean cuisine.

But the star of the evening was restaurant manager Mauro Pacchioli, who surprised the guests by bursting into an operatic aria that would give José Carreras a run for his money.

It turned out that when he's not working, Mauro takes singing lessons at La Scala in Milan.

The next morning, we decided to make the most of a glorious sunny day by borrowing bikes from the hotel and hitting the road.

Guided by the general manager Claudio, we cycled through the wonderfully scenic Maggia Valley.

Along the way we visited the Monte Verità – or Hill of Truth – where a colony pursuing a return to nature was founded around the start of the 20th century. It attracted many artists and creative types, including Carl Jung and Isadora Duncan.

These days it houses a museum, a

tea garden, a Japanese teahouse and a café.

We arrived back from a day's cycling suitably famished for a meal at Ecco.

Chef Rolf Fliegau, who was awarded the first two of his four Michelin stars when he was just 27, presented a seven-course meal.

He draws on the traditional and rustic culinary scene of the region to serve haute cuisine with a twist.

An unassuming, humble man, he is on hand to greet all the guests who dine at Ecco and any sense of intimidation you may feel about eating at a "posh" establishment is firmly knocked on the head.

A visit to the Locarno region would not be complete without checking out one of the many vineyards, and on our last day we were given the grand tour of the Agriloro estate by the owner himself, Meinrad Perler.

Only established in 1995, this wonderfully modern operation produces 38 types of wine.

For our final dinner, we took a hotel shuttle to Giardino Ascona's sister property Giardino Lago, which has stunning views across Lake Maggiore.

Dinner was prepared by chef Rudi Reetz and, in true Giardino tradition, all the produce used was locally sourced with a great range of risottos, pastas and antipasti on offer.

I would be remiss not to mention the hotel's fabulous night butler service, which includes thoughtful touches such as night teas to help you unwind and set you on the path to a perfect night's sleep.

A five-star experience all round.

## Travel info

■ **Giardino Ascona** provided accommodation. Rates start from CHF535 (£420) for two people sharing on a B&B basis. Book at [www.giardino-ascona.ch/en/](http://www.giardino-ascona.ch/en/) ■ **Switzerland Tourism** provided a Swiss transfer ticket. It covers a round-trip between the airport and your final destination. Prices are £104 2nd class or £167 1st class. Call 00800 100 200 30 or visit [www.swiss-travelsystem.co.uk](http://www.swiss-travelsystem.co.uk) for info.



**TUSCAN STYLE**  
Italian design  
in Switzerland