

Near the Swiss border with Italy, vestiges of the past are set in stone

Sylvie Bigar

Bleary-eyed, I left French-speaking Geneva at daybreak. At lunchtime, I switched trains in Zurich, stammering through my rusty grammar-school-level German. A few hours south through the Saint-Gotthard Massif — at almost 11,000 feet, a once formidable obstacle between northern and southern Europe — and, via the longest railway tunnel in the world, I stepped into a balmy summer afternoon in Ticino, the only Italian-speaking canton in Switzerland.

In just a few hours spent in the resort town of Locarno, just about six miles from the border with Italy, it was clear that Ticino's reputation as the sunniest canton was completely warranted. Lush palm trees, dark-green camellia shrubs and pastel-colored facades give it a gentle Mediterranean feel. But that was not what I was seeking. After too much time in New York, I was aching for Alpine meadows, ancient forests and the rural landscape of my Swiss childhood. What I found were vivid traces of an ancient mountain people's enduring struggle against the rocky backdrop of their lives.

I recently stumbled upon the writings of mountaineer and author Douglas W. Freshfield, who, in 1875, published "[Italian Alps: Sketches in the Mountains of Ticino, Lombardy, The Trentino, and Venetia](#)" and wrote, "We feel disposed to cry out with delight before a figure of Michael Angelo or this view in Val Maggia." Even though I had been to Ticino before, I had never heard of that particular valley. It was enough to send me packing.

A main artery for the Maggia River, the valley leads from the high summits of the Lepontine Alps to Lake Maggiore below, but it also breaks into more than 10 smaller canyons. The small town of Maggia, about 11 miles north of Locarno and off the main road, seemed to provide the perfect home-base location. Though it's possible to use the yellow buses that offer public transportation throughout the area, I opted to rent a car and spend a few days exploring the valleys.

You don't ease into Val Maggia. One bend in the road, and you plunge into a radically different landscape: Silvery cliffs reach down as if to restrain the flow of emerald-green water rushing about 70 feet below under Ponte Brolla, settling into deep, tranquil pools. Turns out this is the departure point for several hikes and has been the site of a cliff-diving championship.

The weather shifts fast, and as I drove, nature donned a darker, mysterious robe. Seeming to reflect the ominous clouds, the vertical rock was everywhere: in the towering promontory that frames the valley, in the traditional stone tiles that protect the roofs, in the prehistoric landslides that have marked the history of this land. So much so that its inhabitants have literally carved their lives into the many massive boulders and caves.

In the hamlet of Cevio Vecchio, I climbed through stone, moss and the odd palm tree toward more than 60 "grotti," ancient caves carved into the rock. Thanks to a natural system of ventilation, the caves enjoy the right humidity levels to allow the population to

use them to store wine, cured meats and local cheeses. Over time, people got into the habit of bringing out tables and sitting in front of the grotti to drink local wine and have a bite to eat. That habit led to the emergence of the present-day grotti, open-air eateries featuring local specialties.

“Life here was so harsh in those times,” said Flavio Zappa, a historian and guide, over risotto that night, “that starting in the 1850s and until World War I, waves of emigration led generations of men to Australia and California.” Some, like the Lafranchi family of Nicasio Valley Cheese in Marin County, settled there. Others came back and built the many “palazzi dei emigrati,” houses designed on the models encountered overseas. “While away, they sent money to the struggling women and children left behind,” Zappa said, “but the departures of the men created an imbalance of population that would only correct itself a century later.”

The next day, as if opening the cavern of Ali Baba, Zappa unlocked the heavy wooden door of [Santa Maria delle Grazie](#), a seemingly simple church. Only about 20 minutes on foot from Maggia, it revealed strikingly colorful floor-to-ceiling Renaissance frescoes telling the story of Mary, as well as a whole series of ex-votos commissioned by locals to honor the Madonna.

I had planned to take the cable car all the way to the Robièi area near the Basòdino glacier, but the wind picked up: A storm front was blowing in. Soon the fog hid the peaks, and a torrential downpour sent me back to seek cover at a local cafe. “An end-of-the-world kind of weather,” commented a fellow traveler as she settled into a cozy armchair.

My plans did not include staying put, though. I drove back to Ponte Brolla and from there headed west within the Onsernone Valley where, centuries ago, as many as 27 water mills hummed along the river. In the tiny village of Vergeletto, I visited Ilario Garbani, a retired teacher who, in association with the [Museum Onseronese](#), was working to revive the ancestral tradition of farina bóna, a finely ground roasted corn flour. The storm was just above us, and the furious torrent rushed past the renovated water mill. Here, too, I noted that locals had learned to harness the power of nature to aid their daily lives. At the lovely [Ristorante della Posta Russo](#) in nearby Russo, I savored farina bóna ice cream, amaretti and shortbreads, the powder adding a unique, roasted whiff of the past.

It was time, the next day, to drive north from Maggia toward the mountains. The forest grew thicker on both sides of the road — birches, chestnuts, clusters of pines. To the sound of distant cowbells near the entrance of Val Lavizzara, I stopped in the stunning village of Brontallo, where dark wood and stone chalets — homes to the right and stables to the left — huddled together just below walls of rock.

Cowbells gave way to the syncopated rhythm of mallets hitting stone as I proceeded farther toward the summits, where tears of white marble emerged within the gray layers of gneiss above the School of Sculpture in Peccia. The village is also home to the [International Sculpture Center](#), where I met artists from all over the world, selected by an international committee from a wide pool of applicants, now spending several months on an artistic retreat sponsored by the center.

Before lunch at nearby [Grotto Pozzasc](#), built on the site of an ancient water mill, families bathed and relaxed on the flat stones that dot the turquoise Peccia River. I was too hungry to wait. I ordered the smooth local merlot, which one drinks directly from an individual pitcher, and which paired perfectly with polenta cooked on an open fire and a whole trout poached, then marinated in wine, a method used in the past to conserve the fish. I couldn't resist the torta di pane, a sweet cake with dried fruits and cinnamon

traditionally made with stale bread.

That afternoon, I drove to the village of Mogno, where, in 1986, an avalanche destroyed many structures, including a 1626 church. Renowned architect Mario Botta, a Ticino native, was asked to build a new San Giovanni Battista church. From the outside, the small building, made of alternate layers of Peccia marble and local granite, resembles a sort of standing cylinder cut diagonally to the sky. Designed to physically resist nature's force and to represent the ancestral battle between humankind and the mountain, the tiny church reveals the magnitude of its own power inside. In utter silence, daylight filtered through granite arches and the skylights, seemingly bouncing from marble to glass. As decor, only the lone figure of a wooden Jesus hangs over the altar. Stunning.

Walking the next day through Val Bavona and its 12 terre — ancient hamlets and dwellings, most of them still off the electrical grid — brought together the beauty of the rocky landscape and the desperate efforts of the people who attempted to survive there. With high pastures, where many spent the summers with their animals, and the mouth of the powerful waterfalls along the way, I often wondered whether what I saw was nature (a piece of the mountain) or the moss-covered roof of an antique granary.

Later on, I stopped for a guided tour of the fascinating Museum of Valmaggia, itself carved within a massive boulder. Depicting the old way of life in the area, the museum offered a moving testimony to the struggles of the local population. One room was dedicated to the women who, after the departure of the men, were often left to juggle household and farm work.

I had come to Val Maggia in search of nature, but the discreet valleys revealed much more than beautiful Alpine landscapes. Under the rock, a society had emerged, fought its way through the elements and left us a fascinating piece of Swiss culture.

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If You Go

Where to stay

Casa Martinelli

Al Stradòn 96, Maggia, Switzerland

011-41-91-760-90-51

The perfect blend of design and tradition, this property is near the village of Maggia and offers comfortable contemporary double rooms in the sleek concrete wing along the river and single rooms in the main building. Don't miss the breakfast buffet with local cheese and charcuterie. Rooms from about \$100 per night.

Cristallina

Al Stradon da Coi 22, Coglio, Switzerland

011-41-91-753-11-41

This simple hotel features large family rooms, some with balconies, and provides easy access to the valleys' walking paths. Well-located and environmentally friendly, the building also houses a good restaurant. No elevator to get to the bedroom floors. Rooms

from about \$94 per night.

Where to eat

Locanda Poncini

Piazza Dal Pózz, Maggia

011-41-91-753-15-41

There's a passionate young chef in the kitchen of this rustic inn set on the village square in Maggia. Through perfectly cooked risotto and hefty but tender braises, he leans on traditional specialties but adds his own contemporary touch. Entrees from about \$33.

Grotto Pozzasc

Al fiume, Peccia

011-41-91-755-16-04

This eatery could just bank on its stunning location by the river, but food is taken seriously here. Polenta cooks on an open fire, trout comes from the local streams and even the simple fresh salad is grown nearby. Entrees from about \$16.

Ristorante della Posta Russo

Nucleo alto 3, Russo, Locarno

011-41-91-797-11-97

It's worth the drive to head to the Onsernone Valley for a meal at this authentic restaurant in the small village of Russo. Homemade pastas, local specialties made with farina bóna and an array of traditional charcuterie and cheese. Vegetarian friendly. Entrees from about \$17.

What to do

Museum of Valmaggia

Cevio vecchio 6/12, Cevio

011-41-91-754-13-40

This small museum showcases the stunning natural setting of the region and the human stories surrounding life there. Worth reserving a guided tour in advance. Open Tuesday through Sunday, April 1 to Oct. 30, 1:30 to 5 p.m. Adults about \$6; children about \$3.

Robièi region

011-41-91-756-50-20

If the weather allows, beautiful hikes and Alpine scenery await. Most hikes start from the Robièi lift station. Open daily, June 11 to Oct. 9. Round-trip cable car adult tickets about \$25 per person; children about \$13.

International Sculpture Center

Via Cantonale, Peccia

011-41-91-760-80-80

Best to call ahead to make sure it's possible to see the small but fascinating exhibit inside the center. What better inspiration than to create in full view of the mountain where marble is harvested? Open Tuesday through Sunday, June to October, 1 to 6 p.m. Guided tours available upon request. Free.

Information

PLEASE NOTE

Potential travelers should take local and national public health directives regarding the pandemic into consideration before planning any trips. Travel health notice information can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's interactive map showing travel recommendations by [destination](#) and the CDC's [travel health notice webpage](#).