

36 HOURS

36 Hours in Lugano

Lugano, in Ticino, Switzerland's Italian-speaking canton, has its own distinctive culinary, wine and cultural scene, not to mention casinos and serene views across an alpine lake.

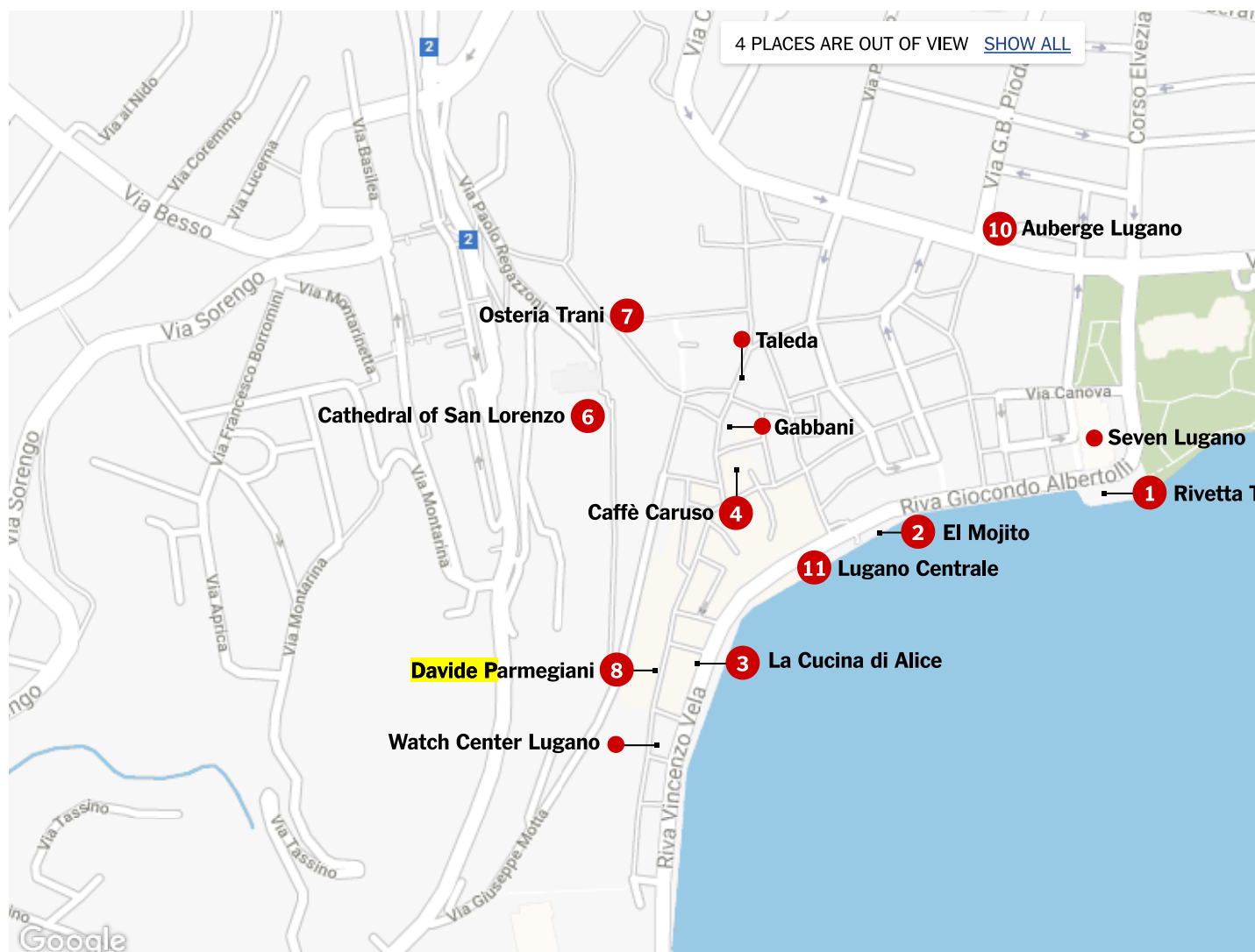
By Andrew Ferren

Sept. 13, 2018

Lugano is known for blending Swiss efficiency with the sunny charm of Italy along the steeply pitched shores of a postcard-perfect alpine lake that reaches deep into both countries. Add Renaissance churches, belle époque hotels, modernist villas, a couple of casinos and lush gardens that improbably combine palm trees and snow in winter, and you'll understand why the region is known as the Swiss Riviera. But it's not all play.

With about 65,000 residents, Lugano is a major destination in Ticino, Switzerland's lone, Italian-speaking canton, which has its own distinctive culinary, wine and cultural scene. With the end of Swiss banking secrecy a few years ago, there have been fewer Ferraris rolling in from Italy to visit the private banks. While that may be bad for the banks, it's made the city much less buttoned-up and more visitor-friendly. A new cultural center known as LAC (Lugano Arte e Cultura) and various gastronomic and music festivals fill out the calendar throughout much of the year.

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Friday

1) 4 p.m. TAKE TO THE LAKE

Why merely stretch your legs strolling along Lake Lugano's picturesque tree-shaded promenade when you can get a real workout pedaling yourself out on the water? There are several docks in town with pedal-boat concessions, but for the ultimate in Instagrammability head to the one at Rivetta Tell near the Parco Ciani and rent a bright red metal vintage-looking Forsa boats (starting at 8 Swiss francs, about \$8.25 for 30 minutes). Those with lazier legs might prefer a motorboat (from 40 Swiss francs for 30 minutes); no captain's license required. Upgrade the experience by grabbing a bottle of wine and some snacks at Gabbani, Lugano's prime purveyor of epicurean delicacies.

2) 6:30 p.m. STAY WET ON SHORE

Back on land, join the youthful crowds kicking off the weekend at Mojito, a popular waterfront adult refreshment stand with a beach shack vibe that can get a little crowded and hectic as the night wears on, but is delightfully laid-back at sundown. Beers from 5 Swiss francs, mojitos from 10.

3) 8 p.m. GET IT AT ALICE'S RESTAURANT

Book a table at La Cucina di Alice, a Lugano standby with a friendly vibe and attentive service. The densely packed tables on the sidewalk outside offer views of the lake and the seasonal menu blends some unexpected international fare like Hungarian goulash and a New England lobster roll with lots of Italian-accented dishes. Standouts include classic linguine al pesto with potatoes and green beans, or a tender filet of local (as in pulled out of Lake Lugano) perch with fragrant vanilla-perfumed black rice. Dinner for two with wine, about 120 Swiss francs.

4) 10 p.m. AFTER-DINNER ARIA

Walk off the meal with a stroll to Caffé Caruso, a tiny boîte tucked into a corner of Piazza Riforma that's known for excellent Italian-style coffee as well as cocktails — Aperol spritzes (9 Swiss francs) were in particular abundance this past June. If the spirits move you to keep going, follow the crowds migrating to Seven, the late-night club at the Casino di Lugano that pulsates til 5 a.m.



Caffé Caruso, a tiny boîte that's known for excellent Italian-style coffee, as well as cocktails.

Andrea Wyner for The New York Times

Saturday

5) 9 a.m. EARLY RISER

For its slightly bulbous profile and precipitously steep drop into the lake, Monte San Salvatore is known as the Sugar Loaf of Lugano. The summit, which can be reached by funicular railway, followed by an easy hike, offers spectacular views over the city, lake and surrounding mountains — several of which are in Italy. Round trip funicular fare is 30 Swiss francs for adults, though many discounts are offered, so check when purchasing.

6) 11 a.m. RELIGIOUS AWAKENING

There are many churches in the city and region worth visiting, including several mountaintop modernist masterpieces by the acclaimed contemporary Ticinese architect Mario Botta that would merit a full-day pilgrimage into the countryside. Two far older and more accessible must-see temples in town are the Cathedral of San Lorenzo — especially noted for its beautifully carved Renaissance facade — and Santa Maria degli Angioli, with its frescoes by Bernardino Luini, a disciple of Leonardo da Vinci. The vivid colors and complex composition of Luini's monumental fresco depicting the passion and crucifixion of Christ still wow visitors entering the church 500 years after it was painted.



The Hermann Hesse Museum provides a vivid sense of the Nobel laureate's cosmopolitan sensibility amid remnants of his simple country life. Andrea Wyner for The New York Times

7) 12:30 p.m. RAVIOLI MASTER

Any restaurant with “ravioli of the moment” on the menu is worth considering. When I visited, Osteria Trani, there were two special raviolis — a swordfish-stuffed pasta in zesty tomato sauce and a more subtle lobster-filled ravioli sauced in lemon butter. The chef had no problem preparing a half-order of each, preceded by a fresh spring pea soup and all washed down with a couple of glasses of white merlot, a delicious quaff pioneered by local vintners and difficult to sample outside the region. Lunch for two, about 130 Swiss francs.

8) 2 p.m. TIME TO GET A NEW WATCH

New watches, like new cars, tend to lose between 20 to 30 percent of their value the minute they leave the lot (or the shop in this case). Especially if you are looking for a watch to wear for a few years and then trade in when styles change, it might make sense to start off in the secondhand market. Within about 300 yards of each other in Lugano's tony pedestrian shopping lanes are three pre-owned watch purveyors worth checking out for personal timepiece enthusiasts. Davide Parmegiani is the most high-end with a curated selection of rare limited-edition watches by Panerai, Patek Philippe, and other top-tier brands. Nearby Watch Center and Taleda offer a wider range of brands, models and prices.



A bartender prepares a drink at Auberge, a cozy bistro that features items like salads, ceviches and tuna and shrimp tartar. Andrea Wyner for The New York Times

9) 4 p.m. NOBEL HOUSE

For more than 40 years, the writer and Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse lived in the tiny hamlet of Montagnola on the Collina d'Oro or "golden hill" that rises behind Lugano to the west. Today a small museum (admission 8.50 Swiss francs), featuring personal items such as his desk, typewriter, glasses, souvenirs of his travels in Asia and elsewhere, as well as selections of his writings and beautiful watercolors of the surrounding countryside, provide a vivid sense of Hesse's cosmopolitan sensibility amid remnants of his simple country life. Signposts around the village mark other buildings that were relevant to his life, and mark his grave in a nearby cemetery. At the other edge of Montagnola — a three-minute stroll away — sits Ristorante Bellavista with a lovely terrace overlooking a pastoral landscape tumbling down the hillside toward the lake. An aperitivo of Ticinese cheeses and cured meats with two glasses of wine will set you back 35 Swiss francs.

10) 8:30 p.m. MULTITASK THE NIGHT AWAY

Lugano seems to be catching the wave of multi-function nightspots where happening restaurants segue into meditative whiskey bars before becoming speakeasy-style clubs that rock until the small hours. That's the progression at Auberge, a cozy bistro with a menu that's heavy on light fare like salads, ceviches and tuna and shrimp tartar in small (10 to 18 Swiss francs) and large (20 to 35 Swiss francs) portions. After dinner, head upstairs to a multiroom cocktail lounge (specialty cocktails, 10 to 15 Swiss francs) that can handily occupy your evening from suppertime to almost sunrise.



Monte San Salvatore, with its slightly bulbous profile, is known as the Sugar Loaf of Lugano.

Andrea Wyner for The New York Times

Sunday

11) 10:45 FLOATING BRUNCH

On the second Sunday of every month, from July through October, there are special Sunday brunch boat tours (62 Swiss francs a person), with departures at 10:45 a.m. or noon. On other Sundays, one could bring a picnic on board a regular lake tour or, better yet, grab a boat to Gandria, the tiny village at the foot of Monte Bré near the Italian border and enjoy the first meal of the day in one of the charming taverns along the shoreline.

Lodging

A newcomer in the aptly named Paradiso neighborhood and a pioneer in the Lugano's nascent design hotel category, the 18-room **Hotel the View** (theviewlugano.com) maximizes its hillside perch with sweeping views of the lake and the city from virtually every spot in the hotel. Enhancements include a spa and indoor pool. Rooms from 1,350 Swiss francs.

A charming four-star historic grand hotel property, **Hotel International Au Lac Lugano** (hotel-international.ch) has 80 rooms with antique furnishings, a lively bar and a surprisingly spacious garden with an outdoor pool located right in the heart of Lugano. Doubles from \$260.

Correction: September 13, 2018

An earlier version of this article misstated the capital of the Swiss canton of Ticino. It is Bellinzona, not Lugano.

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