



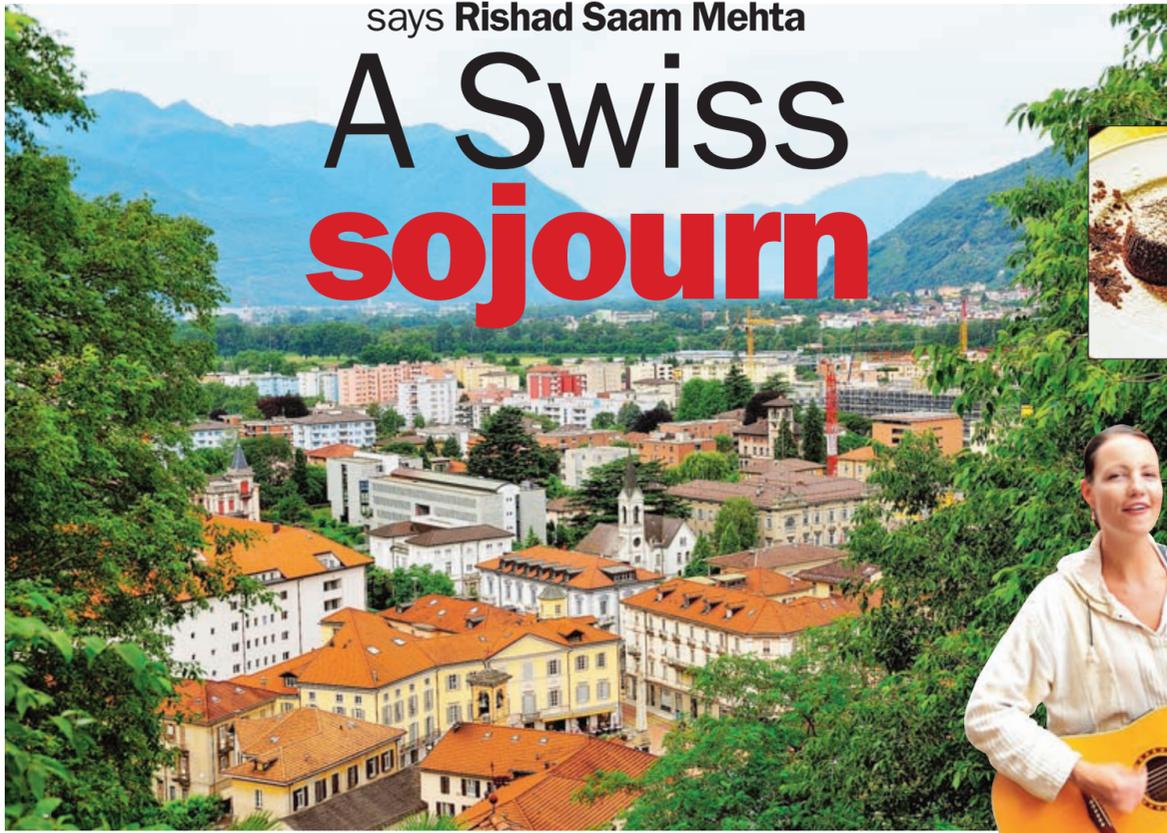
DESERT TALES



To ring in Independence Day this year, escape to Rajasthan where Mandawa Hotels has some great deals going. Desert Resort and Hotel Castle Mandawa in Jhunjhunu are offering 2-night and 3-day packages at Rs 12,599, which include accommodation, all meals, hour-long camel rides for two and lively cultural evenings. At Hotel Castle Mandawa you can spend time soaking in the castle's medieval turreted towers, palanquin-roofed balconies while revelling in its modern amenities. Desert Resort, a stone's throw from Castle Mandawa, also includes activities like horse riding, camel polo, a vintage car ride and much more — though at an extra cost. You could also check in at Mandawa Haveli in the heart of Jaipur and very close to its buzzing markets. Like its sister hotels, this combines the old world look with modern facilities. A 2-night and 3-day stay costs Rs. 8,799 including accommodation and all meals. The three packages are valid between August 13 and 31. Write to neeta.lal@mandawahotels.com or call +91-9873537070.

WAYFARER ▶ Sunshine, tranquil lakes and oodles of Swiss colour are what you get in Ticino Canton in southern Switzerland, says **Rishad Saam Mehta**

A Swiss sojourn



pleading *desi* food, then there's an Indian chef here who offers an Indian *thali* complete with *roti*, *sabzi*, *dal*, rice and chicken.

That night we were back in Ascona for dinner at Grotto Baldoria. Restaurants termed as grottos generally mean that there is a fixed menu for the day. But it was the two bottles of grappa and nocino that the waitress slammed down that really got the evening going.

It was only when the staff determinedly and pointedly started shifting the outdoor tables and chairs inside, that my company and I took the hint. Grappa is another Italian influence in Ticino and is made in this canton by distilling the Americana grape that grows here. It's prized for its aromatic qualities. Nocino is a liqueur made by soaking freshly chopped walnuts in grappa, spices and sugar in the sun for 40 days. It is a Ticino must try.

My last day was partly spent at Bellinzona, which was a 23-minute train ride

away from Locarno. Bellinzona has three castles — Castelgrande, Castello di Montebello and Castello di Sasso Corbaro. These make up the medieval fortifications of Bellinzona and have been together declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The profusion of castles is not surprising. Bellinzona is strategically positioned where the valley narrows en route to the Alpine ranges. In fact it is called the keyhole to the Alps and for years has been a bone of contention between the dukes of Milan and the Swiss. Today it is a lovely place to stroll through. The old town has beautiful piazzas and flamboyant mansions with stone gateways, balconies with wrought iron railing and intricate iron signs — indications of a rich bygone era.

But my most earnest piece of advice would be to have lunch at the Grotto Castelgrande, situated in the castle — though there is a menu you can choose from here. But do sit outside and eat, taking in the fantastic skyline views of Bellinzona.

Most of us go to Switzerland for the snow and the Alps, but Ticino, known for its sunshine and tranquil lakes, will amply reward the visitor. Walking trails, fantastic food, miles of pretty cycling routes and the opportunity to partake in soft adventure and discover charming little towns and villages — what more could a traveller ask for?

Photographs by author

Ready reckoner



be easily reached by train from Zurich. A Swiss Pass is valid on the rail network, buses as well as most funicular railways.

Staying there: Accommodation in hotels, camps, ranches and alpine huts suit all budgets. In Ticino, you can stay in the 3-star Hotel Tamaro au Lac (www.hotel-tamaro.ch), which faces Lake Maggiore at Ascona.

Getting there: Switzerland's national carrier, SWISS, flies directly from Delhi or Mumbai to Zurich at fares starting approximately from Rs 26,000. Ticino can



(Clockwise from top) The old town of Bellinzona; (inset) A delicious hot chocolate fondue with ice cream; A singer performs on a street in Lugano; Ascona is a pretty town on the edge of Lake Maggiore

boats in the little lakes and rivers. The park opened in 1959 and even today, there are artists at work creating new

models that are constantly added. And, oh, if you're fed up of pizzas and pastas and your stomach's

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It was a crisp and melodious strumming of an acoustic guitar that came floating on the breeze. And riding on the notes was a haunting voice. I didn't understand a word of the song (it was in gypsy dialect) but the voice and the tune were arresting. I quickened my pace across the red-tiled streets of Lugano, walking past open air cafés and 200-year-old buildings with shops selling some of the world's most la-di-dah brands.

The musician was a leggy blonde strumming her guitar through the streets of Lugano, while her friend followed with a tambourine and an upturned hat into which people could drop their appreciation.

I'd taken the train from Zurich all the way south to Locarno in the canton of Ticino. Switzerland is divided into 23 cantons and the countries they neighbour determine their popular language. So some cantons speak French, others German and yet others like Ticino, which is actually a prong of Switzerland cheekily intruding into Italy, that speak Italian.

My base in Ticino was the little town of Ascona, a 15-minute bus ride from the Locarno train station. Ascona sits pretty on the northern edge of Lake Maggiore and its lakeside promenade is the place to be. Owing to its proximity to Italy, all the cafés along the lakeside Piazza Giuseppe Motta serve delicious pizza and pasta. The one I went to —

Osteria Nostrana — had an open kitchen with two chefs rapidly rolling and spinning pizzas and the third manning the brick and wood oven. Each time he opened the oven door, a heady aroma of melting cheese and freshly baked bread wafted through the restaurant.

The next day I was in Lugano. My guide told me about the Lugano Jazz Festival — a huge open air jazz festival that marks the beginning of summer. The sunny weather, fashionable shops and the business attract the wealthy, so the casinos come as no surprise. In fact if you climb the pedestrian bridge just by the railway station and look across Lake Lugano, you'll see a big building that stands out. It houses the grand Casinò di Campione.

After lunch in Lugano — highlighted by a seductively sinful dessert of warm chocolate fondue with butterscotch ice-cream and whipped cream, sprinkled with dark chocolate shavings — I boarded a train to Melide. A short walk from Melide railway station is Swissminiatur — a park sprawled over 14,000sq m.

The park has over 120 models on a scale of 1:25. These represent the important buildings, monuments and forms of transport in Switzerland. I loved the attention to detail. Little trains chugged along, carrying a load of miniature cars and there were

Skin deep

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29
strongest in the market. On the other hand, it is used to create the softest flooring in terms of feel." For about Rs 650 per sq feet, walk on flooring which feels like the supple, textured skin of the buffalo, alligator or the Boa. Colours for the flooring vary from warm yellow to subdued black and brown. Moreover, the flooring can be treated like any other and just requires regular cleaning or vacuuming. Waxing it thoroughly once or twice a year helps maintain its sheen.

Stanley has tables and @Home even offers the head rests of beds in leather. Urban Scale has full-fledged bars, trunks, mirrors, chests and lamps as well. @Home's leather furniture is sourced from Malaysia, Indonesia and China. But if you want to move away from the living room, check out the suede-upholstered beds at Savoir, which start upwards of Rs 4 lakh. Meanwhile, Bobby Aggarwal of Portside Café in Delhi not only has quirky beds, dressers, tables, consoles but also chest of drawers and trunks in colours as varied as pink and green.

Says Bahl: "Contemporary leather sofas can be modified according to the space." But it is not as if the classic designs are completely on their way out. Naveen says: "Leather furniture from Cavalli is reminiscent of the furniture that was found on ships in the past and in vintage cars. So, these are essentially large, old fashioned pieces." Prices are on request.

Bring together the modern with a hint of the past in the Elizabeth sofa from Stanley with its Chesterfield back and arm rests. This is topped up with leather cushions em-



(Above) The Elizabeth Sofa from Stanley brings together elements of the classic Chesterfield sofa with contemporary touches; (Right) Urban Scale's leather bar with a crocodile skin finish not just provides storage but also screams style

bossed with silver work adding just that bit of bling to the room.

Abhay Gupta, executive director, Blues Clothing Company, which brought the House of Versace to India and has in addition launched Haute Monde, a leather furniture and accessories store, says: "For the living room you can have a fusion of modern and vintage designs in leather furniture. One can style the living room by using straight line leather furniture and add a classical wing chair in leather to create drama."

Leather recliners, in both single and three-seater avatars are another popular design. Prices start at Rs 60,000. Also the bigger sofas — the two- and three-seaters are more popular than the single-seaters. "The L-shaped sofa with a lounge, which

utilises space, as it can be placed in a corner, sells a lot," says Avijit Mitra CEO, Ebony Gautier.

Move beyond the sofas to pick up the über-cool bar from Auburn Scale with a crocodile skin finish. This is priced upwards of Rs 1.10 lakh depending on the level of customisation. Portside Café and Bullar too have bars in leather on offer.

Move away from the usual for the Balli Maran coffee table from Portside Café, priced at Rs 1.18 lakh. Done up in kitschy pink, green, brown and yellow leather this is cer-



LUXE LEATHER IN FURNITURE

- The thicker the leather — the better.
- If it feels soft and supple it means that it is good quality — bypass the stiffer varieties.
- Leather which does not have marks or minimal



- marks, is better.
- Down feathers, goose feathers and poly-fibres make it more comfortable.
- Use beech or other hard wood for the frame.

Designer Manjeet Bullar customises his leather products with traditional Indian embroidery

tainly an interesting addition to your drawing room.

COLOUR SCHEME

Leather is not just about darker tones of brown, black or maroon any more. These shades have now been replaced by cream, white and other pastel shades. Says Badrinath: "Leather furniture is easy to clean and maintaining a lighter shade is not too difficult." The added advantage is that lighter colours add to a sense of space. Moreover, sofas in these tones make it possible to play around with different shades in curtains, cushions and rugs.

But if neutral colours are too paleface for you, then seek stand-alone pieces like chaise lounges and chairs upholstered in shocking yellow or drop-dead red. Ideally the accompanying furniture in the room should be built around these statement pieces.

"Colours like orange and plum, which were unimaginable in leather earlier, are now available and picking up in popularity," says Raseel.

Aggarwal's two new collections — the Dak Bangla uses dark brown tan and antiques and the other Balli Maran collection is in bright colours.

The trend forecast for leather this season, according to Gupta of Haute Monde, includes tones of beige, brown and orange. Naveen adds that the very Indian colours do well — including blue, green and yellow. Cavalli, meanwhile is rooting for ochres, blacks and browns this season.

Enough reasons to chuck your fabric sofa for the one in oh-so-trendy leather?

Photographs by Rupinder Sharma