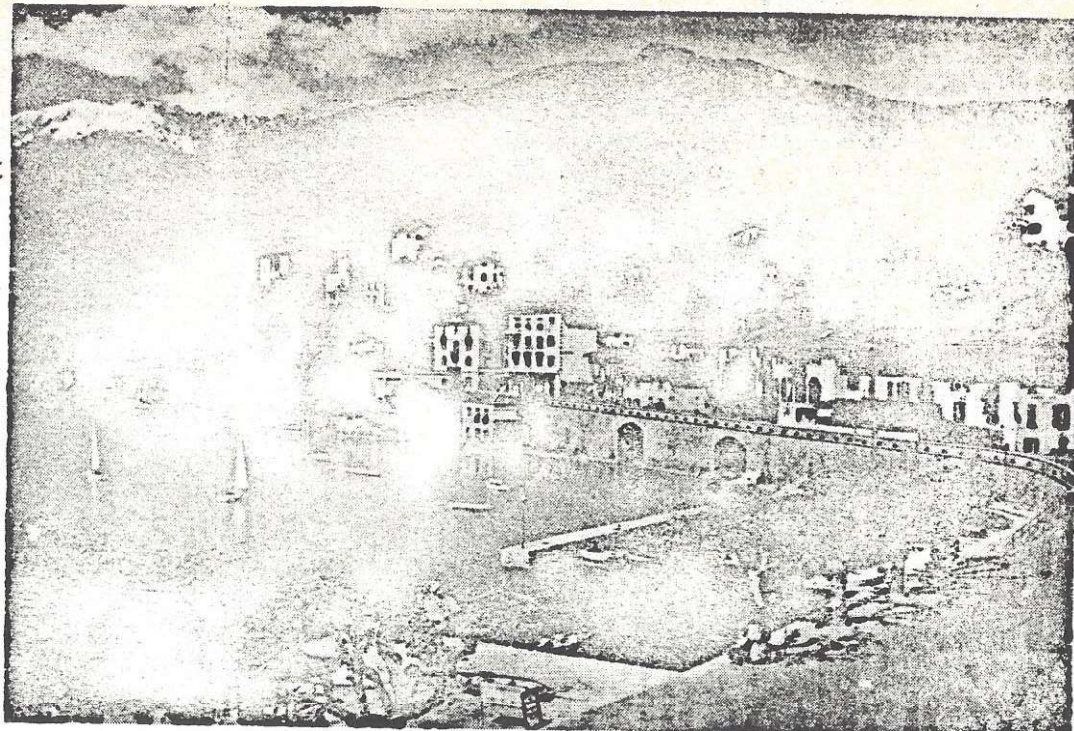


ON LAKE MAGGIORE—With the Alps behind and lovely Lake Maggiore in front, Ascona sits like a jewel in the Swiss province of Ticino. Below is the entrance to the Madonna del Socco Cathedral in nearby Locarno.



Photographs by Ponzetti, Ascona: Swiss National Tourist Office

Ascona Was a Hippie Haunt Before Turn of the Century

By JACK GOLDFARB

ASCONA, Switzerland—The entire world might be preoccupied with hippies these days, but this swinging resort on the banks of Lake Maggiore is so far ahead of its time that it had its hippie invasion before the turn of the century.

The same lovely setting that attracted the 19th-century hippies continues to lure tourists today, for Ascona has become an internationally famous artists colony. It has scores of galleries and antique shops, charming inns and boutiques, and it also is the site of a world-famous music festival.

In the summer of 1880, amid the profusion of prophecies and musings accompanying the countdown toward the new century, a young Belgian named Henri Oedenkoven had a vision of his own.

'Swindle of Civilization'

Fed up with what he called the "swindle of civilization," the "hypocrisy, sham and status-seeking" of his times, he set forth on foot from his wealthy family's Antwerp environment, and, together with his Austrian girl friend and a small band of dropouts, went searching for an ideal locale where they could set up a new society.

Their long hair fastened with forehead bands, and white togas flapping against their thin sandals, they tramped outward across Europe until they came upon an enchanting site just above this town in Ticino, the Italianate canton of Switzerland.

These turn-of-the-century hippies made the scene on a wooded hilltop overlooking sapphire-blue Lake Maggiore and surrounded by the peaceful grandeur of the Southern Lepontine Alps. Declaring themselves to Truth, Love and Brother-

hood, they grandly named their settlement Monte Verità, and on their "Mountain of Truth" they proceeded to do their thing.

The truth-seeking of the colony, combined with an assortment of nudism, tree-dwelling, vegetarianism and nature-loving, attracted considerable attention and rapidly earned Monte Verità a reputation as the enfant terrible among Swiss resorts.

Along with such illustrious intelligentsia as Lenin, Trotsky, Leoncavallo, Klee and Isadora Duncan, all of whom visited Ascona at that time, thousands of voyeuristic Sunday excursionists sailed up the lake from Italy, hoping to see the nudists and sample the reputedly erotic atmosphere.

World War I brought about the dispersal of the Monte Verità community; but the once-languid fishing hamlet of Ascona, now possessed of a "wicked past," went on to flourish as an international cultural center and fashionable resort. And it has been going full blast ever since.

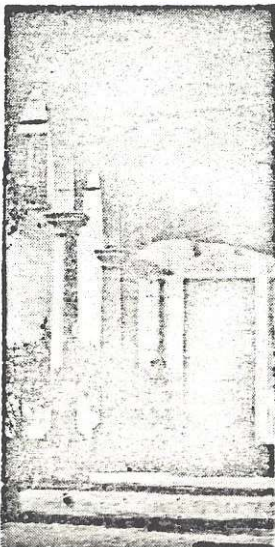
Atop Monte Verità today stands a handsome four-story hotel built during the twenties and bequeathed to Ticino Canton by Baron von der Heydt, an urbane German oriental art expert who operated the hotel for many years.

The baron's hospitality, embellished by his fabulous Asiatic art collection, endeared his hostelry to a host of prominent European personalities. Kings, statesmen, musicians, authors, industrialists, actors and artists beat a path to his door to find repose and to roam through the pine and birch woods inhabiting previously by Oedenkoven's hippies.

Nowadays, dark buses shuttle down

the steep hillside from Monte Verità to the old quarter of Ascona, the Borgo.

Clustered by the shore of Lake Maggiore are the quaint, pastel-hued houses that comprise the Borgo. The extended eaves of their maroon-tiled roofs cast shadows onto the geranium-studded balconies and the narrow, winding alleyways below. These vicoli, neatly paved with tiny red bricks in curving patterns,



are closed to automobile traffic but open to strollers.

Wandering through the Romanesque arcades, the visitor will discover art galleries, charming old inns, antique shops and boutiques. Even the latter somehow manage to blend in with the centuries-old atmosphere of the Borgo.

One turns a corner and unexpectedly finds a delicately painted Madonna frescoed on a garden wall, or a flight of stone angels carved into a niche beside the front door of a dwelling. These diminutive shrines, once used as way stations for church processions, are remarkably well-preserved.

Preserving the Past

In fact, the art of preserving the past in Ascona is a major industry pursued by dozens of craftsmen. The presence of so many picture restorers, bookbinders, sculpture and furniture repairers reflects this 2,500-year-old town's reverence for its artistic heirlooms.

Chief among these are the two Renaissance churches, Santa Maria della Misericordia and Santi Pietro e Paolo, from whose lofty belltowers the hours are chimed in a harmonious duet. These are constantly undergoing restoration, along with art treasures that adorn them—the paintings, frescoes, windows and statuary of the 15th and 16th centuries.

In Ascona, Renaissance art survives, but modern art thrives in a galaxy of exhibitions each year. The galleries derive clientele from the owners of the villas in the vicinity and the droves of visitors who arrive for the annual music and film festivals.

A number of artists, inspired by the scenic landscape and the brilliant Alpine sun, have chosen to settle in Ascona, and many set up easels in the crowded,

little vicoli or on the magnificent lakefront piazza.

The piazza is the center of Ascona's life—a hub without hubbub beside Lake Maggiore. The soft colors of the piazza—the citron, ochre, pale orange and pink of the houses and hotels—contrast with the dark greens of the plane trees at the water's edge and the bottle-green cypresses and palms silhouetted against the massive mountains.

While sailboats, motorboats and pedal boats maneuver offshore, the more leisurely members of Ascona's so-called Piazza Society flock to the Schiff, Al Porto and other lakefront cafes for their sipping, sitting and sunning.

Beyond the piazza, past the crenelated walls of ancient Grigioni Castle (now incorporated into a modern hotel), is the public beach, where boating, water-skiing and snorkeling are popular until the end of October. Farther along the shore are the Ascona Golf Club, tennis courts and campground for tents and trailers.

In the summer, cars bearing license plates from all over Europe pass through the piazza. From here, one can head a few miles south to the Italian province of Novara or drive even less than that distance north to Locarno, the gateway to the Ticino valleys.

Most Crowded in September

The piazza is most crowded in September. This is when Ascona's Settlement Musical, the music festival starring such artists as Rubinstein, Richter, Menuhin, Milstein, Oistrakh and Segovia, holds sway. Many of the concerts are presented in a moonlit cloister garden.

An annual international film festival in neighboring Locarno is now held at the same time as the music fest, despite strong objections by the Asconesi.

However, the actual times of performances rarely overlap.

Ascona's historical ties include a plaque affixed to the veranda of the Elvezia Hotel; it recalls that the foundations were laid here in 1925 for the Locarno Pact, that noble accord intended to maintain post-World War I peace.

Secret Meeting

And in 1943, Allen Dulles, then United States Ambassador to Switzerland, secretly met with the Nazis in a private house in Ascona, where they negotiated the cessation of hostilities on the Italian battlefield.

Accommodations for tourists in Ascona come in the widest variety. First-class hotels range from \$14 to \$24 a person a day (the rate includes full board), and in summer there are one-room vacation apartments available at \$46 a week.

The best way to reach Ascona is by train to Locarno, a 10-minute bus ride away. There is also a Lake Maggiore ferry from Locarno to Ascona and a hydrofoil that links Locarno with Stresa in Italy. There, connections can be made for Paris and Rome aboard the Orient Express.

Many notable personalities reside in Ascona. Among them are Eric Maria Remarque and his wife Paulette Goddard, Herbert von Karajan, Robert Schindler and Elizabeth Schwartzkopf.

Frequently called a paradise, Ascona is indeed a Swiss tax paradise—not yet lost. This is another reason why the affluent residents began moving here years ago, when "a house in Ticino" was not the status symbol it is today.

And wouldn't old Oedenkoven and his hippies shake their hairy heads in dismay, if they could see the place today?