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The picture-postcard village

A stroll through the village of Morcote in Ticino. The hamlet idyllically located on Lake Lugano was recently crowned Switzerland's most beautiful village.

GERHARD LOB

The best way to arrive is by ferry in the sunshine. Then the view of Morcote is truly breathtaking. It nestles along the slopes at the foot of Monte Arbostora – old fishermen's houses, aristocratic villas, jetties and red shingle roofs. Towering above it is the village's religious centre with the parish church of Santa Maria del Sasso, its distinctive bell tower and the monumental cemetery built on terraces. It can be reached by walking up 404 steps – a strenuous undertaking during the summer. Those who climb even higher will find vineyards.

Morcote has long been a magnet for tourists. The village with its narrow winding streets and quaint arcades, restaurants on the shore of the lake and numerous attractions appeals to holidaymakers from Ger-

man-speaking Switzerland and Germany in particular. It therefore did not come as a great surprise when Morcote won the prize of "Switzerland's most beautiful village 2016" last October, a competition launched by "Schweizer Illustrierte", the French-language "L'illustré", the Sunday newspaper "Il Caffè" published in Italian and the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG). It should be pointed out that only communes with no more than 3,000 inhabitants were considered in the online vote. Morcote has a population of just under 750.

Historic privileges

The village can look back on a history spanning many centuries. In around 1100, Morcote was the site of a castle for surveillance of maritime traffic. In 1422, it obtained privileges from the Dukes of Milan, including tax exemptions and self-administration, fishing and market rights. Morcote came under Swiss rule in 1517 and was allocated to the bailiwick of Lugano. Trade, fishing and farming made it wealthy. There was also significant revenue from emigrant artists. As nearby Bissone produced the world-famous Francesco Borromini, Morcote can boast the architect Giuseppe Fossati. His last descendant, Gaspare Fossati, built palaces in Is-

tanbul and restored the Hagia Sophia mosque.

These figures could hardly have imagined Morcote's latest architectural achievement, a gigantic, seven-storey car park built into the mountain that was officially opened in December 2015. It has 300 parking spaces, half for local residents and the other half for visitors. This resolved a tricky issue for the village – the shortage of parking. The traffic passing through the main street nevertheless continues as it is a shortcut for cross-border commuters during rush hour. "We plan to block off the road running along the lake completely at certain times and turn it into a pedestrian area," remarks Nicola Brivio, Morcote's mayor. These plans are currently still some way off.

A visit in late autumn

"This place is an absolute gem," enthuses a German tourist wandering through the narrow streets in late autumn. There are only a few visitors at this time of year. An indication of this is also provided by the shops, some of which close until March. The tourist office is only open in the mornings. "People are now still visiting at weekends thanks to the award," reveals the manager of the grocery store called La Botega.

The impressive Parco Scherrer, on the road out of the village towards Figgino, is also closed during the winter. In 1930, Hermann Arthur Scherrer, a wealthy textiles trader and art lover from St. Gallen, purchased the land to create oriental terraced gardens there.

A view of "Switzerland's most beautiful village" from Lake Lugano in summer. Morcote, a hamlet steeped in history with a population of 750, primarily appeals to tourists from Switzerland and Germany.

Photo: Ticino Turismo

Amidst cypresses, camellias, camphor trees, eucalyptus, cedars, palm trees and bamboos there is also a Siamese tea house and an Egyptian temple in miniature. It is well worth visiting this unique location as well as exploring the many historical buildings.

The honour of being crowned Switzerland's most beautiful village was greeted with great excitement in Morcote. The award ceremony was even broadcast on live television on RSI. Nobody here doubts the beauty of this place, which is included in the Inventory of Swiss Heritage Sites (ISOS). Certain reservations have nevertheless been raised about practical considerations. "Visiting a place like Morcote as a tourist is one thing, but living here is something entirely different," observes an estate agent in the arcades.

The residents of the historic centre have nowhere to park their cars. Satellite dishes are also banned. The mayor, Nicola Brivio, does not regard such restrictions as significant, commenting: "Living in Morcote is about opting for a certain lifestyle, not convenience."

Morcote is the fifth place to be voted Switzerland's most beautiful village. While the competition was restricted to French-speaking Switzerland until 2014, it has been open to nominations of villages from all over the country since 2015. Villages in German-speaking Switzerland are having a tough time though. The finalists in the second last event were villages from Valais, the Jura and Romansh-speaking Grisons – and the competition was won by Soglio, a place right on the edge of Switzerland.

