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Campo – once a flourishing location, now a ghost village

The village of Campo, in Ticino, was once home to fabulously wealthy merchants who travelled to Italy and Germany from 1670. In the 1960s, the remaining families moved down to the plain. Today, fewer than one-tenth of homes in the village are inhabited all year round. Report by Stéphane Herzog.

STEPHANE HERZOG

On the post bus from Cevio to Campo, a boy is playing with his smartphone. He alights at Niva, a small village in Val Rovana. This Ticino valley is nestled in the heart of Val Maggia, north of Locarno. He is the only child of school age in the village of Campo. “I’d be happy to pay for a school bus if only there were 20 children here,” says mayor Mauro Gobbi. He tots up the number of permanent residents in the four villages that make up the municipality. Today, there are 35 of them, down from 250 in the 1950s and from around a thousand at the beginning of the 20th century. Campo has the highest percentage of second homes in Switzerland - 90.3%. The municipality lists 312 homes, but only



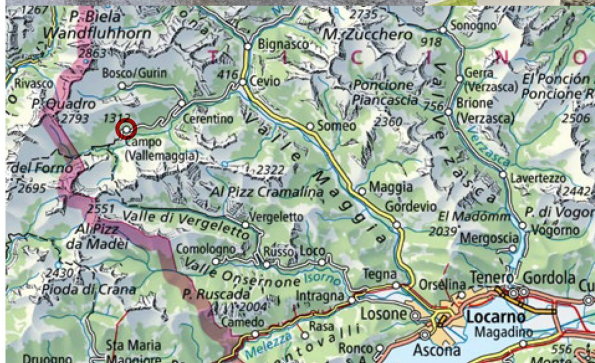
Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records

Today: We visit the municipality with the highest proportion of second homes in Switzerland.

around 30 are inhabited all year round. Just like other high-altitude valleys in Ticino, Val Rovana lost three-quarters of its population between 1860 and 1980.

The bus stops in the village of Campo, at an altitude of 1,300 metres. Lofty ‘palazzi’ adorned with frescoes loom from the mist. These structures used to house wealthy families, although the men of the households were often merchants who began to leave for Italy and Germany in the late 17th century to seek their fortune. Gaspare Pedrazzini (1643-1724) was one such merchant. He ran a colonial goods store in Kassel. Alongside its two chapels and its elegant Stations

of the Cross, Campo also had French-style gardens. Gentlemen would parade through the town on horseback. On our way through, we stop to admire some former barns converted into second homes. Not a soul in sight! The ambiance is surreal. Here we are at Fior di Campo, a small luxury hotel whose balconies look out over Val Romana. “The view is unusually open for Ticino,” says the hotel’s owner, Vincenzo Pedrazzini. In the distance, a herd of deer goes ambling by. Pedrazzini bought the property and converted it to a hotel 12 years ago, with the aim of bringing trade back to this spot in Ticino. His family has its roots here. In Campo, as in Ticino in general, the sur-



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name of Pedrazzini is synonymous with wealth and success. “Some people think I’m a lord of the manor, but I’m first and foremost a kid from Campo,” says the master of the house, who used to run a law firm in Zurich and was vice-president of The Liberals (FDP). Most of the ‘palazzi’ in the village belong to this family, and the family name is to the fore in Campo’s cemetery. What was the secret of their success? “The efforts made by some of Campo’s residents to educate their children,” replies Vincenzo Pedrazzini. Most of the rich Ticino merchants who returned to Switzerland during the Napoleonic Wars chose to leave the country for good. They emigrated to the Americas and to Australia, as did tens of thousands of other Ticino residents. Most of these residents were driven to leave by poverty.

Campo’s summer reawakening

As a child, Vincenzo made hay and milked cows with the other people of Campo. “We were rich, but the others weren’t poor,” he says. The local dignitary began his project of buying up, renovating and reselling almost ten houses and chalets in 2012. “No one will live there all year round, but at least it’ll get people to come to the village,” the former lawyer believes. Every summer, Campo reawakens as dozens of Ticino families arrive to make the most of the cool nights and the precious peace and quiet. “The women and children arrive in mid-June and stay until mid-August, while the men go back and forth between their jobs and Campo,” according to Vincenzo. “We are not talking about empty beds, here,” he insists. In his

view, the law proposed by ecologist Franz Weber to cap the number of second homes in Switzerland at 20 percent does not take account of the country’s diversity. It is true that not many local residents pop round to Fior di Campo for a drink. The fact that the bar is primarily intended for hotel customers has certainly rubbed some people up the wrong way.

No more cows and no more schools

Marco and his wife Olga set up home a stone’s throw from the hotel. They know it like the back of their hand, since she used to be the manager there and he was the chef. Olga was born in this area. Marco has a collection of village mementos. In an adjoining storage area, he shows us a piece of furniture dating from 1770. On the wall are two large boards fea-



Walking home alone in the rain: the only school pupil in Campo (far left).

The historic picturesque countryside of Campo, right beside a carefully renovated building that today serves as a second home.

A ‘Da vendere’ (For Sale) sign, a common sight in Campo (left).

Chapel in Campo: the coat of arms of the Pedrazzini family hangs above the main entrance (centre).

The house where the employees of the local village inn once lived (right).

Photos: Stéphane Herzog

turing dozens of photos, protected by glass, of Campo residents who emigrated to the US in the early 20th century. Olga remembers what the village was like when she was 20 years old, in the early 1960s. At that time, Campo still had a school, and its families still owned cows. The farmers passed on. Their children learned other trades in Locarno and got married. "I watched Campo die: its doors began to close, and they never reopened, except in summer," she says. Olga cannot see a future for this valley. Its mayor, Mauro Gobbi, is doing what he can. He recalls the efforts to stem the 'frana', the potential landslide large enough to engulf the village. Work on a Herculean scale was done in the 1980s and 1990s to shore up the ground.

"Come and live here!"

The municipality decided to reduce its local taxes. It renovated some of

its buildings, such as the Cimalmotto School (above Campo). The school became apartments, three of which are currently rented as second homes. These measures drew in some retirees, but no families. In Niva, where Gobbi lives, the municipal council is pinning its hopes on restoring the former school, which closed in 1967, to solve the problem. The school could become two apartments where people could live "even in the winter", the mayor hopes.

He too is up in arms against Weber's law, which according to him has made renovating properties more difficult. Covid ushered in the era of remote working. A lawyer from Lugano, for example, spends part of the year working from Cimalmotto. Gobbi has also just launched a campaign to encourage people to come and live up here in the mountains. There is always the option of converting your second home into a permanent residence.

Mayor Mauro Gobbi (top left) is hoping to see some impetus; Olga speaks of the village she saw die (right); Vincenzo Pedrazzini (bottom), on the other hand, believes in the power of investment.

Photos: Stéphane Herzog

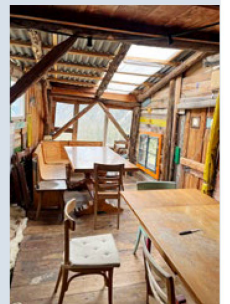


The Senn family get back to nature

Life in the vicinity of wolves, against a backdrop worthy of the "Lord of the Rings". The Senn family, including their six children, have been enjoying this adventurous lifestyle since the 1980s. These "hippies" from the canton of Zurich settled on a plot of land in a place known as Munt la Reita. This remote pasture, which at the time featured only three small stables, is now home to an organic farm whose products include cheese and meat. It hosts hikers, schoolchildren and voluntary workers. Visitors can choose between sleeping in a yurt on the side of the hill, in their tent or in small wood cabins. In the evening, the river Rovana lulls them to sleep. During the day, they can help gather aromatic herbs or hike up to the Magnello Alpine pasture, at an altitude of 1,800 metres. The lady of the house here is Verena. She used to be a librarian, and is now a farmer. Markus, who died in 2022, was a ty-



Samuel Senn



Verena Senn

pographer. He built everything here with his own hands, and the help of friends and family. These pioneers made their dream come true: "We wanted to farm the land organically and show our children real life," explains Verena. Their arrival drew scorn initially. The Senns originally stayed in the Campo church hall. "It was cold in there, but we're resilient!" laughs Samuel Senn, who is still up in the mountains with his brothers Eli and Luca and his sister Gabriela.

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