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Childhood memories of Monte San Giorgio

Auckland club member Lukas Lanz shares a very personal story about Monte San Giorgio and its hidden dinosaurs.

Monte San Giorgio became a UNESCO world heritage site in 2003 because it has produced numerous fossils from the Triassic Period (245 – 230 million years ago) in exceptional detail and completeness. It gives us a unique window into what life must have looked like in the sea and on land at that time.



Mysterious dinosaur mountain

Blissfully unaware...

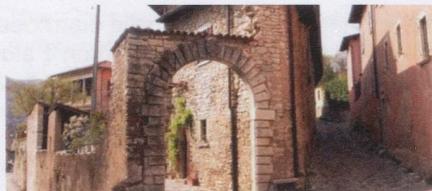
But of course I was blissfully unaware of all that when I was young and we used to spend our family summer vacation in the beautiful mountain village of Meride on the slopes of San Giorgio. It was a totally different world and not only because people there spoke a language I didn't understand.

After the long train ride to the southernmost part of Switzerland, the good old Postauto carried us from the bustling center of Mendrisio past the marble quarries of Arzo to ever higher and smaller villages, heavily using its "TüTaTo" horn while negotiating the narrow bends of the mountain roads, until it reached Meride.

Of course, it had to stop outside the village as the small roads (or should I rather say the small road) didn't provide enough room for a large vehicle and were mostly car free anyway. So we had to walk the last leg of the journey through narrow streets and paths past small stone houses with few small openings, designed to preserve coolness inside but looking rather unwelcoming from the outside.

It was always exceptionally quiet so you never knew whether any of the roughly 300 inhabitants were home at all. Of course, all of this changed once you entered one of the old wooden gates and stepped into the courtyard of say one of the grottos framed by pergolas overgrown with the omnipresent vines.

All of a sudden, you knew where all the locals had gone!



The empty streets of Meride
<http://www.mendrisiottoturismo.ch>

On the numerous (for us young all too long) hikes on the mountain, we learned that San Giorgio has much more to offer than just the saurians.

Cradled by two arms of the Lago di Lugano, Monte San Giorgio is favoured by a warm and mild climate which leads to a dense vegetation and makes it home to, among others, 37 threatened species on the Swiss species Red List. Where the vegetation recedes, you are rewarded with magnificent views over parts of the Sottoceneri and northern Italy.

There were a lot of other things that were more appealing to the adventurous nature of us two boys. I remember for example sliding down the slopes of little streams on shales, exploring the Grotta Bögia cave, rare encounters with venomous asp vipers or the cute little fire salamanders.



Fire salamander
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

Excavating dinosaurs

We spending our vacation in Meride was no coincidence at all. My father Heinz Lanz, who is retired now, used to work as a paleontological preparator and photographer for the University of Zurich and was therefore taking part in many paleontological excavation at various sites around Monte San Giorgio. When I was older, I joined in in the experience for one day and learned how tedious and at the same time demanding the excavation work really is.

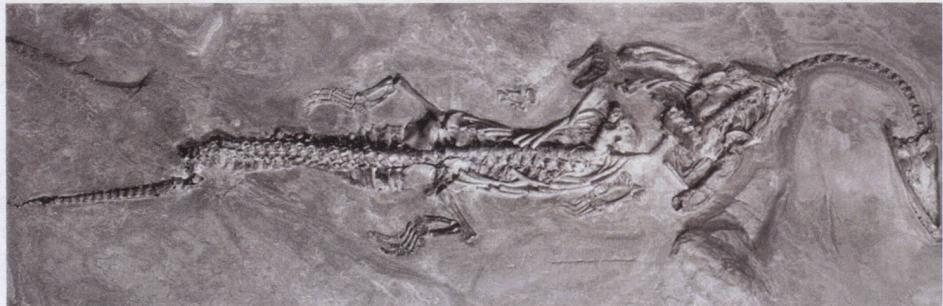


Heinz Lanz during his excavations

If you read about the abundance of fossils on Monte San Giorgio, you could be forgiven to think that they just lie there on the ground, ready for pick-up. Far from it. First, you have to find a place where you know that the geological layers bearing fossils come close to the surface. Once the vegetation and top soil is removed from the site, the real work starts. You have to get down on your hand and knees, and remove the stone piece by piece with a small hammer and chisel so as not to destroy any potential find.

Only a very skilled and trained eye spots the slight irregularities in the stones surface that tells you that embedded in the piece of stone you are holding, there could potentially be the next paleontological sensation. Often, hours and even days pass without finding anything, just loosening one piece of rock, inspecting it and throwing it aside. Rinse and repeat.

Cont. on page 5



Ceresiosaurus lanzi

The Triassic and the Thetys Sea

... Cont. from page 4

Once you have an indication that the rock in front of you contains something worthwhile, you have to find the extent of the fossil by examining the surroundings, keeping in mind that the pressures in the tectonic plates that pushed up the Alps may have twisted and crushed it into all sorts of shapes. Once everything is loosened, it is cast in plaster and secured in a wooden frame for transport to the preparator's lab.

Mind you, at that stage you still don't have a clear idea what you have found. In innumerable hours of precision work, the bones and structures of the fossils are freed from the surrounding stone with instruments as exotic as gramophone needles (the older amongst us remember those). Only at the end of this whole process, the fossil is ready for photographs, identification and either archiving or putting on display. **To be fair, after waiting for millions of years, those fossils have probably given up hope of getting out quickly anyway!**

A dinosaur becomes part of the Lanz family

200 million years ago, the five distinct fossiliferous levels of the Monte San Giorgio were most likely a sea basin whose bottom was poor in oxygen which prevented organisms that died there and sunk to the ground from decomposition. Apart from vertebrates, there are also fossils of fishes, insects, ammonites, crustaceans and plants to be found. Since the excavations started in 1924, over 10,000 discoveries have been made and many new species discovered, many of which have names relating to the region such as the Helveticosaurus, the Ticinosuchus or the Ceresiosaurus, after the Italian name of the Lake Lugano. **In honor of his long standing service to the institute of paleontology of the University of Zurich, one of the Ceresiosaurus species was even named after my father so that since 2004 there is a Ceresiosaurus lanzi!**

Whatever your interests are, fossils, hikes, biking, plants and animals, wellness or even just a quiet boccalino in one of the grottos (which some consider to fall under the wellness category as well), maybe even with a game of boccia, this little unassuming mountain in the very south of Switzerland has it all and a visit cannot be recommended highly enough.

Thetys Sea

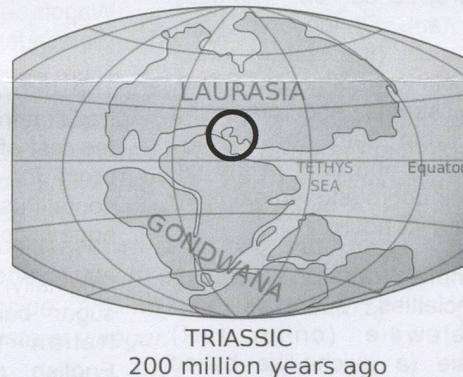
In the beginning, there was a great sea...

Throughout the Triassic geological period (252–201 million years ago), the earth's landmasses were combined into one large super continent, Pangaea. This was surrounded by a vast ocean called Panthalassa. At the equator, an arm of this ocean intruded deeply into the centre of Pangaea, giving rise to an ancient sea, the Tethys. This divided two large continents: Gondwana in the south and Laurasia in the north.

The Tethys sea included two basins of different ages, the Palaeotethys in the north and the Neotethys in the south. This was divided by the Cimmerian continent, a strip of land composed of many small plates. At the western end of the Tethys (see circle below), the story of Monte San Giorgio and the Southern Alps unfolded.

Scientists believe that Monte San Giorgio's oldest rocks once belonged to Africa, or at least a part of it known as the Adriatic Plate. This is why the rocks of Sottoceneri region around Lugano (the region south of Mt Ceneri) are often associated with the African continent.

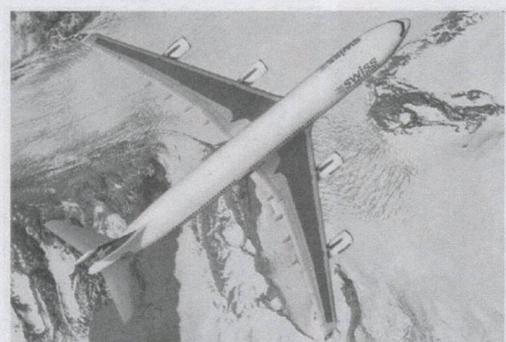
Source: www.montesangiorgio.org/en/Monte-San-Giorgio/Il-periodo-Triassico/In-principio-era-il-mare.html



Planet earth during the Triassic period. The continents Laurasia and Gondwana are separated by the shallow Thetys sea.

Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Laurasia-Gondwana.svg

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