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Mendrisiotto – a Swiss Gem, Where Prehistoric and Medieval History Meet Art, Wine and Culinary Delights

SEPTEMBER 22, 2019 BY ERICA HARGREAVE

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In planning my recent trip to Switzerland, much to the surprise of travel experts, I wanted to plan the trip around a visit to Monte San Giorgio and the [Village of Meride](#). I suspect they were surprised that I knew of the existence of Meride, as it is tucked away in [Mendrisiotto](#), the southernmost district of the canton of [Ticino](#) and of [Switzerland](#), surrounded on three sides by Italy. Despite Ticino being a vacation destination for many Swiss, typically the focus is on the larger destinations of Lugano, Locarno, and Bellinzona – many people are unfamiliar with Meride.



Village of Meride

So why was I so focused on visiting Meride? Well, you see the village of Meride sits on the slopes of [Monte San Giorgio](#), which hosts an ancient fossil bed. Like the Burgess Shale in the Canadian Rockies, this mountain hosts ancient sea creatures hiding away in the rocks!!! You see 230 to 245 million years ago, this [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#) was a 100-metre-deep ocean basin, leaving behind fish, reptiles, invertebrates and plants, hidden in the rock of this mountain, from the middle Triassic period.



Ancient sea creatures from Monte San Giorgio.

Truth be told, when I saw my schedule, that was only going to allow me to visit the museum, and not hike Monte San Giorgio or visit any of the paleontological dig sites, I was worried that the day might be a bit of a disappointment. Wow, was I ever wrong. While I absolutely do NEED MUCH MORE TIME in Meride and the rest of Mendrisiotto, this was one of my most favourite days in Switzerland that left me with a small taste of the wonderfully fascinating and tasty array of experiences to be had in Mendrisiotto.



Having worked as a Natural and Cultural History Interpreter in my teens and twenties, and currently studying educational technologies, I have to admit, I am a bit of a critical museum visitor. [Museo dei Fossili di Meride](#) (the Fossil Museum of Monte San Giorgio) blew me away, and I needed much more time to properly explore. I could have spent all day there alone – not to mention also visiting one of the dig sites and hiking Monte San Giorgio's interpretive trail. The time that I did spend was incredible, and I was fortunate to spend it with Museum Director Daniele Albisetti, nerding out to paleontology and many of the marine organisms that I studied in my biology days, as we followed the timeline of creatures found in Monte San Giorgio up through the strata of geological time. More on all of that in later articles to come here and on [StoryToGo.ca](#).

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So many more place to go back and explore.



Talking crinoids with Daniele.

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Fossilized Grinoids!!!

Before we leave the museum though, I'd be remiss not to mention the incredible architecture of this space. The architecture alone is worth the visit. I love how the exterior of this place fits seamlessly into the historic village of Meride, while inside it has been transformed into a newer, state of the art architectural gem and well designed museum space. Once inside, it is easy to forget that you are in the heart of a village dating back to the 9th Century.

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Any disappointment of being whisked away from Museo dei Fossili di Meride disappeared when we were welcome to [Osteria La Guana](#) by Petra Bernasconi with her warmth and stories, and Silvio's tasty dishes. This was certainly my favourite dining experience on this visit to Switzerland. I am not sure if this is how meals at Osteria La Guana always work, as I do see that there is a menu [here](#), but on that day, Petra, told us and guests at other tables what she recommended, and we simply said, "Yes, please." or more aptly "Sì grazie!" – something that we were very much rewarded for with one of the tastiest meals I have enjoyed in Switzerland yet. More on that whole dining experience in a post to come, as that was a meal that deserves a post of all it's own. Just trust me when I say "Do NOT skip the salad."



Do NOT skip the salad.



Gotta love eating local.

The [food](#) and [wine](#) of Mendrisiotto are definitely things that I wish to experience more of when I one day return. They have local culinary classes and you can [partake in the harvest](#), which is a bit of culture that I always love participating in. There is no greater way to be embraced by people than when working hard alongside them in the beautiful outdoors, helping to bring in the harvest. And then to share in the intimacy of learning from the locals how to craft the dishes that bring them comfort and pleasure is such a wonderful gift. As we talked food and wine, I learned that Mendrisiotto is a culture defined by stone – stone that holds the fossils, stone that crafted jobs in

both extraction and craftsmanship, stone that holds archaeological evidence of past civilizations, and stone that makes this region of Ticino unique in its ability to grow white grape varieties of wine.



Indulging in a local Mendrisiotto white wine – [Punto 902](#)
[Bianco del Ticino](#).

I got to explore more of the archaeological secrets of Mendrisiotto's stone, after lunch at the [Parco Archeologico di Tremona](#) (Tremona-Castello Archaeological Park). This was all kinds of cool on a number levels. Firstly, this is an active archaeological dig site, that is uncovering a mediaeval settlement, that you can actually visit and walk around, without everything being cordoned off – allowing visitors to experience first hand, without the restrictions of barriers, and as they enjoy a nature hike. Secondly, this excavation is quite unique in that it is uncovering daily life in a rural mediaeval village without a castle nearby that is also getting uncovered, and as they have yet to find a nearby source of water for the village, it leaves many questions awaiting the archaeologists that are working on it's excavation. Finally, the City of Mendrisio, together with the Regional Tourism Organisation of Mendrisiotto and Basso Ceresio, under the technical supervision by the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), have create an audio and visual interpretive tour of the site using mixed reality glasses and animated 3D mockups of what archaeologists believe the village would have looked like in it's prime. Stay tuned for a more detailed post here on my visit to the Archaeological Park, and on me nerding out on the XR experience on [StoryToGo.ca](#). I am very much looking forward to seeing how this site and it's XR technologies evolve on a future visit to the site, as there is so much here that is still waiting to be discovered.



A beautiful Spring day at Tremona-Castello Archaeological Park.

Who knows, maybe that will even involve a visit with the archaeologists uncovering the site, to learn from them first hand.



Travelling through time at Tremona-Castello Archaeological Park with mixed reality goggles.

In the meantime, I shall have to satiate my adventures in Mendrisiotto with writing, reading, and dreaming about it and whats to come.



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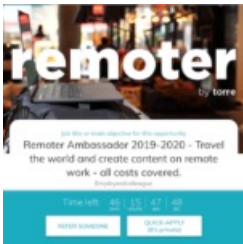


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