

Malpensa and the airports

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The international airport of the region is Malpensa, in the province of Varese, about forty kilometres from the Swiss border. In 2025 it handled 31.2 million passengers, 9 per cent more than in 2024, and a record 759,400 tonnes of freight. Together with Milan's city airport, Linate, which handled 11.1 million passengers, the airport company SEA recorded 42.3 million passengers and operating revenue of EUR 876.8 million.¹ For Lugano, Malpensa has replaced the local airport of Lugano-Agno as the point of departure for most international flights, a development accelerated by the end of scheduled services at Agno. The airport had been the base of Darwin Airline until its bankruptcy, and it lost its last year-round scheduled route, to Zurich, when Adria Airways, which operated it for Swiss International Air Lines, collapsed in September 2019. In April 2020 the company that ran the airport decided to go into liquidation.² The direct train from Ticino to Malpensa, which the Mendrisio–Varese line made possible, has turned the Milanese airport into a Ticinese airport in all but name.

1 Housing and real estate

The cross-border labour market has a distinctive effect on housing. Because tens of thousands of the people who work in Ticino live in Italy, employment growth in the canton does not translate fully into demand for housing. On 1 June 2025 Ticino counted 4,936 vacant dwellings, 7.0 per cent fewer than a year earlier, and a vacancy rate of 1.92 per cent, the lowest in eight years but still well above the national average of about one per cent.³ The differences within the canton are large. The Mendrisiotto, the district most exposed to cross-border commuting, had the highest vacancy rate at 3.88 per cent, and among the fourteen largest municipalities Chiasso had the highest rate at 7.58 per cent. The Locarnese had the lowest district rate at 1.02 per cent, and Gambarogno the lowest municipal rate at 0.61 per cent.⁴ About 80.6 per cent of the vacant dwellings were offered for rent.

The figures reflect two different markets. In the border towns of the Mendrisiotto, where many jobs are held by commuters and many residents have left for the Luganese or Italy, housing demand is weak and vacancy high. In the Locarnese, which has the lowest vacancy rate of the canton, and on the lakes, demand from Swiss and foreign buyers of second homes and from wealthy new residents keeps vacancy low and prices high. On the Italian side, the incomes of the cross-border workers, paid in francs, support property prices and consumer spending in the municipalities of the twentykilometre band, which explains why the Italian border municipalities defend the old tax regime and the compensation payments so firmly.⁵ Cross-border commuters who wish to buy a dwelling near their place of work in Ticino may do so under the rules on the acquisition of real estate by persons abroad, which allow EU and EFTA cross-border commuters to acquire a secondary residence in the region of their workplace without authorization.⁶

2 Notes

1. SEA, press release on the 2025 accounts (above). ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Lugano Airport", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lugano_Airport (loss of the sole year-round scheduled service after the demise of Adria Airways in September 2019; liquidation of the airport company in April 2020; no regular flights as of March 2025), used as a last resort. ↩
3. USTAT, Notiziario statistico 2025-29 (Giubiasco, 2025), https://www3.ti.ch/DFE/DR/USTAT/allegati/news/254739ns_2025-29.pdf. National vacancy rate (Federal Statistical Office, press release of 9 September 2025). ↩
4. Ibid. ↩
5. USTAT, Notiziario statistico 2025-29 (above) (vacancy rate of 3.88 per cent in the Mendrisiotto, 7.58 per cent in Chiasso and 1.02 per cent in the Locarnese). The analysis of the Italian side is the author's. ↩

6. Federal Act of 16 December 1983 on the Acquisition of Real Estate by Persons Abroad (BewG/LAFE), SR 211.412.41, Art. 7 lit. j, <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-it/2/21/211.412.41-7-10.html> (no authorization needed for nationals of EU and EFTA States who "come frontalieri, acquistano un'abitazione secondaria nella regione del loro luogo di lavoro"). ↩

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