



THE ITALIAN LAKES

No plastic, no synthetics, no teabags. More Gucci than Reebok, where shopkeepers have old-fashioned manners, with old-fashioned time to chat to their customers and to lean on their doorposts when trade is slack. This is Lake Como, where the best transport is old-fashioned too—by water rather than by road.

Tourism is accepted but not encouraged to the detriment of the lakes' character; the locals see little point in improving the lakeside roads for the benefit of the coachloads. Potholes, hairpins and narrowness do not deter the Milanese weekenders from screeching round the corners, using their hands to gesticulate and smoke rather than steer. The terrified stranger, gingerly manipulating his hired car, has little time or inclination to admire the view. Far better, in this case, to let the boat take the strain.

Occupying a magnificent site on a promontory dividing Lake Lecco from the southern arm of Lake Como is my favourite village of all the picturesque villages bordering the lake—bellissimo Bellagio. The ochre splendour of the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni benevolently dominates the landscape. It must be one of the loveliest hotels in the world and in spite of the opulence of the gilt, crystal and hand-painted ceilings of its original villa existence, the atmosphere is never intimidating, perhaps because it is family-run. To dine on its wide terrace, overlooking the lake of course, watching the lights begin to flicker on the far side and the fireflies fluttering in the perfumed rose gardens below, must be the ultimate romantic experience.



Lake Como: citypictures.net

Bellagio is the hub of the boat network and consequently its natural languor is animated by the hum of waterborne traffic, hydrofoils and ferries for the benefit of the locals, as well as excursion boats for the visitors. The bustling hydrofoil will jet you up to Como, the furthest point of the lake, in no time, but hurrying is not really the appropriate pace. Rather devote 1½ hours to admiring the scenery, steamer-style. These venerable craft steer a stately course along and across the lake, linking tiny communities. They pass the Villa Balbianello, where Vanessa Redgrave and Edward Fox filmed 'A Month By the Lake', stop at the only island on the lake, Isola Comacino, for passengers to disembark for lunch, then proceed between the slopes of dark green pines punctuated by cypress exclamation marks, to the town which gave the lake its name, Como.

Approached by road, Como is a sprawling town of little appeal, but arriving by steamer involves no more hassle than stepping off the boat right into the heart of the old city. Near at hand are the duomo, exciting shops, good restaurants and cool pedestrianised streets. Ferries are frequent and cheap, so you can explore at whim.

Two steps away is picture-postcard Varenna, where an idyllic walk has been carved out along the water's edge, shaded by a wisteria-decked path. Follow it to the cluster of shops and church that make up the village, or climb up the warm, shiny steps to the Villa

Monasterio to admire the gardens and the view.

Around Lake Garda the situation is reversed. The roads are good and in view of the size of the lake (Italy's biggest) a car is the best means of seeing most variety. Excursion boats there are aplenty, efficient and very popular, but there is no ferry service and it can get expensive to indulge in more than a couple of trips across the bay.

In the south the scenery is not at all typical of the Lakes. The water widens out into a shallow reedy lagoon, and the mountains recede. Here is my favourite of the many resorts round the lake—Sirmione. Perhaps surprise is chief among the many charms of the little town. To reach it you must drive down a charmless four-mile causeway lined with hotels.



Lake Garda: www.eosnap.com

All the more delightful then is the discovery of old Sirmione, hidden behind a mediaeval wall and approached by a drawbridge, with a 13th century castle guarding its entrance. Here you must abandon your car and walk over the bridge. No hardship this, since the narrow streets are lined with enticing boutiques and there are plenty of restorative possibilities. I counted seven superb ice cream bars, with a range of flavours which a fortnight's stay would not exhaust. Vying for custom are two upmarket pizzerias. Forget any preconception of pizzas—these are made to order and topped with you-name-it ingredients. Not a bad idea to take pizza or ice and sit in the sun by the jetty, watching the boats, but keen photographers will puff up to the castle for the best view of sunbaked roofs and a lot of water in three directions.

A tour round this lake will discover a plethora of resorts. Desanzano and Riva are the biggest and perhaps the most attractive, since they both retain a strong national flavour—not be taken for granted in such popular tourist areas. Their colourful old ports, sun-bleached buildings, piazzas and elegant shops spell out Italy loud and clear.

If time is limited—and it takes four hours to drive round the lake without stopping (which would be a pity) settle for the eastern side where the aspect is open and sunny, while resorts like Limone on the western shore are squeezed between rock and water and lose their colour in the afternoon. I like Bardolino, famous for its excellent wine. The main square is lined with honey-coloured old buildings, with cafes on the ground floor. Designate Thursday for a visit, when the market stretches all along the lakeside. Malcesine, with its Scalieri castle looking like a toy fort, should not be missed, though its instant picturesqueness does mean that it gets very busy. From here you can take a cable car to Monto Baldo for truly fabulous views of mountains and lake.

One of Lake Garda's main attractions must be its proximity to other appealing tourist cities. Verona is only half an hour away from Sirmione, Venice one hour and Florence two hours. A fortnight is not going to be long enough, especially if you want to explore other islands—Maggiore for example or the little-known Orta or Iseo. But if you end up exhausted you can always go back to soothing Como.

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