

1,271 views | Jul 23, 2018, 08:03am

# There's Much More to Lake Como than George Clooney



**Margie Goldsmith** Contributor ⓘ  
Travel



Lake Como, Italy ANTONIO CALZOLARO

Italy's Lake Como is so spectacular that it's easy to see why celebrities such as George Clooney (still recovering from a motorcycle accident and yes, he was wearing a helmet) and Sir Richard Branson (months away from blasting himself into space) have purchased villas there. Shaped like an upside-down Y, Lake Como's winding shoreline is surrounded by lush gardens, ancient villages and sprawling mansions. Those who don't own villas choose the 5-star Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni in the medieval village of Bellagio, considered one of the most

prestigious hotels in the world and overlooking Lake Como. The hotel attracts royals, heads of state, and such bold-faced names as Al Pacino, George Lucas, and Isabelle Huppert.



Looking down at The Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni, Lake Como ANTONIO CALZOLARO

The Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni is owned by the Bucher family who, are celebrating 100 years of ownership this year. In 1918, Swiss businessman Arturo Bucher purchased an elegant hotel in Bellagio set on the tip of the promontory that separates Lake Como's two branches. The Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni is so magnificent that three generations of the Bucher family have resided there in their own wing, ever since. The hotel has 95 rooms including 22 suites, two of which are named after their most illustrious guests, Winston Churchill and John Kennedy.

The hotel has a 9,000+ square-foot fitness area with a gym, sauna, Turkish bath, squash court. They can book a Pilates session, use the tennis court and dip into the lake-facing swimming pool. Many book a treatment at the SPA and then head to the Relaxation Room, though some prefer the private terrace of their opulent suite

or head down to the terrace to sip a cappuccino and watch the ferries go back and forth on Lake Como.



Looking down at Lake Como MARGIE GOLDSMITH

## MORE FROM FORBES

---

---

Many guests walk to the center of Bellagio and shop for exquisite silks, hand-painted glass, and buttery-soft leather. Others head off for more active adventures such as cycling (the hotel concierge can arrange for high-end bicycles and biking guides). Nearby is the famous Vallassina Road, the decisive last leg of the Giro Italia, considered the toughest race in the world's most beautiful place.

Climbing up endless hairpin turns with no shoulder, cyclists finally arrive 2,470 feet above sea level to the Sanctuary of Ghisallo.

In 1948, Pope Pious XII declared the Madonna of Ghisallo the patron Saint of cyclists. A year later, he blessed the bronze eternal flame which burns in this 400-year-old chapel, a cyclist's shrine where cycling shirts line the altar. Next door to the chapel is a sleek steel and stone cycling museum, Museo del Ciclismo Madonna del Ghisallo filled with two floors of biking memorabilia, and movies of the greatest biking champions.



Sanctuary of Ghisallo, a cycling shrine MARGIE GOLDSMITH

Besides cycling, Lake Como offers excellent hiking, easily accessible by ferry boat. Cadenabbia is an ancient village with picturesque alleys in every direction and a one-hour hike to the summit. The trail is in a forest, but much of the hike is walking up old stone steps. About every fifteen minutes, there are ancient chapels with mosaics depicting the Mysteries of the Rosary. Mid-way is a Chapel dedicated to Saint Charles, and then the stairs end.



Hiking to summit above Lake Como ANTONIO CALZOLARO

After that, it's a steep trail to the summit, which looks down at all the neighboring villages including Bellagio. This being Italy, you never complete a hike without a pub stop for a celebratory grappa. (The Italians *begin* their hikes with a grappa as well!)



Rockefeller Park Foundation, Bellagio MARGIE GOLDSMITH

Less active adventurers can take a daily guided tour to the Rockefeller Foundation Park, a meandering walk along a path lined with monkey-puzzle and fir trees up to

the top of the promontory. Just a few minutes' walk from the Serbelloni is the trail (all narrow stone steps) to the small fishing village of Pescallo. The narrow main street is lined with beautiful stone houses surrounded by flowers. At the end of the road is the shoreline, where fishing boats gently bob up and down on the water. If you go early in the morning, you'll encounter no tourists – only dog walkers.

Also of interest is Villa del Balbianello, originally a rest home for Franciscan monks and which, like many villas on the lake, can only be reached by boat. *Star Wars* and *Casino Royale* were both filmed here, and the villa became part of the Italian Trust in 1988. Prior to that, it was owned by Guido Monzino, the leader of the first Italian expedition to climb Mount Everest. Now open to the public, the eye-candy here is endless rooms of Chinese, African and pre-Columbian art and 18<sup>th</sup> century English and French furniture.

Not to be missed is a boat ride to the tiny island of Comacina for lunch at the Locanda Restaurant. The meal is a smorgasbord of endless appetizers, pasta dishes, main courses, and a wheel of Parmigiano as large as a tire. The main show is after dessert in which owner Benvenuto Puricelli adds enough alcohol to a huge cauldron of coffee to flood Lake Como. He sets it on fire, and as the hot orange flames lick up towards the ceiling, Puricelli recounts that this ritual will undo a mysterious curse cast on the island in 1169.

Located on the hotel's terrace overlooking the lake is the elegant Michelin-starred Mistral Restaurant, presided over by Executive Chef Ettore Bocchia. The Mistral is the only restaurant in Italy to offer a full molecular cuisine menu, of which Chef Bocchia is the leading Italian expert. Molecular cuisine is a new way of cooking based on science (what happens to the ingredients in the process of cooking, cooling and matching during food preparation) with no chemical products and accentuating natural ingredients. A perfect way to end a meal at Mistral is ice cream made with liquid nitrogen, (meaning no brain freeze) while overlooking Lake Como.



Swimming Pool and terrace of the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni ANTONIO CALZOLARO

*Margie Goldsmith is a NYC-based travel, lifestyle and culture writer who has been to 135 countries on 7 continents. Follow her on twitter @margiegoldsmith*

*I have been to 135 countries on seven continents and written about them for Travel + Leisure, Robb Report, National Geographic Traveler, Islands, Coastal Living, Virtuoso Life, Business Jet Traveler, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Affluent Traveler, O the Oprah Magazin... MORE*