



THE PEARL OF ITALY'S LAKE COMO ...

Bellagio!

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
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The French have a delicious dessert that has captured fame in recent years; of course they have many, but I am speaking of the macaron. A morsel of crisp meringue coupled with cream. A perfect bite. A round pillow played in a pale rainbow of colors. Each delicate cookie has at least seven or eight layers of cracked, thick crust with thin, pale fillings and Lake Como can be considered the geographical embodiment of a macaron with its layers of pale colors that somehow evoke a bolder-than-life tableau. Tenacious Italian builders have snagged into every available inch of hospitable shoreline and the homes are stacked against the deep green waters of the deepest lake in Europe, and rising into the cerulean sky, the villages and towns surrounding the lake are jammed into the impossible rock that sharply angles up into the Alps; they begin here. Switzerland is just over the rainbow and right around the bend. Just 60 kilometers north of the fabulous city of Milan, the lake begins its upside-down Y-shape. In the lake, sailboats bobble and a blue-and-white sea plane cruises by.

While the town of Como is known as the Queen of the Lake, it was to Bellagio, the Pearl of the Lake, that I traveled last spring.

Lake Como is famous. To the Italians, it is where the Fascist Italian dictator Mussolini met a firing squad. To the British, it is the stuff of once-in-a-lifetime dream vacations. To the French, it is where luxury escapades begin a trip to the grander-than-grand ski resorts of St. Moritz and Andermatt. But to Americans, not so familiar with its honeymoon-like setting or its combined indolent charms coupled with refined tastes, it is perhaps familiar as one of the homes of actor George Clooney. I admit I looked for him in every Italian face, hoping it was him speeding past in one of the dozens of handmade mahogany jet boats edging by the shoreline, or sitting at a nearby table in one of the hundreds of impossibly idyllic restaurants overlooking the panoramic lake views, or walking up broad cobblestone steps as I went down. My search for him was unrequited in the sensuous five days spent in this playland to the rich and famous, but I left satisfied anyway. It is a trip worth taking.

While Italy is well known for its automobile industry (Ferrari, Alfa Romeo), it is not so well considered as easy to navigate. Flying into Milan requires at least two legs from Houston. Recommended for the truly adventurous is renting a car and driving yourself. Spectacular!!! Narrow serpentine roads with plenty of blind, blood pressure-raising curves hug the shoreline. The hotel sent a driver for me and for that, I am eternally grateful. Luigi, an incredibly handsome and charming chauffeur, took most of the risk as I had only to glide by, from the back seat, and admire the wonder of the scenery. Ninety minutes from arrival, I was checking into the magnificent Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni (GHVS) in the impressive village of Bellagio (yes, the Las Vegas hotel appropriated its name). It holds the last occupied spot on the peninsula and could not be more stately, supremely regal or gorgeous. Yet, there is an air of unpretentiousness. Everyone from the owners, Gianfranco and Dusia Bucher, to their long-employed staff, are both magnanimous and humble. The hotel has been in the family for more than 150 years. It is gloriously decorated in marble, gold, Murano glass chandeliers, rich brocades, palms, thick floral carpeting, tassels and dangles and glint and intricate glowing lights, all seamlessly coursing into a hotel evocative of past glories while providing an experience for today's travelers. I think it may be the only hotel I've ever stayed in that "closes for the season."

Open only from April to October, GHVS quietly freshens, upgrades and expands while shuttered in winter, only to throw open its arms for warm weather seekers. As the area slowly revives each spring, restaurants open their shutters, red, white and green Italian flags are raised, and flowers by the thousands are planted. Now readers may think that this is an expensive and smallish vacation spot. Not true! Lake Como is affordable and generously hospitable. Airfare was just \$600 to Milan (and do spend a few nights there, gazing at the Duomo, "The Last Supper" and the galleria, eating risotto alla Milanese and drooling at the fashions emanating from every shop and store). I was surprised at the prices in Bellagio! Just 6 euros for a panini in the town square, 9 for an entire pizza, 29 for a leather pocketbook. Local wine is plentiful and cheap! Rooms at the hotel begin at \$475 (prices are seasonal) and my fabulous pedicure in the GHVS spa was just 60 euros. Yes, a little more than home, but this was in Italy! And fabulous!

Francisco, the unflappable and movie star-handsome concierge, can arrange day trips on the lake from the hotel pier in the hotel's private boat. Villa Balbianello is a keepsake of the past with furnishings, photos and a view worth the hike up the winding path. Villa Melzi is a 15-minute walk from the hotel. While the building is not open to the public, visitors love its magnificent gardens situated along the lake.

GHVS provided my first-ever Michelin meal at its incredible restaurant, *Mistral*, named for the winds that often visit the lake. Chef Ettore Bocchia is famous for molecular cuisine, an interesting version of "deconstructed" food. Diners, seated in an all-glass patio, are serenaded by a three-piece live orchestra every night. On warm nights, the retractable roof gives way to the stars. Many a couple have fallen under an eternal spell here. We are still swooning over the millefeuille rolls, a "thousand-petal" piece of art nestled into each bread basket.



PHOTOS, LEFT, CLOCKWISE:

Lake Como, in Northern Italy's Lombardy region, is an upscale resort area known for its dramatic scenery set against the foothills of the Alps.

Lake Como is shaped like an upside-down Y, with three slender branches that meet at the resort town of Bellagio.

The view from Varenna's Villa Monastero.

A bite of cheese?

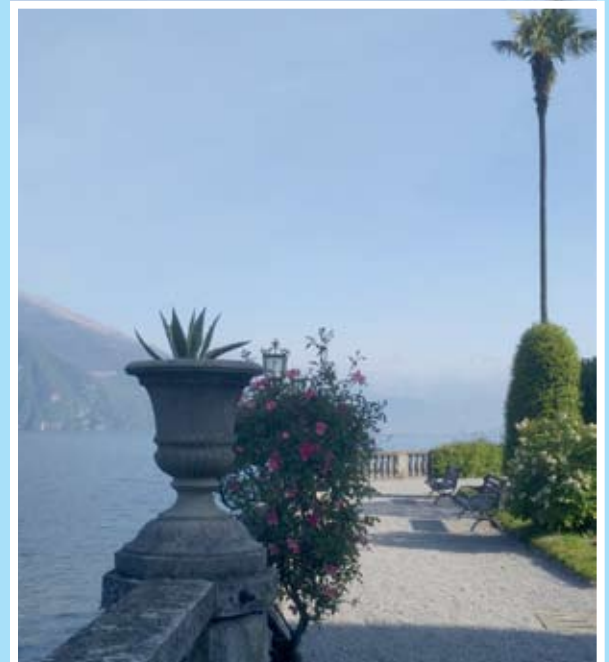
Mozzarella for sale in the Varenna street market.

George Clooney's Villa Oleandra in Laglio on Lake Como, Italy. The actor filmed parts of his blockbuster movie "Oceans 12" there.

Shopping in Bellagio.

Millefeuille rolls were just the beginning of a fabulous meal at Restaurant *Mistral*.

Breakfast is served in the breathtaking Grand Ballroom of the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni.



GHVS also is home to La Goletta, a more informal restaurant with the same dazzling view of the lake and directed by Bocchia.

The hotel has a fitness center with a personal trainer and many enticing classes. The outdoor pool is next to the lake, as is a small, private beach and two indoor pools.

Shopping in town, just steps from the hotel, was a surprise. While I thought prices would be an Italian version of sticker shock, actually the prices were fantastic. I bought olive oil, pasta, a pair of leather flats, a jar of truffle salt, a glass cloisonné egg, and a memorable gold necklace from the designer herself. Chocolates, gloves, silk scarves, Murano glass jewelry and wine were plentiful. Nothing was expensive, surprisingly.

There aren't too many places I go that I want to see again. Once is usually enough. But there is something about riding that boat around the shore, something about the intoxicating views, and something about possibly running into, at last, George Clooney, that puts this destination back on my list.

Enjoy visiting villaserbelloni.com and bellagiolakecomo.com to book your trip.

