

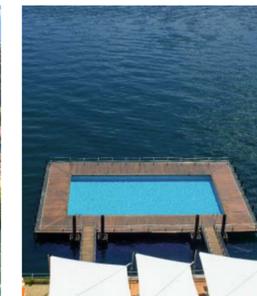
## TRAVEL EXPLORE

EDITED BY  
CATHY WINSTON  
cwinston@thejc.com

PHOTO: KATE WICKERS/GRAND HOTEL TREMEZZO

# Living la dolce vita

Kate Wickers heads to Lake Como for Italian glamour without the crowds



There are some destinations when a splurge on a convertible rental car is worth every penny, and Lake Como is one. We pick ours up — an Opel Cascada — at Milan Malpensa airport and immediately drop the roof to zip along the lakeside from Como to Bellagio.

Not quite a Maserati, but with the wind in our faces we feel wonderfully uninhibited after hours of wearing a facemask, and it's exciting to think that we are following in the glamorous treadmarks of George Clooney, who owns an 18th century villa nearby.

Slender and forked, the lake stretches 29 miles long and 2.5 miles at its widest point but it's the mid-section that is considered most scenic, with views to make you gasp at each twist in the road.

After a harbourside lunch in low-key Torno (one of Como's oldest cliff-hugging villages), we arrive at Bellagio, with its waterfront of fin-de-siècle hotels in custard yellows and powdery pinks. There's just enough time for an apple-pie flavour ice-cream (a nod to the English and American tourists who first holidayed here), before catching the car ferry over to Tremezzo, our base for exploring.

I'm a romantic traveller, preferring a journal to a laptop, and a book to a Kindle. Grand Hotel Tremezzo, a belle époque palace built in 1910, delivers this luxurious nostalgia in spades. We're given silk facemasks on arrival, to be worn while walking around the family-owned hotel, which is a lovely touch.

There are silver trinket boxes, porcelain urns and books in our suite. Aside from the bespoke toiletries (including a bottle of Aqua

Como perfume), the illusion is that you're staying in the private home of wealthy friends. The separate sitting room is perfect for our 14-year-old son, Freddie, to sleep in. In front of my canopied four-poster, huge oak-framed windows give floor-to-ceiling views over the lake to where, by night, Bellagio twinkles.

While we're breakfasting on sweet cannoli filled with creamy pistachio ricotta on the hotel's lovely terrace, Freddie spies our 42ft yacht slipping into the hotel's marina, booked for half a day's sailing with Bellagio Sailing. After temperatures have been taken and hand sanitiser applied, we clamber aboard.

First stop is the Lavedo Peninsula and Villa Balbianello, built by Cardinal Angelo Durini in 1787, most recently the home of eccentric Italian explorer Guido Monzino, the first Italian to conquer Everest,



The illusion is that you're staying in the private home of wealthy friends

who bequeathed the house to the Italian equivalent of the National Trust. The gardens are famous for the huge umbrella canopies of its sycamores, and the villa has hosted many famous weddings, including Liam Gallagher and Nicole Appleton's, as well as being used as a location in both *Casino Royale* and *Star Wars*.

From here you can also spy the romantic Villa La Cassinella (rumoured to be owned by Richard Branson) built in 1920, with mossy lawns reaching down to the lake — it appears as soft and dreamy as an impressionist painting in the haze of the morning sun.

We catch a breeze, the sails are hoisted, and a beautiful silence transcends — just the gentle thwack of sail against wind, and the splash of water as we sail over the deepest section of the lake near to the village of Nesso. Here, fishermen cast nets for perch, used for

the region's most popular dish, *riso con il pesce persico* (rice with perch fillets, flavoured with sage).

A round trip hike to the *cappelletta degli alpini*, or chapel of the Alpine, takes around two hours and begins in Tremezzo. We pass through the mediaeval hamlets of Balogno with its narrow, cobbled alleys and pretty porticoed houses, and Volesio whose stately homes date back to the 17th century, and were once owned by rich merchant families. It is blissfully quiet, with only the smell of wild thyme to accompany us as we climb the stony paths, past farmhouses and over small streams to the simple stone chapel; the views over to Bellagio, Mount San Primo and Comacina Island are worth all the gushing tributes we can muster while catching our breath.

The views from Grand Hotel Tremezzo's new 50s-inspired beach club are almost as good. Capturing

the glamour and fun of the Italian riviera of this era, it's not difficult to conjure up an image of Sophia Loren sipping a Campari under its orange and white striped umbrellas or imagine Cary Grant diving into the pool, which is sunk into a floating pontoon within the lake.

I barely read a page of my novel as I can't drag my eyes from the lake; a succession of ferries, pleasure cruisers and speed boats criss-crossing the water. We wave as the vessels slow for those aboard to take snaps of the hotel and 17th century Villa Carlotta — one of Como's most celebrated and photogenic grand houses with eight acres of botanical gardens — that sits next door.

The world has changed since Wordsworth wrote of Lake Como that it is "a treasure that earth keeps to itself", with growing concerns regarding overtourism, particularly at Bellagio, the most visit-

ed of all. "Last season you couldn't walk on the streets because of the number of people, much better to be on the water," Mich Gandola, owner of Bellagio Watersports tells me as we're kayaking from Pescallo — a laidback fishing village over the hill from Bellagio. We journey up to the Triangolo Lariano where the Como and Lecco branches of the lake meet, which Mich refers to as his lake. The only sound is the flap of a startled heron's wings as we row past a zig-zag of craggy cliffs, where Mich pauses to hold up a flask. "Aperitif?" he asks.

As we sip Bellini cocktails, bobbing on the waves, I realise life hasn't felt this good for months. The toast of "Salute! Your Health!" has never sounded more heartfelt.

Back in Bellagio, we wander on the pretty oleander-lined waterfront, past a stylish retro lido, from where sunbathers can relax, lunch and take dips into the lake,

**The Grand Hotel Tremezzo, and its beach club (right), make a great base from which to explore Lake Como, including Varenna (top), Villa Cassinella (left) and Villa Balbianello (far right)**

to grand Villa Melzi, with gardens inspired by English gardener Capability Brown. We carry a backpack of swimming gear everywhere we go, never knowing when the yearning for a dip in Como's lovely water will grip us. Today, it's in front of Hotel Villa Serbelloni, the town's grandest though rather faded lodgings. We swim out to a diving board, its steps slippery with lake weed, feeling what the Italians call *spensierato*, carefree.

As a birthday present for my husband, Neil, I charter a sleek black E26 speedboat for a private cruise, locally crafted by Cranchi, one of Lake Como's few surviving boat-builders, of which there were once many. "Want to drive?" Claudio Valsecchi, of Il Medeghino boat tours asks Freddie. He's really just steer-

ing under Claudio's guidance, but it's fun to pretend.

I sit gazing back to a lake that, in our wake, is as frothy as a cappuccino, as we cut a nifty 50 knots to Varenna. Picture-perfect at any time, 7pm is the golden hour and the pretty pastel-hued houses that spread upwards from the port to the 16th century ruins of a castle on the hill are luminous in the setting sun.

In the old harbour, a horseshoe of simple restaurants and bars are filled with those enjoying sun-downers, as the sun dips below the Alps of Switzerland to the west. Cats prowl in steep stone-stepped alleys, while hole-in-the-wall gelaterias serve up homemade ice-creams and elderly residents sit on soft cushions to enjoy the evening breeze.

This is the surely la dolce vita. Catch it while you can.

## GETTING THERE

► **Doubles at Grand Hotel Tremezzo, sleeping up to two adults and one child, cost from £497, including breakfast.** [grandhoteltremezzo.com](http://grandhoteltremezzo.com)

**EasyJet flies from Luton, Gatwick, Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester to Milan Malpensa from £38.98 return.** [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)  
**Sailing, kayaking & speedboat excursions available from Bellagio Sailing ([bellagiosailing.com](http://bellagiosailing.com)), Bellagio Watersports ([bellagiowatersports.com](http://bellagiowatersports.com)) and Il Medeghino boat tours ([lakecomoboattour.it](http://lakecomoboattour.it))**