

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Sun-kissed and gorgeous

Exploring the towns and villages hugging the shore of Lake Como in Italy is a wonderful post-lockdown treat, finds **Kate Wickers**

I'm standing in Villa Balbianello on the Lavedo Peninsula on Lake Como staring at the fur under-garments worn by Guido Monzino, who led the first successful Italian ascent of Mount Everest. When he died in 1988 he bequeathed Villa Balbianello to the Fondo Ambiente Italiano (Italian National Trust), and the lavish gardens shaded by immense sycamores have been used as a location for films such as *Casino Royale* and *Star Wars*. The villa, which sits on the site of a 13th century monastery, was built by Cardinal Angelo Durini in 1785, who had secret passageways installed within the walls, one of which ran (rather predictably) from his bedroom to the guest suite. "The door couldn't be opened from the guest room. It was only the cardinal that could surprise you with a visit," our guide, Daniella, tells me, with a wink. When Monzino acquired the house, he created an indulgent retreat complete

with map room, smoking den and private museum to house the many artefacts used in his expeditions, and wandering through his home you get a sense that this was a man born in the wrong era, favouring dog sleds to skidoos and fur to thermal.

Willowy and split in two, the lake stretches 29 miles in length and 2.5 miles at its widest point and it's the mid-section that is considered most scenic, so the town of Tremezzo makes for the perfect base. I'm staying in Grand Hotel Tremezzo, one of Italy's most luxurious family-owned hotels, with my husband, Neil, and 14-year-old son, Freddie. "Welcome. Make yourself at home," is the heartfelt cry on our arrival from Valentina de Santis, who inherited the hotel from her grandmother. Despite its size (90 rooms in total), it has the

There's a canopied four-poster in front of oak-framed floor-to-ceiling windows



The Villa del Balbianello overlooking Lake Como, main; a street in Bellagio, above

atmosphere of a magnificent private home. Our suite has a separate living room, perfect for Freddie to sleep in, and in the main bedroom there's a canopied four-poster in front of oak-framed floor-to-ceiling windows with views over to where the town of Bellagio twinkles at night. We're presented with silk facemasks, a nod to Como's silk-producing history; and in the marble bathroom, I discover another gift – a bespoke bottle of Aqua di Como (scent of the lake) perfume, created for the hotel by Acqua di Parma.

"Want to take the wheel?" asks Claudio Valsecchi of Il Medeghino

(boat tours). The wheel he's referring to belongs to a sleek black E26 speedboat, crafted by Cranchi, boatbuilders on Lake Como for 150 years. Freddie doesn't need to be asked twice. We cut a surprisingly smooth 50 knots in a ride along the lake to where cliff-hugging villas perch below verdant mountains. "That's Villa Oleandra, George Clooney's place," Claudio tells us, pointing to an enviable 18th century villa near the town of Lagio. "The story goes that he crashed his Harley Davidson in front of the house, fell in love with it and bought it." We zip on to 16th century Villa Pliniana where Rossini composed the heroic opera *Tancredi*; Napoleon played billiards; and Leonardo de Vinci studied the flow of its irregular waterfall; before arriving at 19th century Villa La Cassinella, rumoured to be owned by Richard Branson. It's an exquisite place, flanked by soaring cypress trees, all quiet apart from an aproned maid scurrying over the immaculate mossy lawns.

Gualtiero Marchesi, who died in 2017, was the first Italian chef to be awarded three Michelin stars and he opened his restaurant La Terrazza

at Grand Hotel Tremezzo in 2011. Among his signature dishes are dripping di pesce (squid and carpet shells on a canvas of tomato and squid ink), which was inspired by the artist Jackson Pollock; and riso, oro e zafferano (rice and gold with saffron) – a bright yellow saffron risotto served on a black plate topped with a square of gold leaf. “Is it OK to eat gold?” Freddie sensibly wants to know. “Only if you’re in a fancy restaurant,” I tell him, already enjoying what is, in essence, the most delicious risotto.

Last season, Bellagio, widely considered to be one of Italy’s most beautiful towns, struggled to cope with the number of tourists. This year, in the wake of Covid-19, it’s a more sedate scene. At the artisan gelateria belonging to Hotel Splendide, I order an apple pie ice-cream (an homage to the American and English tourists who first holidayed in Bellagio in the 1950s), and wander the pretty oleander-treed esplanade, past the town’s retro public lido, to the English-inspired gardens at Villa Melzi. In August and September, the lake averages 23 degrees, and I carry our swimming gear in case we fancy a spontaneous dip. Today, we swim out in front of Hotel Serbelloni (the town’s grandest, though rather time-warped, lodgings), to scale the steps of a diving platform. Slippery with fluorescent green lake weed, at the top I lose my nerve, leaving Freddie to jump with what Italians call spensierato (without a care).

At Ristorante Punto, we order a local favourite, perch with rice flavoured with sage, which we eat gazing out at the Triangolo Lariano peninsula where the Como and Lecco branches of the lake meet. A 20-minute walk over the hill, down narrow cobbled lanes, brings us to the serene fishing hamlet of Pescallo, where Mich Gandola from Bellagio Watersports, is waiting. Being close to the water brings another perspective to Lake Como, and in kayaks we’re close enough to see perch and pike swim, and grey herons wade elegantly in the shadows of an uninhabited craggy cliffside. Another day, we take a sailing trip with Bellagio Sailing, drifting over the deepest section of the lake at 414 metres near to the village of Nesso,



Sunloungers by the pool and lake at Grand Hotel Tremezzo

where fishermen cast nets for perch.

Grand Hotel Tremezzo has two attractive pools; one secluded in a tropical garden at the rear, and the other at TBeach, the hotel’s new 50s inspired beach club, with its jaunty orange and white striped umbrellas and pool sunk into a pontoon on the lake. It’s chic and fun, and beautifully captures the glamour of the Italian riviera in its heyday. We sip on Campari and watch the ferries, pleasure boats and speed boats motor by, while above us the air gently buzzes with small seaplanes giving aerial tours.

The poster girl for tourism on Lake Como is photogenic 18th century Villa Carlotta, with its peaches and cream exterior. It would normally be packed with day-trippers, but there’s only a handful of other tourists about, plus small lizards that scurry away as we climb the unusual stone triple-layered scissor staircase, past arbors hanging with citrus fruits to the villa entrance, which houses a collection of 18th century art and sculpture. Beyond, there are eight acres of botanical gardens to explore, including a hilltop forest of bamboo and a fern grotto guarded by grotesques.

As we slide into Varenna’s ferry terminal at 7pm, the town, which sprawls from the lake to the hilltop ruins of Castello di Vezio, is bathed in amber light. We pass local kids chasing ducks in the stony shallows of the old harbour and cats snoozing on the scalatinelli (staircase steps) that lead to the upper areas of the town, as we hurry along to the terrace of Hotel du Lac – the perfect perch to watch the sun slip seductively away and raise a glass of prosecco to toast what has been a blissful post-lockdown holiday. ■

Please check the latest Covid-19 guidelines before travelling. A double room at Grand Hotel Tremezzo, sleeping up to two adults and one child, from £497, including breakfast (grandhoteltremezzo.com). Ryanair fly from direct from Edinburgh to Milan Bergamo on selected days from around £29 return. For sailing, kayaking & speedboat excursions contact, www.bellagiosailing.com; www.bellagiosailing.com; www.bellagiosailing.com; www.lakecomoboaattour.it

SHORT HAUL



Mountains of freedom

Nicole Whitton tries e-biking and foraging in and around the beautiful Swiss resort of Verbier

Nestled in the Alpine glory of Switzerland’s Valais canton, Verbier is stunningly beautiful. But as is the case with so many places, Covid-19 has taken its toll – streets are quiet, nightclubs are unusually empty and hotels welcome guests with hand sanitisers and face masks.

But despite the lack of crowds, Verbier pulsates with an energy that’s a little at odds with its quiet aesthetic of wooden chalets clustered cosily between snow-topped mountains. After months of lockdown, Verbier’s vast spaciousness feels like an exhilarating breath of fresh air – particularly after a day of travelling in a mask. The cliché of Switzerland as a tonic for good health feels especially relevant right now.

Verbier is famed for its skiing and party-hard lifestyle. How this year’s season will fare is still anyone’s guess. The après ski scene looks unlikely, although Verbier Tourisme is in the process of developing activities that will cater to smaller groups. For now, the area is making the most of its summertime outdoor activities.

If you stay one night or longer in Verbier, Val de Bagnes or La Tzoumaz, you’ll receive a free Verbier Infinite Playground (VIP) Pass +. It

provides access to a host of activities for free or at significant discounts. E-Biking up and down the Alpine slopes is bound to get your adrenaline (and heart) pumping. I take part in the Verbier E-Bike Festival, which provides signposted routes around Verbier and Le Châble. I choose the Rando Gourmande, a scenic route punctuated with four gastronomic stops, each providing local treats such as pastries, meats, cheeses, wines and local beers.

A bike ride such as this is



A bike ride such as this is guaranteed to deliver lifelong memories

guaranteed to deliver lifelong memories. It will also deliver thigh burn and bum ache, but don’t let this put you off. The bike provides almost all the power, which is very much needed on the sheer uphill stretches. But finishing the route still feels like a massive achievement. After all, why let the bike take all the credit?

The festival finishes tomorrow, but my guide, Jess Koon from MTB Verbier (mtbverbier.com), offers cycling packages throughout the year. Given I’m a double-whammy novice to mountain biking and e-biking, Jess sticks with me as the rest of the group (and a family with toddlers in tow) whizz past. The festival caters to all levels of biking experience but does require a high level of commitment to new challenges.

A half-day foraging course offers a unique opportunity to get up close and personal with edible plants. Foraging host Cherrie, of Cherries Walks (cherrieswalks.com), is a qualified Swiss-American Mountain Leader, and her walks have been voted TripAdvisor’s top activity in Le Châble.

It’s not hard to see why. Her passion for plants is contagious, and you’d be hard pressed to find a more charming way to spend a summer morning in the Alps. Surrounded by wooden chalets and the gentle tinkling of cow bells, the biggest challenge is refraining from breaking into song. The Mauvoisin dam, built in the

View over the Swiss Alps; Nicole Whitton with an e-bike; a lammergeier; foraged edible flowers

1950s is a crowd-free way to take in some spectacular views. Cherrie takes us on a day trip including a moderately challenging hike through a James Bond-esque underground tunnel that serves as a museum, showcasing historical images of how the dam was built.

On the way, we look out for lammergeiers, a species of bearded vulture. A pair have been spotted on the slopes around the dam – but they have plenty of space to hide.

Simon Wiget, director of Verbier Tourisme, is spot on when he says: “We have big, open spaces, which is what people need when they can’t gather together indoors.”

The possibility of an adventure, albeit a socially distanced one, is certainly a healthy relief. ■

Hotel Bristol (bristol-verbier.ch; +41 27 771 65 77) offers rooms from £120 per night with breakfast. SWISS (swiss.com; operates up to 180 weekly flights to Switzerland from London Heathrow, London City, Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh (seasonal during summer) and Dublin from £52 one-way. The Swiss Transfer Ticket covers a round-trip between the airport/Swiss border and destination. Prices are £70 in second class and £130 in first class.

48 HOURS IN

Mull

Friday, midday Check into Shieling Holidays in Craignure (doubles from £60, <https://shielingholidays.co.uk>). You will see it by the water’s edge sailing in from Oban. No tent pitching needed; you’re staying in their large ‘Shieling’ tents, pioneers of Scotland’s glamping scene.

1pm Head into Tobermory for a seafood feast at Café Fish, with boat-fresh shellfish the star. They have been struggling to make things work with Covid-19 regulations, so if they’re not open enjoy a king scallop supper from the waterfront takeaway van. It’s said to be a favourite of Prince Charles.

2pm Stroll along Tobermory’s picturesque waterfront, admiring the pastel-hued houses.

3pm Pop into Tobermory Chocolate for delicious hot chocolate and handmade takeaway choccies.

4pm Time for a wee dram at Tobermory Distillery. They offer tours and a well-stocked shop.

5pm Nip up to the home of the legendary Mull Cheddar, just outside Tobermory. Look out for their increasingly fine Hebridean Blue too. There is an honesty box if no one is around at their shop.

7pm Enjoy a picnic as the sun sets over Morven and Ben Nevis. Starring are the foodie goodies you picked up in Tobermory. Any night is a good one



that ends with Mull Cheddar and a wee campfire dram.

Saturday, 10am Calgary is one of the finest beaches not just on Mull, but in Scotland. Get there early to have the sands to yourself. It may look like the Caribbean, but the landscape is much older.

1pm Fish and chips tempt alongside venison burger at Taste of Mull.

2:30pm Mull’s bigger hills can be testing so enjoy a more relaxed walk in Aros Park, a verdant forest oasis on the fringes of Tobermory.

7pm Dine on pub grub within walking distance of your shieling at the Craignure Inn.

Sunday, 9am Rise early for a wee bacon butty al fresco. Wander along the shoreline looking out for otters. Or at least CalMac piloting down the Sound of Mull. ■

Robin McKelvie

CalMac (www.calmac.co.uk) run regular ferries to Craignure on Mull from Oban. For tourist information see www.visitscotland.com

BARGAIN BREAKS

Highland hospitality

The 32-room four-star Bridge of Orchy Hotel is located on the A82, two-and-a-half hours from Glasgow and Edinburgh. Rooms currently start from £180, including a full Scottish breakfast. **Call 01838 400 208 or see www.bridgeoforchy.co.uk**

Sea view at The Pierhouse

On the shores of Loch Linnhe you’ll find The Pierhouse Hotel & Seafood Restaurant. This small hotel and seafood restaurant is near seaside village, Port Appin, which was

recently named one of the best places to live in the UK. Sea View Rooms, including breakfast, start from £165. **Call 01631 730 302 or see www.pierhousehotel.co.uk**

Offer at Dukes

Mayfair hotel Dukes London has reopened with a special offer. Stay for two nights and you’ll get the third for free, or stay for three and they’ll chuck in the fourth. Nightly rates start from £183 per room, including breakfast. See the website for their flexible cancellation policy. **Call 0207 318 6580 or see www.dukeshotel.com**