

departures

DESTINATIONS

The Secrets of the Lake

On the dazzling shores of Italy's Lake Como, a history flows rich with romance and drama.

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LAKE COMO IS scaled like the iridescent tail of a great big fish. It glints and glimmers under the sun — dark bluish emerald at bright midday, silver come aperitivo hour. Opulent and storied with an aristocratic past, the lake has been the jewel of Northern Italy for centuries.

On the day of my arrival, I check into Il Sereno, a property that caused quite the stir when it first opened. In a region known for its neoclassical aesthetic, Il Sereno cuts through with stark and modern lines envisioned by renowned Spanish architect Patricia Urquiola. Taking in the views from the balcony, towering verdant mountains rise into spectacular peaks. Lunch is prosciutto and sweet melon, hand-rolled pasta in a creamy pesto sauce, and a caprese salad of plump mozzarella and sweet tomatoes. My room has a noise-canceling quality about it, a hushed elegance. Featuring dark, soothing slabs of wood panel, the space has a balcony outside with a deep, round chair that I curl into for a moment to stare out at that mesmerizing, mystical lake.

I take a dip in the pool, a sleek stretch of water on the lake's edge, and then head toward the tiny village of Torno, wet hair dampening the back of my cotton dress. The little port is sun-drenched and frozen in time like a bug in amber — tourists and locals laze over sweating glasses of Aperol spritzes in the tiny piazza. To my annoyance, the ferry to Como, where I plan to sightsee, is late, so I stop into the square's church. Dim and cool within, I hold the gaze of saintly Renaissance faces. I ask for patience, and to be absolved of my chronic New York City haste. I also ask for the ferry to please come soon, as I am quite earnestly on a schedule.

The region is meant to be experienced by water. Many hundreds of years ago, these great Y-shaped waterways carried lords and ladies to and from each other's shoreline villas. I pass clusters of colorful homes along the coast from my little ferry, the chopped waves of crossing boats spraying my cheeks. We pull into Como, which, compared to tiny Torno, is the very heart of hustle and bustle. Making my way toward the old quarter, into the little stone streets dotted with silk boutiques and bars, I reward myself for absolutely nothing with a dark-chocolate gelato, bittersweet and decadent. Dinner back at Il Sereno is at water level, in what was once the old boathouse. I sit at a table nestled beside a dramatic arch of Moltrasio stone, through which the night turns the lake ink black.

The next day I hike to Villa Pliniana on a secret, leafy trail. It's the oldest villa on the lake. In 1573, the governor of Como, Count Giovanni Anguissola, bought the land and began construction. He had murdered the Pope's illegitimate son, the cruel and ruthless Pier Luigi Farnese, stabbing him to death along with fellow adversaries. Loved by the citizens of Como, the governor lived out the rest of his days in relative peace at this villa-fortress, unreachable by land due to the extreme topography surrounding it.



An exterior shot of Il Sereno's clean, modern lines against the backdrop of the lake.



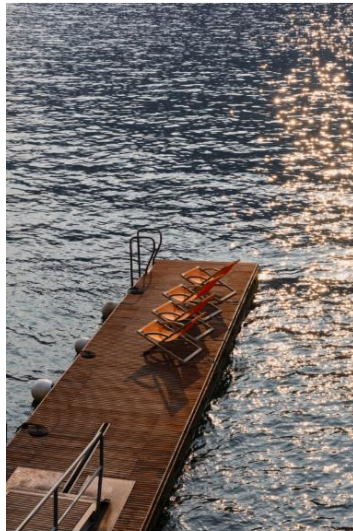
The foyer on the second floor of the newly restored Il Palazzo at Villa Lario, filled with sculptures and books on architecture and design.



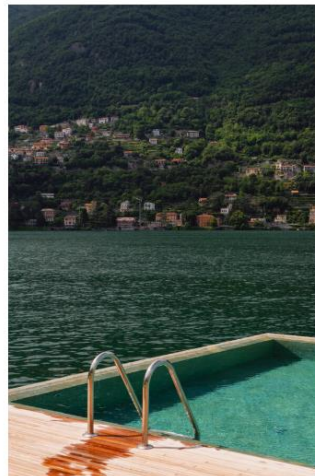
The perfect nook on the terrace of Il Palazzo at Villa Lario to sip an aperitivo and watch dusk descend.

Later guests of the villa included the likes of Napoleon, Byron, Shelley, and — my favorite — two scandalized lovers: Prince Emilio Barbiano Belgiojoso and the beautiful French noblewoman Anne Berthier de Wagram. In 1843 they fled from Paris to Pliniana, Anne leaving behind her husband and child, to live together in total isolation for nine years within the villa. At midnight, the lovers would wrap themselves naked together in a bed sheet and dive from the top of the loggia into the lake, so the story goes. The terrified villagers across the water thought they were a ghost. Gazing up at the hand-painted, frescoed ceilings, I can only wonder what secrets this place has seen, what true ghosts still haunt its halls.

Another passionate tale awaits at my next property, the Mandarin Oriental, Lago di Como, housed in the former Villa Roccabruna. I make my way through a front salon lined in a rich wallpaper of blossoms and peacocks, out onto a columned balcony overlooking the terrace below. Here, I learn, once resided the great opera singer Giuditta Pasta, a famed soprano of her time. Across the water, composer Vincenzo Bellini heard her singing and searched all around the lake to find her voice. She became his muse and greatest inspiration. In 1831, Bellini would compose his most significant works for Pasta — “Norma” and “La Sonnambula” — which she’d perform to great acclaim at La Scala in Milan. The composer supposedly wrote “Norma’s” opening act, the stunning “Casta Diva,” to highlight the immense range and beauty of her voice.



Villa Lario's pontoon, a perfect place to read on one of the folding chairs or from which to dive into the lake.



A detail of the infinity pool at Il Sereno, right on the lake's edge.

Once in my room, I play the aria, popping open a bottle of Prosecco and sprawling on the carpeted floor as Maria Callas reaches an impossibly crystalline note in her stirring 1954 rendition. I listen to another from the opera, “Mira, o Norma,” while exploring the property's gardens, in awe of a larger-than-life manicured hedge that seems to have been shaped into cursive.