

Atlas

July 2017

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Great lake

*With swish, new
design hotels adding
to its timeless glamour,
Como is hotting up
just in time for summer*

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Top of



A photograph of a wooden boat on a lake, with a white buoy hanging from the side. The boat is made of polished wood and has a steering wheel visible. The water is a deep blue-green color with ripples. The title 'the lake' is written in a white, cursive font across the bottom half of the image.

the lake

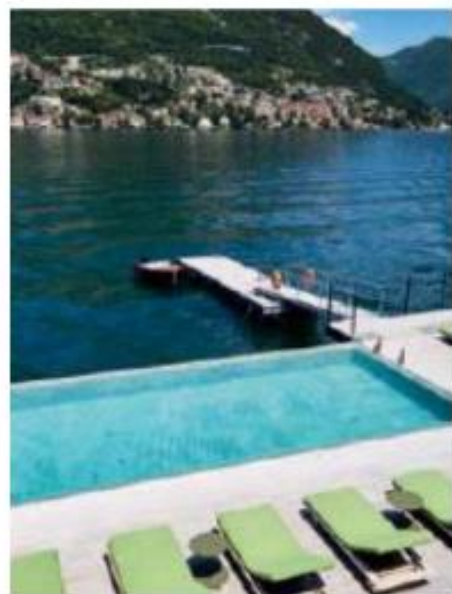
With its grand hotels and rarefied ambience, the cool waters of Como have long been a favourite summer retreat, but now a number of smart new rule-breakers are providing a timely makeover. *Mike MacEacheran* reports

Photography by Alicia Taylor

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amy Ghachem can remember the precise moment he announced his new hotel to the world. It was a late-August evening, on the sunset side of Lake Como. Only weeks before, the New Yorker had arrived to oversee the launch of his latest property and that night its doors were set to open for the first time. Such affairs are often low-key events, as luxury hotels like to spend the first few months of business quietly finessing their guest offering – what’s known as a “soft launch” – but the arrival of a rather conspicuous wedding party meant that Il Sereno Lago di Como had to hit the ground running.

It started when Daniel Ek swept in on a custom-made Riva yacht. The Spotify music mogul had chosen Il Sereno and its lakeside sibling, the newly revamped 16th-century Italian palazzo, Villa Pliniana, as the joint venues for his nuptials,



and he was the first guest to step over the threshold on this opening weekend. Next to land was his close friend, Facebook billionaire Mark Zuckerberg with his wife, Priscilla Chan. They were followed by comedian Chris Rock, who was there to MC the ceremony. By the time the wedding singer – Bruno Mars, in case you were wondering – had shown up, word had bubbled through to the nearby town of Torno that a good portion of Hollywood and Silicon Valley seemed to have appeared on their doorstep. No wonder social media went into a frenzy.

Lake Como was a destination that many thought they knew: the wishbone-shaped basin, the brawny Canova sculptures, the balustraded villas clinging to the shoreline with their rose and azalea gardens, rows of Cypresses stretching back up the vertiginous hillside that encloses the water. Even today it evokes the golden era of European travel, thanks in large part to its long-established *grand dame* hotels, with their dripping chandeliers and ornate furnishings.

But this? This was a glimpse of a different Como. Excitement about the guest list aside, >



Clockwise from above Samy Ghachem, standing outside his new hotel; Cernobbio's ferry terminal provides access to the whole lake; Il Sereno's infinity pool is part of its modern appeal

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LAKE LIVING

NAVIGAZIONE LAGO DI COMO





– and he’s not the only one to have spotted the opportunity to bring a lively, modern buzz to the lake. Villa Lario in Pognana Lario is a ten-years-in-the-making residence that was also completed late last summer. Left abandoned for three decades, the building has now been reborn as a modern design marvel with umbrella-cut palm trees, spotlights, Sonos speakers, and a sparkling infinity pool – not to mention the requisite dreamy lake view. The stunning cuisine, meanwhile, comes from resident chef Michele Tamburrino, who jokes he uses a luxury gondola to buy his meat from the butcher.

It’s only a tease, but in this rarefied, watery wonderland such far-fetched claims seem entirely plausible. As Lario’s Sicilian front-of-house manager Virginia Saia says later, “The DNA here is the same as the lake’s classic hotels, but if you put your finger on it, the feeling is just different. There was a missing element in Como, but not now. This is the start of something new.” Naturally, comparisons

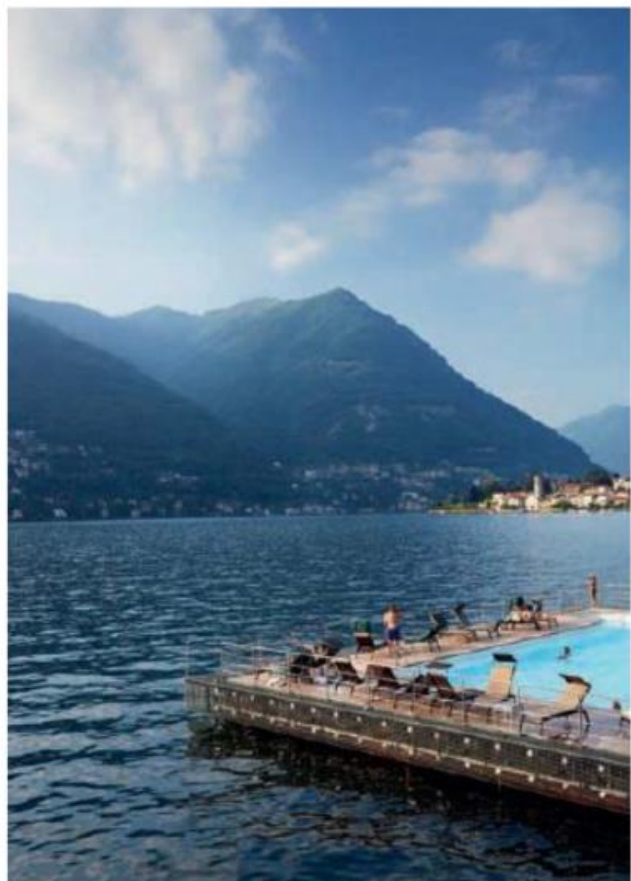
Clockwise from below CastaDiva’s pool epitomises Lake Como living; Il Sereno’s modern interior; Villa D’Este epitomises Como’s old-fashioned glamour; fine dining at CastaDiva

social media took immediate notice of Il Sereno’s designer good looks, sleek concrete stylings, smart typography and custom furniture. The vertical gardens and infinity pool (a new thing at Como) at the €150,000-a-night palazzo, Villa Pliniana, just a few kilometres down the shore, also made a big impression. Here were two super-modern, super-luxurious properties, both selling a splendidly contemporary idea of a lake hotel, and both quite unlike anything that had come before on Como’s shores.

“The picture has long been of beautiful, historic hotels, but we’re here to shake things up,” says Samy Ghachem over lunch at Il Sereno’s stone-arched Ristorante Berton al Lago. “You know, Napoleon, Lord Byron, Mark Twain, George Clooney, they’ve all come to Como – it’s always been a scene-setter.”

Clooney, in particular, has a lot to answer for. When the A-lister bought the historic Villa Oleandra as a summer residence for \$10m 16 years ago, Como had a reputation as a tranquil retreat for the wealthy, the aristocratic and the artistic. It was a discreet kind of place, one the composer Bellini, who had a residence on these shores some two centuries ago, would have still recognised. The Clooney effect, however, raised Como’s profile significantly, repositioning it as something of a European version of the Hamptons. Real estate rocketed in value and wealthy visitors starting arriving in greater numbers, with ever-greater expectations.

It created a perfect opening for Samy Ghachem





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LAKE LIVING

Through the keyhole

Como's historic villas are a mix of architecture and art that is well worth exploring

The masterpiece

Villa Carlotta

Permission to drop your jaw is granted at this palatial lakeside residence, transformed into a botanic garden adorned with marble sculptures, fountains and rhododendron-framed stairs. An Italian Narnia, it's a temple of 19th-century art with works by Canova, Thorvaldsen and Hayez, but the real star is the view across the basin to a ripple of Alpine hills. villacarlotta.it

The Hollywood star

Villa del Balbianello

When the producers of 2006's *Casino Royale* were looking for a stunning location for a wellness clinic, they looked no further than this fairy-tale pavilion on a thumb-hook of land outside the village of Lenno. The villa steals several scenes shot on its manicured lawns. It also provided the backdrop for the marriage of Anakin Skywalker to Queen Amidala in *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, bringing some class to an otherwise terrible film. villabalbianello.com

The literary darling

Villa Pinliana

When poet Percy Bysshe Shelley first visited Lombardy some 200 years ago, he was struck by how dazzling its lakes were, describing Como as exceeding anything he had ever beheld in beauty. That perfect view? Found at this sumptuous wedding cake mansion, an opinion seconded by fellow residents Lord Byron, Franz Liszt and Alessandro Volta. serenohotels.com

and reflections are expected with the lake's majestic hotels. Back around the turn of the last century, when the first wave of five-star properties opened, visitors came for their pure glamour. The lake had first-generation speedboats and cocktail bars; the first nouveau Grand Hotel Tremezzo was a hunting ground for Greta Garbo, the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni welcomed Clark Gable and JFK, both dressed in velvet dinner jackets.

It's this classic appeal, combined with Como's natural assets – cloudless skies, lantern-like stars and purling waters – that has ensured the guests keep coming back. At the fabulous Villa D'Este, now in its 145th season as a hotel and where Como's story begins, I overhear two such anecdotes while at reception. One family has returned with a roop of children and grandchildren, another is >



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LAKE LIVING



“Bruce Springsteen and Robert De Niro are repeat guests, and the lake so hypnotised John Legend, he married on the same front lawn as Alfred Hitchcock shot his first movie”



Clockwise from above inside Villa Lario's minimalist rooms; Villa Plania is located just down the water from Il Sereno; Como's distinctive steep hillside; Villa D'Este maintains its standards with regular refurbes



back to celebrate a 25th wedding anniversary.

“Like an Armani suit, this hotel will fit you for a lifetime,” says D’Este’s marketing manager and born-and-bred local Isabella Brusco, when we later meet on the terrace. Bruce Springsteen and Robert De Niro are repeat guests, she says, and the lakeside romance so hypnotised John Legend, he married on the same front lawn where Alfred Hitchcock shot scenes for his first movie. Como’s attractions, she explains, are rather old-fashioned, but its hotels and restaurants still move with the times. “Life on the lake exists in a hubble, but we don’t forget we’re in 2017,” she says.

I see Brusco’s point as I wander D’Este’s corridors. It is undeniably classic, with its oil paintings and antiquated brass lamps, but it’s not in the slightest bit fusty. The hotel spends millions each year on refurbishment (to the extent that tapestries are seasonally changed and every room repainted to better capture the lake’s soft, variegated light).

While the hotel scene continues to get a >



Above Onboard Il Sereno's Riva motorboat

makeover – Villa Lario, for one, is planning to double in size – the best lunch spots on the lake still encourage the same pleasures they always have: lingering as much as eating. And I find out this much when I take a boat trip (on a Riva, of course, courtesy of Il Sereno) to meet chef Massimiliano Mandozzi at the Giardino dei Saperi restaurant at the CastaDiva Resort and Spa, another relatively new arrival. When it opened on the lakeside in 2013, it was the first hotel to do so in a century.

“Lunch on Como isn’t like elsewhere in Italy,” says Mandozzi, all slick-backed curls and Roman profile. “We have the lake and the mountains for inspiration, and that makes it a holiday in itself.”

While we talk in the shade, two star players from the Juventus football team enter with an entourage, and sit at the table next to us. “See?” says Mandozzi in a hushed whisper, as they toast with carefully chosen fizz, passing round enormous plates of *burrata* cheese. “They won Serie A last week and they come here to celebrate. That is Lake Como living.”

Italy's Banksy

Based in Como, street artist Pierpaolo Perretta – AKA Mr Save the Wall – has a uniquely respectful style of rebel art

Street artists don't often tend to pop their heads above the parapet for obvious reasons – if they did, they'd likely be arrested. In Como, however, Pierpaolo Perretta has found a workaround to painting the town red that means he's actively endorsed by the local authorities. Long considered Italy's answer to Banksy, the ex-businessman paints works on cardboard, then hangs them on the town's walls. But this comes with its own problems, he says. As his profile has risen, so has the value of his art, and his provocative, non-permanent public paintings were frequently stolen. So Mr Save the Wall – his *nom de spraycan* – opened his own eponymous space on via Giovio. The witty, satirical street art makes for a slightly more irreverent stop on Como's otherwise staid cultural scene and Perretta can be found there most days, happily meeting and greeting visitors. “Anyone who sticks around a while, I give them a kind of live art experience,” he says. “Just bring an open mind.” mrsavethewall.com

And perhaps that is why Lake Como endures. The great hotels may be quite different to the new additions, espousing timeless glamour rather than more modern luxury, but they're really two sides of the same coin – both offering an idyllic vision of lakeside living and both helping to maintain Como's place as the most civilised of Italian lakes.

And as the late afternoon skips by, the water's edge soundtracked by the buzz of seaplanes and cicadas, speed boats bobbing languidly in the water, I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. ■



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