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Step back in time on Lake Como's storied shores

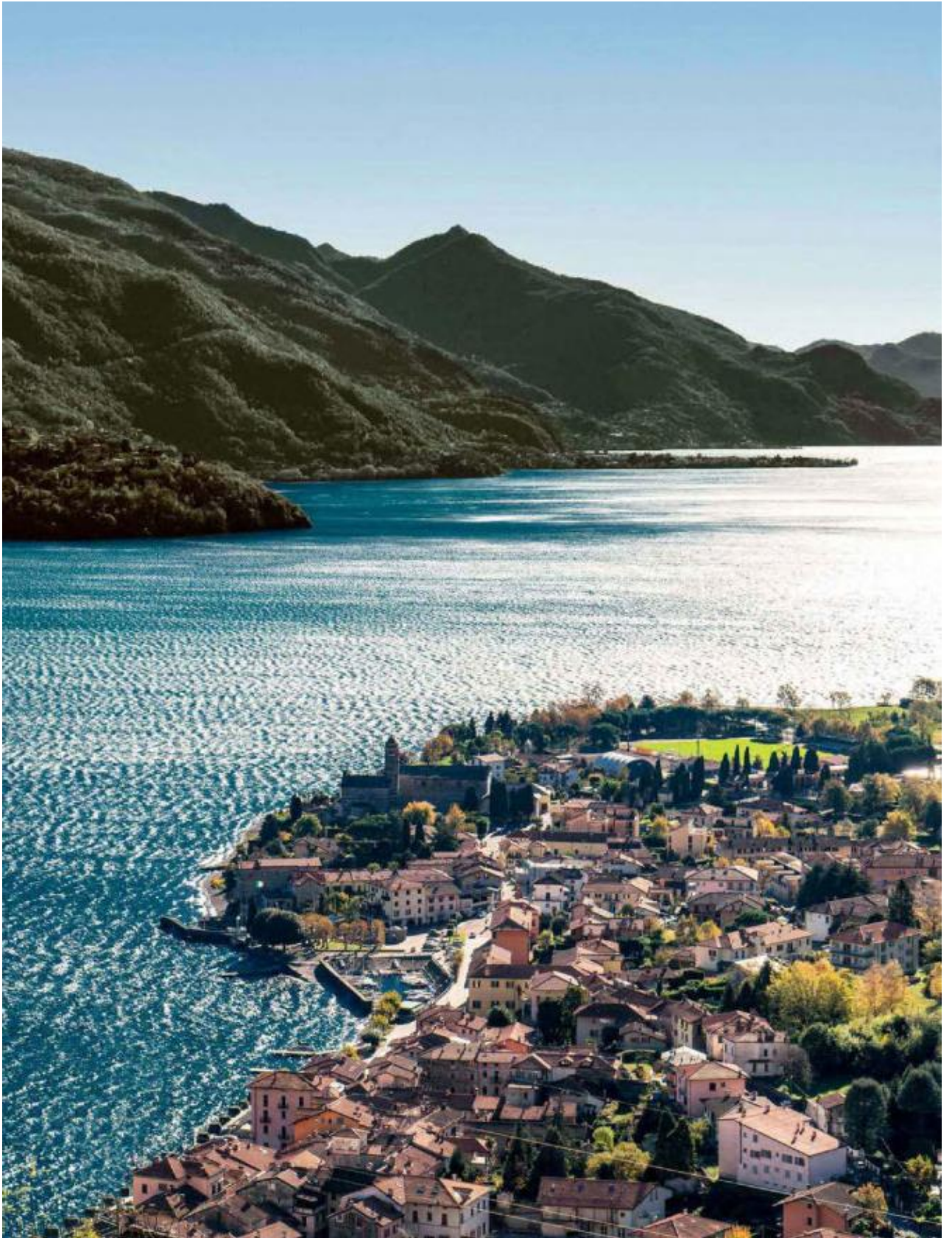
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**Tradition and heritage are honoured,
but the natural beauty still takes centre
stage at Italy's most famous lake.**

Words NADIA BAILEY

FOREVER NEW



*A PLACE TO EXPERIENCE
A CERTAIN KIND OF
RAREFIED NOSTALGIA,
ITS CHARMS ARE MANY.*



A **RESTAURANT FOUND** on Lake Como's only island, Locanda dell'Isola Comacina can boast many things — seclusion, picturesque views and that actor Sylvester Stallone once dined there — but its biggest claim to fame is that its menu has remained completely unchanged since 1947. Whether you dined here 70 years ago or just last week, the meals always begin with a fresh tomato, halved and topped with a whisper-thin slice of lemon, continue across five consecutive courses, and conclude with a shot of sweetened, brandy-laced coffee. The food is simple, orderly and pleasant. You don't go to Locanda dell'Isola Comacina to be surprised. You go because it offers a fleeting respite from the pace of the modern world.

This turns out to be a terrific way of thinking about Lake Como proper. At towns all around the lake, trattorias and ristoranti faithfully plate up Lombardian classics, grand old world villas peddle time-capsuled luxury, and the only real variable is if and when one might catch a glimpse of Amal and

George Clooney. As a place to experience a certain kind of rarefied nostalgia, its charms are many — but it's not necessarily a place you go because it's on the cutting edge of anything.

But all that, it seems, is changing. In the past few years, there's been an influx of new establishments that have found a way to balance tradition with a fresh perspective. Take Torno's Il Sereno Hotel, for example. The brainchild of the Contreras hotelier family and architect Patricia Urquiola, it's the first newly built hotel on the shores of Lake Como in 70 years — but newness here does not equal conspicuousness. Its exterior is modern and boxy, rendered in locally sourced stone, lake-reflecting windows and warm wood, and finished with a tumbling vertical garden.

The hotel doesn't so much lay claim to the landscape as it gently melds with it. The inside is filled with an exacting assortment of furniture and objects tailored to the sort of traveller who can spot a Brâncuși at 30 paces. The palette is all lumber, walnut and copper, with the occasional flash of emerald, and the air smells faintly herbaceous. The hotel boasts an infinity pool, multiple custom-built wood-panelled Riva boats and a Michelin-starred restaurant. It more than delivers on Lake Como's reputation for luxury – but compared to the ritzy, gilded hotels that have dominated the area, Il Sereno's earthy, design-led aesthetic is invigorating.

Speaking of that Michelin-starred restaurant, Il Sereno's inventiveness extends to its food offering, too. In Berton al Lago, chefs Andrea Berton and Raffaele Lenzi translate Italian classics into thrillingly modern fare: a ravioli, for example, is made from black rice, black cabbage and razor clams; a pared-back Veal Milanese is elevated with fragrant morsels of candied lemon. Most surprising of all is the 'minestrone', not a soup, but a dessert of ultra-fresh fruit and vegetables – everything from curly fronds of oak lettuce to julenned pear to purple potato crisps to juicy segments of fig – which comes plated as prettily as a garden and theatrically drenched in chocolate sauce. A waiter, quizzed on the logic of the dish, explained the chefs are interested in creating food that is, above all, memorable. It's certainly that.

If your tastes swing towards ambitious small plates, try *Materia* in Cernobbio or *Feel* in Como, both of which utilise a *locavore* approach – fish from the lake, locally grown herbs – in service of artful gastronomical creations. Even more appealing is *Bistrot Figli dei Fiori*, a florist-cum-restaurant located on Como's grungier west side. What it lacks in lake views (none), it makes up for in atmosphere: a plant-filled terrace resembling a greenhouse proves an ideal aperitivo spot, while in the multiple low-lit, botanically themed dining rooms you're likely to hear the swift patter of Italian among the guests. ▶▶



THIS PAGE Take a stroll down Como's charming narrow walkways. **OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT** Bistrot Figli dei Fiori ducks floating on the lake. **OPENER, FROM LEFT** Village of Gravedona on the Lake Como shoreline; Bistrot Figli dei Fiori dish.



VIEW FROM THE TOP

It's not difficult to find an aperitivo with a view in Lake

Como, as almost every cafe, restaurant and bar is designed to make the most of the panorama. But for those seeking to somehow improve on perfection, there's only one thing to do: seek a higher vantage point. Overlooking Como, at an altitude of 715 metres above sea level, is the tiny town of Brunate, whimsically referred to as 'the balcony of the Alps'. The name is not wrong. On a clear day, you can see right out across Como and beyond to Torno, Bellagio, Tremezzo and, on the distant horizon, the Swiss Alps. Take the vertiginous seven-minute

Funicolare Como-Brunate ride up the mountain (a bargain at €5.50, roughly \$9, return), and you'll find your choice of aperitivo spots. Ristorante Bellavista may be the most popular tourist choice, but the smart money is on Il Balcone sul Lago Café, a modest, family-run affair where an Aperol Spritz on the terrace comes with views so palatial that it might make a grown human cry. A tip: time your visit with sunset and watch as the lake turns pink, golden, violet and finally burnished silver, and one by one, the lights come on in the town below.

This is a local's hotspot, too. The food is fresh, relaxed and surprisingly light, and everything — from the cocktails to the pasta — comes strewn with flowers.

Of course, there's much more to Lake Como than just drinking and dining — its greatest asset remains the environment itself. It has the kind of overwhelming natural beauty you'd think you'd have to put in some serious travel time to find, when in fact it's an easy train ride from Milan. The foothills of the Alps form an awe-inspiring backdrop. There is verdant greenery everywhere you look — the lake is stunningly beautiful all year round.

While Como is the obvious place to start, the region's biggest pleasure might lie with exploring the panoply of small towns that cluster around the shoreline: from stately Tremezzo and sweetly touristy Bellagio through to the unexploited beauty of Nesso (the Nesso Orrido, a fairytale waterfall which cuts through the hills to meet the lake, is worth the trip alone). There are buses that will take you almost anywhere, but the roads surrounding Lake Como are perilously narrow and edged by sheer cliff-faces, and Italian drivers tend to barrel down them with a kind of distracted nonchalance. A less heart-stopping choice is to take Navigazione Lago di Como's *battelli* (slow boats), which criss-cross the lake all day long, cost a handful of Euros per trip, and dock at many of Como's loveliest towns.

It's best not to try to cram too much into a day though. Sit back and enjoy the slow pace of the journey, the sky reflected in the water, the overlapping green of the hills. Because no matter what trends may be happening on its shores, Lake Como's lure will always be this: the weight and shimmer of the water as it stretches out to the horizon, still and blue and eternal. ☺

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DETAILS

Berton al Lago Via Torrazza, 10, Torno; www.serenohotels.com/property/il-sereno/restaurant. **Bistrot Figli dei Fiori** Via Borgovico, 39A, Como; www.figlideifiori.com/bistrot. **Feel** Via Diaz, 54, Como; www.feelcomo.com. **Funicolare Como-Brunate** Piazza Alcide de Gasperi, 4, Como; www.funicolarecomo.it. **Il Balcone sul Lago Café** Via Pissarottino, 26, Brunate; www.ilbalconesullago.it. **Il Sereno Hotel** Via Torrazza 10, Torno; www.serenohotels.com/property/il-sereno. **Locanda dell'Isola Comacina** Isola Comacina, Ossuccio; www.comacina.it. **Materia** Via Cinque Giornate, 32, Cernobbio; www.ristorante.materia.it. **Navigazione Lago di Como** www.navigazioneelagi.it. **Ristorante Bellavista** Piazza Bonacossa, 2, Brunate; www.bellavistabrunate.com.

THIS PAGE

The stunning Il Sereno Hotel. **OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP** Artfully plated Feel dish; town-hopping on a battello, inside the Il Sereno Hotel.

