



THIS PAGE: Delicious Italian antipasti and cocktails served on the sunny terrace at Grand Hotel Tremezzo's T Bar. **OPPOSITE:** Striped sun loungers in Aperol spritz hues are perched on the shores of shimmering Lake Como at Grand Hotel Tremezzo.

MUCH MORE THAN A SIMPLE VACANZA, A GLAMOROUS GETAWAY ON THE SHORES OF LAKE COMO IS THE ULTIMATE DIVERSION FROM THE EVERYDAY AND AN IMMERSION IN THE MAGIC OF TRUE ITALIAN HOSPITALITY.



Italian *Idyll*

Words & photography EDWINA HART



Villeggiatura is more than a simple *vacanza*. It's a diversion from daily life. To rest and relax, embrace a slower pace, enrich the soul and deeply connect with a destination.



Long before the concept of 'slow travel' became a modern trend, the Italians had the tradition of *villeggiatura*: a word that dates back to Renaissance Italy, when Venetians sought a change of scenery, escaping Venice in favour of a summer villa. It's more than a simple *vacanza*. It's an extended stay in one place, a diversion from daily life. To rest and relax, embrace a slower pace, enrich the soul and deeply connect with a destination.

It's intrinsically Italian, and there's no finer locale than Lake Como to truly escape. So, I'm setting off for Italy's most beguiling body of water, a little more than an hour's drive north of Milan. The plan? Well, that's precisely the point – there isn't one. The next few days will unfold as I give in to the languid Lago di Como experience, ensconced in two of the lake's most luxurious hotels: the iconic Grand Hotel Tremezzo and the brand-new sister property, Passalacqua. >>

THIS PAGE: *Grand Hotel Tremezzo's floating pool. OPPOSITE* (clockwise from top left): *Grand Hotel Tremezzo's spa; Guests are whisked around Passalacqua in an open-top Fiat 500; Exploring Lake Como's towns in a vintage battello (boat).*





FROM LEFT: Lunch at Passalacqua is fresh and unfussy; Live la dolce vita at the hotel's chic pool. **OPPOSITE:** A few doors down from Grand Hotel Tremezzo, the 16th-century aristocratic residence Villa Sola Cabiati can be rented out for an ultra-private stay.



LAKE COMO

There's a mystique to Italy's loveliest lake, located in the foothills of the Italian Alps, dotted with lavish *palazzi* and terracotta roof-topped towns. The province has attracted artists and aristocrats for centuries. Lake Como's fabled legacy of pleasure-seekers can be traced to the second century as a Roman holiday resort, and later a stop on the Grand Tour undertaken by the upper classes of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was a favourite Hollywood haunt during the 1950s before a modern-day revival as the playground of the rich and famous – dubbed the 'George Clooney effect' after the lake's most feted resident.

PASSALACQUA

It's a stormy October afternoon when I arrive at Passalacqua on the shores of Lake Como. The grand iron gates creak open to reveal an 18th-century villa with sage-green shutters set among verdant tiered gardens that cascade to the waterfront. I'm warmly greeted by the staff with a posy of freshly picked flowers and handed a heavy brass key to my room at the enchanting 24-suite hideaway. The historic estate has hosted notable guests from Napoleon and Winston Churchill to composer Vincenzo Bellini, who was inspired to write two operas during his stay.

For the first time in the property's 236-year history, it's been reimagined as a hotel. The transformation was dreamt up by the De Santis family, who are perfectly versed in the art of hospitality as owners of Grand Hotel Tremezzo, one of Europe's legendary institutions. Third-generation hotelier Valentina De Santis had a vision for Passalacqua. And after three years of masterfully making over the estate – enlisting a small legion of Italy's finest craftsmen and handpicking decor across the continent – it's one of the most sought-after stays for the chic elite.

Passalacqua is a celebration of Italian artisanship – a red-carpet staircase, original frescoes, mosaic floors, glass-blown chandeliers

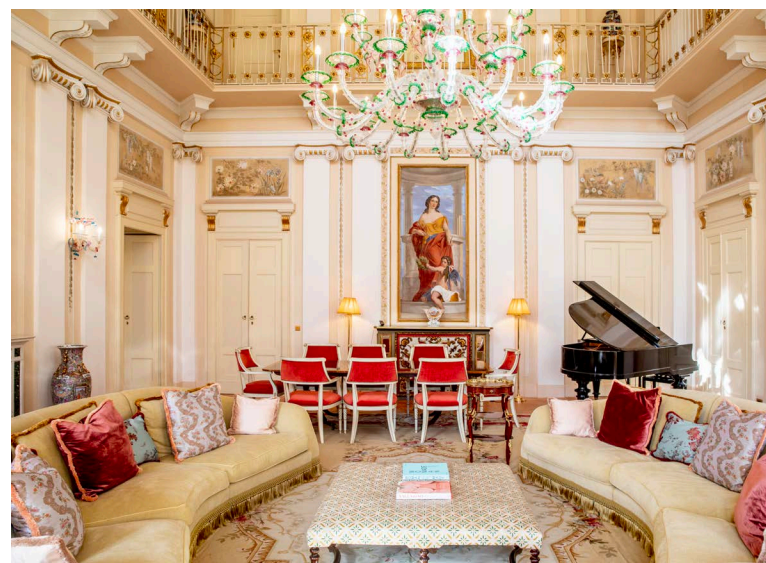
from Murano and slabs of Carrara marble. Despite the swoon-worthy antiques and priceless art, I'm invited to feel at home, even to wander into the old-fashioned open kitchen to help myself to a snack from the fridge or a piece of homemade *torta* (cake) on the counter.

THE SWEETNESS OF DOING NOTHING

My day begins with the clanging of church bells from the old hamlet of Moltrasio perched behind Passalacqua. I take breakfast in the garden: cloud-soft, cream-filled *maritozzi* (buns) and a cappuccino. A gentle, jasmine-scented breeze carries the sound of the trickling fountains and birdsong. It's the Italian idyll. The sprawling grounds are brimming with lemon, pear and pomegranate trees, silvery olive groves, ancient Lebanese cedar and a rose garden. The storm has lifted, revealing something special about the light in Lake Como. The way it peeks through the clouds, streams between pine branches and sparkles on the surface of the glacial lake.

Embracing the Italian saying *dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing), I meander down to the pool to take a dip. The floral-printed parasols and sun loungers have been custom-designed in collaboration with Milan-based fashion boutique La DoubleJ, as is the 200-year-old glasshouse, decked out with vibrant fabrics and tableware. A fizzy Bellini makes for the perfect overture to a lingering poolside lunch. Chef di casa Mauro Verza worked as a private cook for prominent Milanese families for over two decades. The food is >>





FROM LEFT: Breakfast with lake views at Grand Hotel Tremezzo; The opulent Suite Bellini at Passalacqua. **OPPOSITE:** Embrace the Italian art of dolce far niente or 'doing nothing' at Passalacqua's pool, complete with custom-designed parasols and sun loungers.

gorgeously garden-fresh and unfussy. I tuck into fried calamari and zucchini flowers, ribbons of *culatello* (salumi) with winter melon and twirled forkfuls of spaghetti pomodoro.

The best way to see Lake Como is on the water. I discover the underground passage that emerges at Passalacqua's private dock and hop onto the vintage motor launch, decked out in lemony yellow Loro Piana fabric. The boat is skippered by Bepe, who's been zipping along the lake for almost 40 years. As we glide along the water – smooth like the famed Como silk – he points out George Clooney's Villa Oleandra in the actor's adopted hometown of Laglio. The lake is edged with autumnal burnt orange-tinged forests and storybook villages such as vine-clad Nesso, with swans swimming beneath the stone footbridge.

A MUSICAL MUSE

This evening I venture into the cosmopolitan town of Como for a piano recital at the neoclassical Teatro Sociale, an opera house with crimson interiors reminiscent of Milan's La Scala. I take a behind-the-scenes tour with a local guide who points to a gold-framed painting of a beautiful raven-haired woman in a velvet dress. "That's a portrait of Giuditta Pasta, also known as Casta Diva", she says. The celebrated 19th-century soprano also happened to be the muse of opera composer Bellini. "You are staying at Passalacqua? It was the villa of Bellini at that time. Across the lake, there is Villa Casta Diva. Legend says that he would play the piano from his villa, and she would sing from the other side of the lake. She inspired [the opera] *Norma*."

That night, as I drift off to sleep enveloped in the Beltrami bed linen – made from white birch fibres said to be softer than silk – I dream of hearing Bellini's aria floating across the lake.

GRAND HOTEL TREMEZZO

While Passalacqua is a hidden paradise, Grand Hotel Tremezzo is the place to see and be seen. It's a smooth ride to the town of Tremezzo in the back of a Maserati, taking a winding route along the shoreline before I finally set eyes on the hotel's unmistakable facade.

The 90-room Art Nouveau masterpiece has been charming holidaymakers since 1910. It still exudes the golden-age glamour of Greta Garbo's 'happy, sunny place' from the 1932 film *Grand Hotel*. On this blue-sky day, I've decided that it's my happy, sunny place, too. A floating pool sits on the lake, fringed by retro Italian Riviera-esque striped sun loungers on a stretch of real sand. The colour palette is Aperol spritz, which also happens to be the cocktail du jour of the sunbathers wearing silk headscarves and Gucci sunglasses.

The architecture fits squarely in the genre of the grand-hotel style of the early 20th century (think: Wes Anderson's film *The Grand Budapest Hotel*). I ride the glass-and-brass elevator – a portal into a playful, pastel-hued lobby – and check into my suite, which is lavishly appointed with a gilded bedframe >>





and a bathroom dripping in marble. Sumptuous curtains open onto a Juliette balcony with postcard views.

VINTAGE BOAT RIDE

I'd already heard enthusiastic whispers about the extravagant breakfast buffet at Grand Hotel Tremezzo – and it did not disappoint. It's fig season, so I tear into the deliciously sweet fruit and pastries before skipping down to the pier, where a handsome Venetian-built boat awaits me. It's Lake Como's version of a limousine. We speed towards one of the region's most cinematic locations, Villa del Balbianello, where whimsically sculpted gardens festoon the promontory. The backdrop is recognisable from both *Star Wars* and James Bond's *Casino Royale*. It's exhilarating – with the wind in my hair and a glass of prosecco in hand.

BELLAGIO

When I stand on my suite's balcony, the town of Bellagio beckons from across the water. Conveniently, the ferry wharf is a moment's walk away from the hotel, so I ride the 20-minute *battello* (boat) bound for the 'Pearl of Lake Como' where the wishbone-shaped lake forks. It's one of the prettiest towns in Europe, with narrow side streets awash in shades of limoncello, peach and apricot with shuttered windows adorned with geraniums, as well as fashion

boutiques, cafes, *pasticceria* and wine bars to while away the afternoon.

THE TERRACE

As the golden-hued afternoon slinks into a sultry evening, it would be unconscionable not to enjoy an aperitivo on the terrace at T Bar where a honey-voiced performer tinkers on the piano. By the time the moonlight has cast a silvery lustre over the lake, the night progresses to the patio of La Terrazza Gualtiero Marchesi, where the tables are a sea of twinkling candle-lit Murano glassware. The restaurant has the privilege of serving the signature dishes of the late chef Gualtiero Marchesi, known as the maestro of Italian cuisine. The pièce de résistance is the saffron risotto crowned with a sheet of 24-carat gold leaf from Florence – a dish worthy of the splendid backdrop.

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

In the spirit of espousing my slow-paced villeggiatura, I extend my sojourn for another few days at Passalacqua. "You're back. Welcome home!" one of the white-jacketed waitstaff smiles while swiftly delivering my coffee granita at breakfast. It's funny that one should feel so at home in what could quite possibly be the most beautiful villa in Lombardy, but somehow, I do. That's the magic of true Italian hospitality. **IT**

A Traveller's Checklist

GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is Milan Malpensa, around an hour's drive to Lake Como. The lake is also easily accessible by train; it's a 40-minute journey from Milano Centrale station to Como San Giovanni station in Como's town centre. The tourism season begins in March.

STAYING THERE

Passalacqua

This hotly anticipated boutique hotel opened in summer 2022. It's now one of the lake's most fashionable addresses. You can stay in the main Villa, the Palazzo (fashioned from the former horse stables) or the four-bedroom Casa al Lago by the water's edge. passalacqua.it/en

Grand Hotel Tremezzo

The grand dame of Lake Como is more than a five-star hotel. The family-run property boasts five stylish restaurants and bars, three pools (including one that floats on the lake) and an award-winning spa for movie star treatment. The lakeside location in the town of Tremezzo makes this hotel a convenient base for those keen to explore. grandhoteltremezzo.com/en

Villa Sola Cabiati

Located a few doors down from Grand Hotel Tremezzo, Villa Sola Cabiati is an opulent and ultra-private option for those travelling in a group or wedding party. The 16th-century aristocratic residence has six rooms that can accommodate up to 12 guests – and you'll be looked after by a dedicated team of staff, including a butler. grandhoteltremezzo.com/en/our-villa/villa-sola-cabiati

EATING THERE

Restaurant Kitchen

This elegant Michelin-starred restaurant is nestled in a private park in front of the Sheraton Hotel Como. Expect creative Italian cuisine with seasonal ingredients plucked from the kitchen's biodynamic garden. kitchencomo.com

Gelateria Le Giuggiole

This tiny gelateria is located above Passalacqua in the village of Moltrasio. The sugary scent of waffle cones wafts up the stone-paved path, tempting all who stroll by. Opt for a scoop of the salted pistachio ice-cream or the seasonal pear sorbet. facebook.com/GelateriaLeGiuggiole

DRINKING THERE

T Bar

Located at Grand Hotel Tremezzo, this is the bar of your Lake Como dreams. Expect extraordinary views, a convivial atmosphere and expertly made cocktails. For a twist on an Aperol spritz, try the refreshing Spritz GHT with notes of pink grapefruit and rosemary. grandhoteltremezzo.com/en/gourmet-experience/t-bar/

PLAYING THERE

Visit Villa Carlotta

The former marquis' mansion-turned-museum is home to some wonderful Canova sculptures. However, it's really about the eight-hectare botanic gardens with more than 150 different species of plants. Springtime is a riot of colour. online.villacarlotta.it/en

Explore Villa del Balbianello

The guided tour provides a fascinating glimpse into the life of the villa's last resident,



Count Guido Monzino – an explorer who led the first Italian expedition to climb Mt Everest in the 1970s. The interiors are a treasure trove of memorabilia he collected on his far-flung adventures to Africa, the Himalayas and frozen polar regions. fondoambiente.it/villa-del-balbianello-eng
Take a pizza-making class
Grand Hotel Tremezzo guests can learn the secrets of cooking authentic Italian pizza – made with stone-ground flour, fresh tomato sauce and buffalo mozzarella – under the guidance of *pizzaioli* (pizza chefs) at poolside restaurant T Pizza.

Spa Treatment at T Spa
The exquisitely redesigned T Spa at Grand Hotel Tremezzo boasts products exclusively used by only a handful of select hotels – the Florentine beauty brand Santa Maria Novella can trace its roots back to 1221. **Shop at Pierangelo Masciadri**
Como was a renowned silk producer for centuries. Stop by the Pierangelo Masciadri store in Bellagio, which stocks everything from scarves and handbags to shirts and ties. pmartemoda.com/en

CLOCKWISE FROM

ABOVE: *Grand Hotel Tremezzo is the grand dame of Lake Como; Bellagio is one of the lake's prettiest villages. OPPOSITE:* *Villa del Balbianello has been used as the setting for well-known movies, such as Casino Royale.*

