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## The lake show



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**T**hink of the Italian lakes and images of grandeur and luxury inevitably come to mind — renaissance villas, baroque castles and ostentatious gardens. You imagine the belle-époque spas, casinos and balls that made the area the playground of the European elite — a legacy continued today by Milanese fashion designers, Roman aristocrats, and Hollywood star George Clooney, who owns a £7m mansion by Lake Como. And you envisage the famously opulent Villa d'Este hotel, where a jacket and tie is de rigueur for dinner and a club sandwich will set you back £17.

A trip to the region need not, however, be prohibitively expensive — if you're prepared to travel off-season, fly budget airline, and stay in smaller, family-run hotels that aren't always right by the water.

It is also possible to enjoy the fascinating variety of mood imparted by each of the five major lakes — Maggiore, Lugano, Como, Iseo and Garda — in a driving holiday of 10

days or so. From Maggiore in the west to Garda in the east is a distance of just 160km and, while circuitous lakeside roads and dizzying mountain passes can make the journey at least twice that distance, it's easy to find strategic bases from which none of the unmissable attractions are very far.

We started at Maggiore, a small section of which stretches north into Switzerland. While the area can appear quite industrialised and built-up — this is decidedly not the bucolic Lake District or Lakes of Killarney — there are views from the road that sweeps along the western shores of Maggiore that beguile and transport you like few others.

In late spring and autumn the temperature sits comfortably above 70F — the gentle, pale blue water so still, and the thin, opaque mist that lays upon it so delicate, it looks like a meditative Japanese water-colour. It's at times like this that you can see why the Italian Lakes appealed so ardently to English romantic poets and Italian opera composers. There

is something theatrical yet elegiac about the scenery. There is none of the bluster and brashness of the seaside, none of that dazzling sunlight. To Italians, this can be a distinct disadvantage. Some regard the lakes as too *triste* (sad) to holiday in.

On Maggiore, we stayed at a great value hotel that may have been a little away from the more popular resorts of Stresa and Verbania, but that was quiet, unhurried — and lakeside. The 55-room, four-star Hotel Cannero, located on the northern tip of the lake, was built in the mid-1800s as a monastery, and has been owned and run by the Gallinotto family since 1902. From here we visited lavish, grandiose Isola Bella, just off-shore from Stresa. On the island is a vast baroque *palazzo*, overflowing with art treasures, and an extravagantly terraced garden with artificial grottoes and ornate fountains, obelisks and statues.

Our next base was Lake Lugano. Perhaps it's because most of the lake lies in Switzerland, or because its surround-



## Way to go

►►► **Getting there:** Ryanair (0871 246 0000, [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies to Milan (Bergamo) from Stansted, Luton, Liverpool, Newcastle and Glasgow. Car hire: Hertz (08708 484848, [hertz.co.uk](http://hertz.co.uk)) has pre-paid 'World on Wheels' all-inclusive rates starting at £149.49 for seven days.

►►► **Where to stay:** Two nights' double room B&B at Hotel Cannero on Maggiore cost from £196 with Italian Journeys (020-7370 6002, [italianjourneys.com](http://italianjourneys.com)). Three nights' double room B&B at Hotel Stella d'Italia on Lugano cost £404 with Magic of Italy (0870 888 0220, [magictravelgroup.co.uk](http://magictravelgroup.co.uk)). Two nights' half-board at I Due Roccoli on Iseo and two nights' half board at Locanda agli Angeli on Garda costs from £728 for a double with Inntravel (01653 617906, [inntravel.co.uk](http://inntravel.co.uk)). All three companies also offer tailor-made holidays with British Airways' flights and car hire. Inntravel offers walking holidays around Iseo and Garda, and will arrange



trips using Ryanair for a fee of £25.

►►► **Other information:** Factory outlets: As well as Foxtown (via A Maspoli 18, Mendrisio, Switzerland, [foxtown.ch](http://foxtown.ch)), head to the Franciacorta Outlet Village near Brescia (Piazza Cascina Moie, Rodengo Saiano, [franciacortaoutlet.it](http://franciacortaoutlet.it)) and the Alessi Outlet Store near Lake Orta (via Privata Alessi, Crusinallo). Italian Tourist Board (020-7408 1254, [enit.it](http://enit.it)) Country code: 00 39 Flight time London-Milan: 2hrs. Time difference: +1hr. £1 = 1.39 euros.

ing landscape is wilder and less inhabited, but Lugano was supremely restful and relaxing. Here the charm is that there is little activity on the lake.

We checked into the Stella d'Italia in San Mamete on the northern, Italian shore, and kicked back for a few days, taking leisurely breakfasts on the arbour terrace by the water's edge, swimming in the cool and invigorating lake, and sampling superb dishes such as *ossobucco*.

From San Mamete it is a quick 20km journey to busier Lake Como, where we took in two of the area's most celebrated sites — the elegant Villa Carlotta mansion and gardens, and the lovely town of Bellagio, best approached by water.

The early-18th century Villa Carlotta in Tremezzo has a neoclassical symmetry and perfection to it, and a large garden with lemon and orange trees, climbing roses, azalea and specimen rhododendron. From the pontoon opposite the villa, you board a ferry that takes you across Como to beautiful Bellagio.

Perched at the tip of a



**Great lakes . . . (clockwise from far left) Maggiore; the medieval village of Orta San Giulio on Lake Orta; Lake Garda**

promontory that divides the lake in two, Bellagio's natural position and long watery aspects is enough to draw admirers. Add its pastel-shaded historic hotels, a maze of steep cobbled alleys, fine shops and lakefront cafes and bars, and you have one of the lakes' most enchanting attractions.

We also took the scenic road south along the Como shoreline to Cernobbio, driving nonchalantly by the £420-a-night Villa d'Este, and nipping across the Swiss border to the Foxtown shopping village in Mondrisio. It is a dispiriting, American-style mall, on four levels, but it has 130 shops offering designer labels such as Prada, Gucci, Guess and La Perla at heavily discounted prices.

On the way to Lake Iseo, we stopped off at Bergamo, which, despite being looked down upon by its haughty near neighbour Milan, is not to be missed. On a hill to the north of the city stands one of the finest walled medieval towns in Italy. There's a stunning old square, Piazza Vecchia, and narrow cobbled streets that lead to funky modern clothes

shops and historic cafes.

Smaller Lake Iseo, just west of Bergamo, is much more low-key than Como. The architecture in the 12th-century town of Iseo seems less elaborate than elsewhere on the lakes and the lakefront is more open, the mountain views more spacious. We stayed at a four-star hotel high up the wooded hills, I Due Roccoli. The views from the 19 guest rooms out over the lake were reason enough for the detour, as was the simple yet beautifully executed food in the restaurant. The wine list featured a fine selection from the nearby Franciacorta region.

Garda, the largest of the lakes, is perhaps the area's number one attraction, with the picturesque medieval spa town of Sirmione often crowded to capacity in the summer. The mood was not just more touristy, but more Germanic, too. There were none of the gossamer northern mists here; the sharper southern light made everything almost hyper-real. The shorelines seemed closer than they actually were, the build-

ings and the landscape felt lit from within, and the lakeside promenades had the breezy feel of the seaside.

We stayed near Gardone Riviera at the Locanda agli Angeli, opposite the preposterous but compelling Vittoriale degli Italiani. The one-time residence of 20th-century Italian poet, poseur, womaniser and egomaniac Gabriele D'Annunzio, the Vittoriale is worth a visit just to see the coffin in which D'Annunzio meditated and the prow of a battleship lodged in the gardens to commemorate his attempt to "liberate" the city of Fiume from Yugoslav rule.

**T**he locanda has 16 stylish rooms divided between two buildings — the original trattoria and a large 17th-century house restored with a tasteful eye. The owners Patrizia and Elisabetta Pellegrini have imported smart colonial-style furniture from Indonesia; guest rooms have canopied four-poster beds and rustic marble bathrooms. It's

a small, two-star operation yet the delicious home-made food (grilled perch from the lake, rabbit cooked in a local red wine) was about the best, and best value, we tasted.

It was our last great "affordable lakes" moment, but perhaps not the finest. That belonged to the pretty medieval village of Orta San Giulio by lesser-known Lake Orta, near Maggiore. Arriving late in the afternoon at the graceful main square, Piazza Motta, we found a table right by the water and ordered a prosecco and a Campari.

Behind us was an elegant row of weathered and sun-bleached houses. By the pier, a dapper boat captain in a crisp white polo shirt and peaked cap chatted amiably with two elderly women. Past old wooden rowing boats named Sofia and Filomena, was the glorious deep turquoise lake sparkling in a sun that slowly set behind the hazy, blue-white mountains beyond. It seems almost vulgar to mention it, but at just €3 each, the aperitifs were a bargain. The view, of course, was just about priceless.