

RELAX BY THE

ITALIAN LAKES

For dazzling scenery and a taste of *la dolce vita*, **Suzie Boulton** heads for northern Italy to find out-of-the-way island and waterside wonders in the shadows of the Alps



The 'big three' Italian lakes are Maggiore, where mountains form a dramatic backdrop, beguiling Como, of which Shelley wrote, 'it surpasses in beauty everything I have seen hitherto', and vast and varied Garda – fjord-like in the north, sea-like in the south.

WHY NOW?

Summer is the season of music and food festivals, boat processions and fireworks. The prestigious Stresa Festival stages concerts in stunning locations around Lake Maggiore and its islands. Mid-July sees Clusane's *Settimana della Tinca al Forno* (Week of the Oven-baked Tench) when trattorias serve up fish fresh from the lake at rock-bottom prices.

The southeastern shores of Lake Garda are 30km (19 miles) from Verona where *Aida* and other lavish operas are staged throughout the summer in the world's third-largest Roman arena. This summer, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death is marked by plays performed where (more or less) they are set: *Romeo and Juliet* in the city of the star-crossed lovers and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Torri del Benaco on Lake Garda.

Vinophiles should wait until September for the cork-popping wine festival at pretty Bardolino, on Lake Garda. The tiny wine-growing region of

Franciacorta near Lake Iseo produces some of the best fizz in all Italy.

ROMANTIC HIDEAWAYS

Tiny Lake Orta, to the far west of the region, is awash with charm. Wander the cobbled, car-free alleys of medieval Orta San Giulio, drink in views of magical Isola di San Giulio, then take a boat to this tiny tranquil haven. Lovely Lake Iseo is neglected in favour of its larger, more glamorous neighbours, leaving it delightfully unspoilt. In summer, ferries chug around the lake to Monte Isola, a timeless island where twait shad (a type of herring) dry on poles in the sun, islanders build boats or make nets – and the only car belongs to the local policeman.

On Lake Garda, Sirmione, the famous spa resort with its photogenic castle and atmospheric Roman ruins, heaves with tourists. Come back in mid-winter. Instead head for unspoilt Gargnano where DH Lawrence wrote *Twilight in Italy*. It has a lively little port, a promenade of orange trees with the romantic gourmet restaurant, La Tortuga, serving some of the best food on the lake.

Bellagio is the village that everyone goes to on Lake Como. Just as charming and far less crowded and commercialised is Varenna across



BLUE YONDER

Above: café society Italian-style in Varenna on the shores of Lake Como; fish is the dish of the day – every day

TRAVEL OUTTHERE

◁ the lake, a perfectly preserved medieval village where narrow cobbled alleys lead to the arbour-shaded *Passeggiata degli Innamorati* (Lovers' Walkway) that winds along the lakeshore.

ALL ABOARD

Lakeside roads are clogged with traffic during summer, so let the ferries do the work. For a combined lake cruise and mountain scenery, you can't beat the Lago Maggiore Express, from Stresa to the Swiss town of Locarno, followed by a sensational ride on the narrow-gauge Centovalli (100 valleys) train through the heart of the Ticino mountains.

On Lake Como, slow ferries pass villages clinging to the hillsides and grandiose waterfront villas – including George Clooney's. At Tremezzo, Villa Carlotta is a vast pile famous for its 14 acres of beautiful gardens. Villa del Balbianello, one of the locations of the Bond film *Casino Royale*, has a beautiful setting on a wooded headland. Bellagio, 'pearl of the lake', enjoys an unrivalled setting and remains enchanting despite boatloads of tourists.



ON THE WATERFRONT Laidback Lake Garda life

THE ITALIAN LAKES NEED TO KNOW

FLIGHT TIME
2 hrs: Stansted-Bergamo, Gatwick-Milan, Heathrow-Milan

TIME DIFFERENCE
GMT +1 hr

TEMPERATURE
Mid-summer around
28C (82.4F)

DRINKS
Beer €3-4, glass of
wine €4-6 (but
cheaper at the bar)

TIPPING
Service is normally
included in restaurant
bills, if not then 5-10%.

SPORTS
There's a great range
of watersports to try:
windsurf rental €20 an
hour; dinghy €40-€50
half a day; tandem
paragliding €130

www

For information on
Italian Lakes holidays,
visit saga.co.uk/gritti



SNAP! The lakes are a photographer's paradise

BUON APPETITO!

Seek out the less touristy trattorias in the alleys where the locals dine, and make the most of the lake fish – *lavarello* is a white fish, grilled with sage and butter. At Clusane on Lake Iseo, sample *tinca ripiena*, baked tench stuffed with breadcrumbs, parmesan and parsley and served with polenta. And try the flavoursome pastas – *casonsèi*, giant ravioli stuffed with parmesan, spinach and eggs, and *risotto alla milanese*, infused with saffron. Round your meal off with a *limoncello digestivo*.

HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

For jaw-dropping views Stresa's cable car climbs up Monte Mottarone, a natural balcony commanding views over the Alps and lakes. For an adrenalin-fuelled ride back down, the Alpyland Coaster two-seater bobsleds speed along at 40kph. At Malcesine on Lake Garda, rotating cable-car cabins soar up to the mountain ridge of Monte Baldo for walks, bike trails and tandem paragliding, while at Como a funicular climbs steeply to the hill village of Brunate, with a bird's-eye view of the lake, 1,600ft below. It's simply *meravigliosa!* ◆

OUTTHERE TRAVEL EXTRA



Sent packing

Visitors to the USA can cut down on the cases thanks to *theunpack.com*. It will deliver freshly laundered shirts, jackets, dresses, even gym gear – straight to your hotel. Fill in your size, height and weight online, then choose from a wide range of outfits. From around £15 a day for a 'suitcase' of smart-casual.

On your rocker

We think the Vango Hampton Rocker Chair with its padded seat/headrest and lockable frame (it stores flat for easy transportation) falls into the acceptable outside-living comfort zone – it's not too 'glampy'. The only downside is that it's got the grandchildren saying 'My turn! My turn!' written all over it. Maybe one for the grown-ups. £64.98 (*camperlands.co.uk*, 0161 902 3026)



FUNDS IN THE SUN

The golden rule for holiday spending-money is 'whatever you take, it will never be enough', particularly on short breaks. A recent Saga survey revealed that, on average, we each take £285 spending money on a typical three-day city break. So, take £385 and you should be ok!