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*Chefs, designers, hoteliers, and the cool crowd that orbits them are bringing a new energy to Lake Como—but discreetly. In this fabled Italian enclave, la dolce vita is pretty much perfect as it is. Text and photographs by **CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY***

From left: A swimming spot near the town of Tremezzina; the ancient city of Como; a drawing room at Villa Sola Cabiati.

ON MOST SUMMER NIGHTS, it seems that nothing could ever disturb the air of refined serenity outside Villa d'Este. Built in the 16th century as a lake house to beat all lake houses, the five-story villa became a grand hotel in 1873 and since then has managed to exist in its own parallel universe—an idyllic world of terraced gardens, white-jacketed waiters, and views with exactly the right mountain-to-lake ratio. But on this Sunday in June, the vibe on the hotel's veranda is oddly restless as diners sip aperitifs and stare intently at the shoreline. Word has spread that some major people will be showing up for dinner, and sure enough, as dusk begins to set in and a speedboat approaches the dock, a few loud gasps can be heard. The Obama

family—all four of them—step off the boat and stroll across the terrace, trailed by George and Amal Clooney, who are hosting the group for the weekend at their own villa farther up the lake. Black-suited security guards dart among the tables, commanding everyone to put away their phones and cameras, but the ex-president himself seems relaxed. “Hello everybody,” he says, before leading the group into the lobby and up the stairs to a first-floor suite.

I've been in Lake Como for only a few hours, and I'm already beginning to suspect that the standard reproach about this gorgeous place—that nothing really interesting happens—is a bit out of date. Granted, a young boat captain named Michele, who took me for a ride around the lake earlier in the afternoon, had a wisecrack ready when I asked him what people do for nightlife. “They go to Milan!” he said. But the next night, on the lake's eastern shore, I find a crowd of fashionable Milanese who've done just the opposite, ditching the city for the evening to attend a bash at Villa Roccabruna, which had recently been transformed into the area's latest posh hotel, the Mandarin Oriental Lake Como.

Later in the week I meet up with Yoox founder Federico Marchetti and his partner, journalist Kerry Olsen, at their fab new home in a former silk mill (it's the first interior design project of film director Luca Guadagnino). We hop in a Riva and head to a concert on the lake's wooded Comacina island, where an orchestra plays Dvořák on instruments that were brought in by helicopter. Afterward we motor up the lake for a party at the villa of Milan-based designer Simone Ricart, where guests discuss the pros and cons of Como in six or seven languages.

“There's a bit of a renaissance happening here—it's true,” says Maria Mantero, whose family has lived in the area since her great-grandfather founded the Mantero silk company, in 1902. “Things are changing. But not a lot, I hope.”

For a while now—2,000 years, at least—the consensus has been that Lake Como is just fine as it is. The Roman poet Virgil was one of the place's earliest outspoken fans, deeming it “our greatest lake,” and he was followed by everyone from Byron to Stendhal, who wrote that Como was “unequaled on earth in its loveliness.” Today, a quick scan of destination-wedding websites, not to mention Instagram, makes it clear that the lake's crowd-pleasing powers haven't waned. One Tuesday afternoon in the



Federico Marchetti and Kerry Olsen at their house near Lenno. *Opposite:* The newly revamped Villa Balbiano.





From left: The bar at Il Sereno; the main salon of the Villa Sola Cabiati; panna cotta at Materia restaurant; Maria Mantero in her traditional Lucia rowboat.

lobby of the Grand Hotel Tremezzo, I meet a group of English groomsmen in tuxedos; I assume they're prepping for a photo shoot, since nobody would ask their friends to fly to Italy for a wedding midweek, right? Wrong. The groom explains that Villa del Balbianello, the prettiest event venue on the lake's prettiest peninsula, is often fully booked on weekends, so they settled for a Tuesday, and everybody still came.

Inevitably, a few of the lake's hotels and restaurants are coasting on Como's reputation, secure in the knowledge that some diners will forgive a mediocre risotto if they're seated on a magnificent rose-laden loggia. During summer the outdoor tables in the medieval village of Bellagio can seem packed with every non-Italian who's ever read a Yelp review. But at the high end of the market, businesses have been determinedly upping their games, whether they need to or not. Grand Hotel Tremezzo's portfolio of private villas now includes the almost indecently dazzling Villa Sola Cabiati, the onetime summer residence of the dukes of Serbelloni. (Heirs of the Sola Cabiati family still own the place and have preserved its upper floors as essentially a private museum.) The family behind **Lario Hotels** has filled a void at the southern tip of the lake by opening **Vista Palazzo** in a restored Venetian-style mansion, right on the town of Como's main square. And at modern, built-from-scratch Il Sereno, designer Patricia Urquiola has shown that floor-to-ceiling windows and sleek walnut paneling, if done right, can look just as good here as Renaissance frescoes and Empire beds.

One perennial debate about Lake Como, which sits a few miles from the Swiss border and is backed by snowcapped

peaks for much of the year, is whether it's really, truly Italian. Before my arrival I'd made a stop in Naples, where a local had told me, with a mix of envy and dismissiveness, that Como was "basically Switzerland." Not quite. Despite the manicured perfection of many of the villas' gardens, the balmy microclimate here sustains a luxuriant glut of moss and palms and rhododendron, constantly blurring the line between the romantic and the decadent. You'll know you're not in Zurich when you go for a dip at one of the Tremezzo's three pools and a salamander darts out of the thick grove of banana plants while the tanned, handsome pool boy sets down your towel with a wink. There's also a very lax, very Italian attitude about rules and regulations, as evidenced by the traffic situation on the water. On most lakes in Europe you need a boating license to operate a craft with a 10- or 15-horsepower engine. Here the baseline is 40 horsepower, which explains all the hapless first-timers crashing their rented speedboats after too many Aperol Spritzes. "A lot of these people couldn't even operate a boat when sober, and they're definitely not sober," says skipper Carlo Tettamanzi, who charts several boats from Bellagio. He shrugs. "We just steer around them."

Also unmistakably Italian—and newly interesting—is Como's food scene, which for years was dominated by a handful of mainstays like pan-fried

lake fish. In the village of Cernobbio, a foursome of thirty-somethings with at least a dozen tattoos among them got an official stamp of legitimacy in 2018 when their place, **Materia**, snagged a Michelin star. "This part of Italy has always been so traditional, and there weren't many places pushing boundaries," says chef Davide Caranchini, who's done stints at Noma in Copenhagen and Le Gavroche in London. "If you serve stuff that everybody knows already, it's easy to fill the restaurant every night." Instead Caranchini offers twists on dishes where "everything that goes on the plate has a mission." Another contender is **Berton Al Lago**, at Il Sereno, with regionally inspired dishes by Milan fixture Andrea Berton, who trained with Alain Ducasse. And at the slick, minimalist **Market Place**, in Como's historic center, Davide Maci brings an almost Japanese-style reverence for balancing taste, shape, and color. Meanwhile, reliable classics are still the thing at the family-run **Locanda La Tirlindana** in Sala Comacina. A dish of trout with toasted almonds, tasted inexplicably, sublimely rich, so I asked the waiter if there's a secret ingredient. "Love, of course!" he said, noting that his mother is the chef.

The tiny and sometimes scruffy historic villages strung along Como's shoreline remain a big part of the lake's appeal—reminders that this place is not only a billionaire's playground or a stage set for movies like *Casino Royale*. At the waterfront, granddads fish for *agone* using traditional bamboo poles while teenagers show off their backflips with reckless leaps from ancient stone balustrades. Before Marchetti and Olsen found the abandoned silk factory near Lenno that's now their

Como Essentials

STAY

Visit **Villa d'Este** (rooms from \$675; villadeste.com), the idyllic, elegant property that's in a category of its own. **Grand Hotel Tremezzo** (rooms from \$565; grandhoteltremezzo.com) has 90 rooms and suites, many of which offer lake views, but for the ultimate experience book the private **Villa Sola Cabiati**, just minutes from the main property. Check out newcomer **Vista Palazzo** (rooms from \$550; vistalago.dicomo.com), a recently restored Venetian-style mansion located in the center of the city that's open year-round. For a luxury modern setting, stay in one of the 30 minimalist suites at **Il Sereno** (rooms from \$830; serenohotels.com). Go to the **Mandarin Oriental, Lago di Como** (rooms from \$631; mandarinoriental.com) for a seductive blend of modern Italian style with East Asian influence. The six-suite **Villa Balbiano** (price upon request; theheritage-collection.com) is a dream venue for the no-expense-spared wedding or private party.

EAT

Materia (restaurantemateria.it) creates its dishes using herbs and vegetables from its own greenhouse. Check out the new **Berton Al Lago** (serenohotels.com), at Il Sereno, for regionally inspired dishes by star chef Andrea Berton. Go to the **Market Place** (themarketplace.it) for an internationally inspired menu, or visit the family-run local favorite **Locanda La Tirlindana** (latirlindana.it).



Guests on the lawn of the hotel Mandarin Oriental, Lago di Como.

vacation home, they considered bidding on one of the coveted historic villas. “But as beautiful as they are, they can be isolating,” says the English-born Olsen. “And we might feel ridiculous in one.” Marchetti, an avid swimmer, also had his own goals for a midlife-crisis splurge. “Instead of a Ferrari, I wanted an indoor pool,” he says. While their new place was under renovation, the couple, who are based in Milan, lived nearby and sent their daughter, Margherita, to the public nursery school. Adjusting to village life came with some surprises, as when Olsen got scolded by the other mothers for taking Margherita

out in her stroller on breezy days. (The wind, locals believe, carries germs.) But for Olsen it was a welcome break from Milan and a crash course in keeping things real. “Here you can’t even tell a white lie about why you’re late or whatever,” Olsen says. “Everybody sees everything.”

The profile of the typical Como newcomer has shifted continually over the years. In the 17th and 18th centuries, English aristocrats made extended stopovers on their Grand Tours to mingle with noble

Milanese families; later came an elite crowd of artists, industrialists, and world leaders. By the 1970s and ’80s, when Italians started getting on planes for Ibiza and Mykonos, more and more Americans were showing up. (Even before Clooney bought his property from the Heinz family, in 2002, Madonna and J.Lo were paying visits to Gianni Versace, who got his place, Villa Fontanelle, in 1977.) In this century, megarich Russians have been the most visible new homeowners. But for all that, the general look of the lake

remains remarkably unchanged. “If you brought someone here from a hundred years ago, they’d be surprised at how similar it is physically,” says Jean-Marc Droulers, whose French-born father purchased Villa d’Este in the ’60s. Droulers says that Lake Como’s steep hillsides and unique topography make it more intimate than neighboring lakes such as Garda, where a road hugs much of the shoreline. Here, the mansions sit right on the waterfront, with nothing blocking the view in either direction. “So your boat can go right past each villa and you can see whether the owner is working on his garden, or taking a nap,” Droulers says.

One of the least hyped highlights of a trip to the lake is the town of Como itself. Oddly, many travelers come and go without realizing that this prosperous, ancient walled city is one of the most interesting in northern Italy. A few blocks from the 15th-century Duomo sits the Teatro Sociale opera house, which briefly took over for La Scala during World War II; even if it’s closed when you stop by, the attendant might let you in to see the stacked rows of 98 viewing boxes, each privately owned and individually decorated. Deeper in the medieval quarter is the shadowy, candlelit, and usually empty San Fedele basilica, with Renaissance frescoes and Baroque triptychs that would be star attractions if there weren’t so much competition nearby. “Little by little, people are realizing that there’s actually a city here,” says Bianca Passara, owner of Vista Palazzo. She’s positioning the hotel as a year-round urban getaway, since many properties on the lake shut down between November and March.

Before leaving Lake Como, I stop for lunch at the villa of Maria Mantero’s family in Tremezzina, where a wide lawn slopes down to a dock and a small beach. Mantero, looking glam in a silk turban printed with one of the family company’s archival designs (their charity, Dee di Vita, raises funds and creates silk headwear for cancer patients), heads out on the water for a workout session in one of Como’s traditional stand-up rowboats, with its distinctive wooden arches. Then her father, Michele, cousin Lucia, who runs the family business, and a few others join us in the stone boathouse as we share a massive grilled fish from the lake. Lucia Mantero, it turns out, paddled over in a kayak from her family’s own villa just down the shore. For all of Como’s extravagant man-made splendors, this group says, the ultimate attractions are still its natural ones, like the forested mountains and shimmering water they can ogle from their backyards.

“Lots of people prefer Mykonos, and places with discotheques, and that’s fine for them,” Maria Mantero says. “I hope they enjoy it. We’d rather be here.” ☞