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BACK FROM COMO: ON THE LAKE AND IN THE CITY

BY SHARRI WHITING DE MASI

The ancient town of Como, Italy keeps getting better, far surpassing the level of hospitality afforded its founder, Julius Caesar. Though there have long been five-star properties in the towns along the lakeside, the city itself only saw its first open

within the last two years. The proprietors, the Passera family and its Lario Hotels group, are deeply committed to preserving the lake and the history that surrounds it. (Fun fact: Lario is the other Italian / Latin name for Lake Como.)

VISTA PALAZZO, the only five-star luxury hotel in the center of the ancient lakeside city of Como, has 18 suites and rooms and affords breathtaking views of the lake and the city.

AT VISTA PALAZZO, the Corner Junior Suites, one of which is shown here, and the Junior Suites, shown below, have living rooms with views of Lago di Como.



Adjacent to the Passeras' Liberty-style **Terminus** (four stars) on the lakefront, the newer five-star luxury, **Vista Palazzo** at Piazza Cavour 24, has taken the group's hospitality up a notch. Intimate and not too overwhelming, the Vista Palazzo uses subtle touches to gratify a guest's unspoken wishes (deep bathtubs perfectly aligned to soak in the lake view come to mind).

Unlike the storied luxury properties outside of the city, this one sits steps away from city center, historic sites, fine restaurants, the ferry port and the silk museum, as well as the designer shops to purchase the ties and scarves Como is famous for.

The Lario Group operates four properties in and around Como. Its latest, the Vista, includes 18 rooms and suites in a salmon-colored palazzo (c. 1870); all are furnished with king beds and big

marble bathrooms, Nespresso machines, huge, soundproof windows, and the other bells and whistles that allow us to plug in or unplug as needed. The suites have separate living rooms. We especially liked the Corner Junior Suites (Nos. 230, 330, 430; about 500 square feet) with all the windows — such a pleasure to enjoy the lake and people-watch while wearing a plush bathrobe and sip-

ping a cappuccino.

The six Suites are a bit larger, at about 650 square feet. Not to be overlooked is Deluxe Room 407, which has a huge bath and two sets of doors leading out to a large terrace.

We indulged ourselves at the rooftop bar for an aperitivo before dinner in chef Stefano Mattar's *Sottovoce* rooftop ristorante, one of the only places

in the town to offer this kind of panoramic view along with a carefully thought out international menu.

Another Plus: Vista Palazzo stays open all year. Cristina Zucchi (cristinazucchi@lariohotels.com) is the managing director of the group; contact her regarding all the hotels. The Vista Palazzo is a member of Small Luxury Hotels.

For less populated lakeside living, our jet lag was soothed by the calm waters off the balcony of our room at **Hotel Villa Flori** (four stars). Sometimes lowkey is what we need, and we found it here.

Between the towns of Como and Cernobbio, this 19th-century villa became a hotel in 1958 and has been renovated several times. Of the 53 rooms, seven are Junior Suites and there is one Gran Lago Suite. Only four rooms are without a view, though they do have a





ALBERGO TERMINUS' Bar delle Terme (here) has a period feel inside and extends into the garden during the warm weather. Each of the rooms at the Belle Epoque hotel are unique, cozy and soundproofed. Shown below is a Superior Room.



the bathroom. Suite 321 has separate living and sleeping spaces.

We love the Bar delle Terme, both the period feel of the inside and the garden tables in warm weather. There's a full menu for lunch or dinner, including light choices. Guests often go between the two hotels for meals.

Naturally, visitors to Italy prioritize food, and restaurants in Como and along the lake are ready for them. It's a chefs' town. Federico Beretta reigns at Feel Como, housed in a stone barn. Davide Maci stars at The Market Place in the center of town; Andrea Casali runs Kitchen at the Sheraton with a young, talented team; and Davide Casanchini, formerly at Noma, earned a Michelin star in 2020 at Materia in Cernobbio. We can't forget Michele Zambanini, who introduced us to the Glacier 51 fish at Veranda at Villa d'Este.

Shopping in Como is focused on silk, which has delighted visitors for 200 years. Start with a visit to the Museum of Silk to marvel at the process of turning cocoons into fine fabrics and then enjoy the museum store's collection of scarves and ties. A ferry ride up to Bellagio leads to Azalea, one of our favorite silk purveyors. Of course, wandering the narrow streets of the little town is a joy unto itself, as is a visit to Villa Serbelloni, owned by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Boat trips, whether by private Riva or on the ferry, bring guests to the Roman ruins on Isola Comacina, to Villa Carlotta for the exhibits and gardens, and to the many villages that line the lake. The gardens at Villa d'Este are perfect for a stroll after lunch on the terrace. To survey the scene from the mountains above, take the funicular from Como to Brunate.

Here in Italy, there are the fabulous three Cs: Como, Capri, Cortina d'Ampezzo. We love them all, but we always begin with Como. ■

might be to divide a Como visit between the two. The hotel is closed January and February.

Returning to Como, we renewed our acquaintance with the **Albergo Terminus**, which we enjoyed back in the 20th century. No matter: The Belle Epoque hotel has been around since 1900 and has held on to its cozy ambiance in this town known for cocooning silkworms. It sits next to its fancier younger sister, the former silk factory-turned-Vista Palazzo, which means it's on the lake in the center of town. The rooms share similar views and are soundproofed. The Terminus began as a thermal spa and, today, offers sauna and treatments by appointment. It closes in January.

For a longer stay, the secluded Bianca Suite 501 could be an option. On the top floor, an "angolo" kitchen takes a corner of the living room and there's a balcony that overlooks both the lake and the piazza below. Note: We thought you'd want to know that the bedroom has glass walls, bringing in light, but reducing privacy within the suite.

Room 320 is an example of the spacious doubles here, with French doors and a deep tub in

common, shared terrace.

We found plenty of space and privacy in Deluxe 325, and loved the terrace, with its views of calm water, mountains and Como in the distance. Junior Suite 430 has a large bedroom with triple Palladian windows, the better to see the lake.

The Gran Lago Suite is in a separate building, requiring climbing a flight of stairs, which may be an obstacle for those needing accessibility. At more than 2,000 square feet, it has some great benefits: Privacy, a

large terrace overlooking the lake, huge living and dining rooms with a view, two-and-a-half baths, and a king master and twin second bedroom.

The hotel's public spaces are intimate and Old World, frescoed and antique-filled. There's a small spa for massages, a private boat dock for lake excursions by Riva, and the tasty Mediterranean menu at Ristorante Raimondi. Villa Flori provides a very different atmosphere from its Lario Group sisters in Como town. A thought