



LAKE MAGIC

Two new hotels threatening to “shake up the lakes” are opening this summer; one on the shore of Lake Como, the other Lake Garda. Gabriella Le Breton drives a Maserati around this exemplary Italian landscape to investigate how architecture, design and luxury are evolving in the region

“WOW! Maserrrrati! Che bella macchina!”

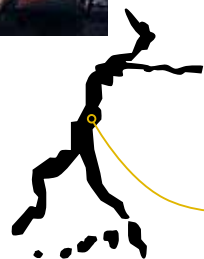
You don’t have to speak Italian to understand what the locals are saying as you growl past them in a Maserati GranCabrio MC. Roof down, wind in my hair and Lake Como glittering in the sun beside me, I hit the Sport button to open the exhaust flaps for a bit of extra roar. If George Clooney is at home in Laglio, he can probably hear me coming.

Signor Clooney is just one of countless distinguished fans of Italy’s lakes region, following in the footsteps of the Romans, 18th-century nobility, 19th-century poets and 20th-century silver screen sirens. Like splashes of water grazing the thigh of Italy’s boot, five lakes spread east to west: Garda, Iseo, Como, Lugano and Maggiore, the last two spilling over Italy’s border with Switzerland. Each lake boasts its own distinctive character, yet all are





From top: An artist's impression of how Il Sereno will look; the Villa Pliniana; Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni



embraced by mountains that are thickly carpeted in forest and capped with snow. Clusters of villas cling to the shores, their wisteria-strewn terracotta and ochre walls and verdigris shutters peeling in Italy's effortless shabby-chic style.

Lake Como lays claim to being Italy's deepest lake while Lake Garda is its largest. However, it's undoubtedly their respective proximity to Milan and Venice that gain them greater popularity with the wealthy Milanese and Venetians who, for centuries, have owned villas on the lakes or holidayed in the splendid *la belle époque* hotels that stud their shores.

However, winds of change are blowing across the lakes, bringing with them a new way of travel. Diana Cherry, director of operations at Oxford Private Travel, explains: "The Lakes will always epitomize old-school Italian glamour, style and luxury. However, our clients are increasingly requesting private villas and boutique properties that combine the heritage and status of grand five-star hotels with contemporary facilities and tailored service. Modern travelers crave freedom from the constrictions of the traditional hospitality world: the freedom to take breakfast at noon, pop to the local market with their chef to decide what to eat and hop in a bar for cocktails... Spontaneity is paramount."

In the spirit of evolving Italian design, I selected a Maserati GranCabrio MC to whiz me around the Lakes. I picked up the 4.7-liter V8 from Milan's Malpensa airport (private jets are welcome here and at Linate), complete with a pre-planned GPS itinerary, thanks to Mark Heather of Ultimate Drives. Heather tailors bespoke driving tours for clients, using his fleet of supercars to enjoy Europe's most dramatic and scenic roads.

An introduction to the stylish four-seater, a Centennial Special Edition complete with carbon trim, embroidered Trident logos and a celebratory kick plate logo, revealed a ZF six-speed automatic gearbox with steering wheel paddles for manual mode. The soft top goes down in under 30 seconds and it's 16ft long and as I discover while squeezing through Como's narrow, winding roads, the Maserati is also one and a half feet wider than a Fiat Panda.

LAKE COMO...

I reach my first Como hotel to find a hard hat pressed into my hand rather than an Aperol Spritz. Samy Ghachem, managing director of Sereno Hotels, assures me that Il Sereno, sister property of Le Sereno in St Barths, will open on

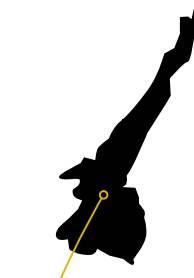
August 1. Set on Como's east bank, Il Sereno's distinctive contemporary architecture and interiors are designed by Christian Liaigre and Patricia Urquiola. Each of the 30 spacious suites feature floor-to-ceiling glass windows and secluded terraces; my favorite suite hovers above the lake with steps leading straight into the water. A 60ft infinity pool lies flush with the lake and links the hotel to the spa, which is housed in an old boathouse.

With its defiantly modern glass-box design, Il Sereno is dividing local opinion, which perhaps explains Sereno Hotels' recent decision to lease the nearby Villa Pliniana. This magnificent, immaculately restored 16th-century villa is one of Como's finest, set in 18 wooded lakeside acres with a fantastical history: former visitors include Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon, Lord Byron and Rossini. No longer hidden from the public, Villa Pliniana is now available to rent, complete with 19 luxurious bedrooms dotted across the main villa and three smaller villas, a spa, helipad and a private jetty.

Following the lake shore northwards, I purr through the alleyways of Bellagio, where the Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni has been welcoming guests for over a century. Serbelloni's general manager Antonio Calzolaro is clearly unfazed by the imminent arrival of Il Sereno: "Our guests can go to London or New York for modern architecture. They come here when they want an experience, not just a room to sleep in."

With exquisite Murano glass chandeliers, brocade wallpaper and ornate gilded furniture, it's all definitively lavish. And the formula works: families have vacationed in Serbelloni every summer for over 50 years; Michelin-starred molecular chef Ettore Bocchia has overseen the Mistral restaurant for 25 years; and concierges Francesco and Roberto have over 30 years' service between them. If you fancy flying a seaplane above the lake or chartering a helicopter to St Moritz for a mountain-top champagne picnic, Roberto's your man.

The following morning, with mist still veiling the lake, I take the car ferry from Bellagio to Como's west shore, bound for Grand Hotel Tremezzo. A favorite of 1930s Hollywood star Greta Garbo, this Art Nouveau icon strikes an impressive balance of old and new, thanks to its visionary third-generation owner, Valentina De Santis. A quirky *Alice in Wonderland* feel pervades: the music salon's armchairs are upholstered in lime and fuchsia, giant glass candy jars sit atop an antique mahogany



dresser and mismatched Murano glassware adorns the tables of La Terrazza restaurant. Working with local architect Ruggero Venelli, De Santis has created a hip lakeside lido with champagne bar and transformed the 18th-century Villa Emilia into a slick 10,763 sq ft spa. It's an eclectic blend that proves just how the lake is moving with the times.

LAKE GARDA...

Leaving Como, I head west to visit Garda's "lake shaker," Villa Eden Gardone. Like Il Sereno, the property is an architectural game-changer that features seven spectacular contemporary villas and a Clubhouse designed by architects including David Chipperfield and Matteo Thun, set in 839,585 sq ft of olive and cypress groves above Lake Garda.

Book a villa or one of the seven rooms in the Clubhouse and you'll have at your disposal a spa, helipad, chauffeurs to drive you down the hill to Gardone and a Frauscher motorboat to whiz you to Isola di Garda for open-air concerts or Locanda San Vigilio for cocktails. Chef Christoph Stiglitz, who earned his culinary stripes at Nobu and The Fat Duck in the UK, works magic with local ingredients at the Clubhouse restaurant. A feast of burrata and succulent lamb on the terrace is a must when in Garda. Even better, take a villa and claim Stiglitz for yourself.

Another culinary gem greets me among tranquil olive groves and orchards above Salò, south of Gardone. Once a convent, the 14th-century Villa Arcadio now comprises 18 bedrooms and an astonishingly good restaurant. Faded frescoes cling to the walls, an ancient stone angel protects the staircase and rooms reflect the purity of their former residents in their simplicity, albeit complemented by pieces of contemporary art.

It is, perhaps, the best possible spot to perfect the Italian art of *dolce far niente* (the sweetness of doing nothing), particularly when booked exclusively with family or friends. Pass the time watching sailing boats flit across the lake from the infinity pool, indulging in feather-light pasta beneath a canopy of vines, and listening to the background music of birdsong and church bells.

The following day, after taking the Maserati for a spin up Garda's east shore and catching a ferry back to the west shore, I squeeze through the wrought-iron gates of Villa Feltrinelli. The drive winds past an ancient *limonaie* (lemon garden) before revealing the neo-Gothic villa in all its glory. Built in 1892 for the Feltrinelli family, it was inhabited by Mussolini during his

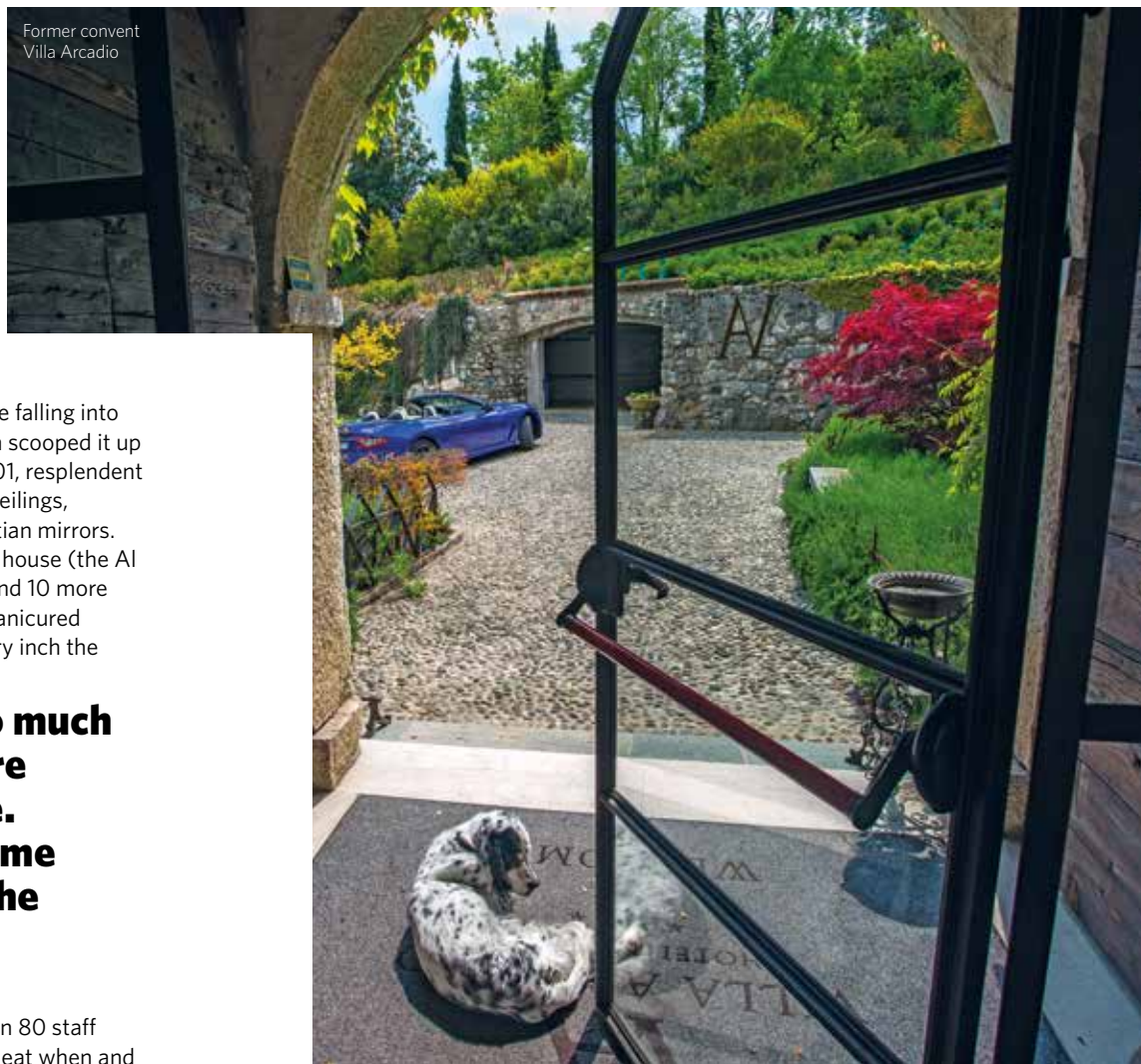


"Modern travelers crave freedom from the constrictions of the traditional hospitality world: the freedom to take breakfast at noon, pop to the local market with their chef to decide what to eat and hop in a bar for cocktails..."

Above: Architectural game-changer - Villa Eden Gardone



Former convent
 Villa Arcadio



short-lived Republic of Salò before falling into disrepair. Hotelier Bob Burns then scooped it up and opened it to the public in 2001, resplendent with restored frescoes, coffered ceilings, stained-glass windows and Venetian mirrors.

With just 12 rooms in the main house (the Al Lago suite is the most coveted) and 10 more spread across four villas in the manicured grounds, Villa Feltrinelli feels every inch the

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refined private club. No fewer than 80 staff (yes, two per guest) invite you to eat when and where you wish, by the lake, on the shaded terrace or *à deux* in the candlelit library. Chef Stefano Baiocco heads up the Michelin-starred kitchen, serving a memorable tasting menu that bears the hallmarks of time spent at eBulli. One of his salads includes 120 individual leaves, herbs and flowers.

FOOD FINALE

Amidst all this luxury, however, my personal highlight of the Lakes was the least lavish. Ever since 1947, Benvenuto Puricelli has served the same six-course menu at his simple restaurant, Locanda dell'Isola Comacina, set on Lake Como's only island.

Sporting his signature tartan waistcoat and woollen hat, Puricelli oversees the delivery of endless plates of antipasti to his tables, laden with glistening roasted onions and ribbons of Serrano ham. Freshly caught salmon trout – filleted at the table and dressed with olive oil, lemon and salt – is followed by crisp, succulent chicken, devoured with the fingers. It's simple fare, perfectly executed, in unbeatable surroundings, washed down with unlimited wine and Puricelli's chat.

When I ask him what he makes of the contemporary hotels coming to the lakes, Puricelli looks at the hills above Comacina in which he played as a child. His answer comes as something of a relief: "You can't have too much modern here, there simply isn't space. The mountains come straight down to the lake, you see?"



THE DETAILS

DRIVE...

The Maserati GranCabrio MC Centennial Edition in Inchiostro Blu costs from \$184,000
maserati.com

Ultimate Drives creates bespoke driving itineraries around the Italian Lakes from \$14,500, including two nights' accommodation at the Park Hyatt Milan, private airport transfers and four days' rental, delivery and pick up of a Maserati GranCabrio with pre-programmed scenic trip driving tours. Accommodation on the lakes can also be arranged. To book contact Mark Heather, owner, **+41 788 663 253**, mark@ultimatedrives.net

STAY...

Oxford Private Travel tailors bespoke visits to Lakes Como and Garda from \$36,500 for two people, including three nights at Il Sereno, three nights at Villa Feltrinelli, airport transfers and six-day rental of a Maserati. To book contact Diana Cherry,

director of operations,
+44 1993 899 430,
diana@oxfordprivatetravel.com.

Il Sereno, Torno, Como (ilsereno.com); The Penthouse is priced from \$4,720 per night. Villa Pliniana, Torno, Como (villapliniana.com) from \$168,100 per week exclusive. To book contact Samy Ghachem, general manager, reservations@serenohotels.com

Grand Hotel Serbelloni, Bellagio, Como (villaserbelloni.com); Suite JFK \$1,300 per night. To book contact Antonio Calzolaro, general manager, **+39 031 950 216**, inforequest@villaserbelloni.com

Grand Hotel Tremezzo, Tremezzo, Como (grandhoteltremezzo.com); Suite Greta \$4,300 per night. To book contact Cristina Guerrotto, reservations manager, **+39 0344 42491**, reservations@grandhoteltremezzo.com

Villa Arcadio, Salò, Garda (hotelvillaaarcadio.it); \$8,940 per night for exclusive use of 18 bedrooms. To book contact Jaana Nakari, owner, **+39 0365 42281**, info@hotelvillaaarcadio.it

Villa Feltrinelli, Gargnano Garda (villafeltrinelli.com); Al Lago \$3,700 per night. To book contact Alessia Micheletti, PA to general manager, **+39 365 798 000**, management@villafeltrinelli.com

Villa Eden Gardone, Garda (villa-eden-gardone.com); Clubhouse Premium Room \$3,900 per night and Villa.Sphere.Ovest rental from \$110,400 per week. To book contact Nicholas Labhart, general manager, **+39 0365 520 027**, n.labhart@villa-eden-gardone.com

For more information about Lake Como, visit lakecomo.it and for Lake Garda, gardalombardia.com