

# VANITY FAIR

HOLLYWOOD 2017

*On Travel*

*"I haven't been everywhere,  
but it's on my list."  
— SUSAN SONTAG*

## SOUTH AMERICA

*(On Travel talks Latin)*

COLOMBIA, BRAZIL, BOLIVIA,  
ECUADOR *and* ARGENTINA

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# The Water's LOVELY

Millennials, wake up and smell the cappuccino. It's time to reclaim the Italian Lakes from the white-hair brigade. VICTORIA MATHER explains why

**T**he Italian Lakes, once top of the bucket list on the Grand Tour, are the wonder that time forgot. Modern grand tourists have been seduced by long-haul wonders in the Far East, India and the Antipodes; millennials think there is only one lake (Como) and one person goes there (George Clooney). And they'll go there one day, when they're old.

There are five lakes, each with its own iconic hotel, cuisine, micro-climate and history. *Five lakes? Como, Garda, Maggiore and, er...?* The unsung ladies of the lakes are darling Orta, the prettiest, and Iseo, the most charmingly rustic.

Let us start with Garda, the largest lake in Italy. Garda guards one of the most precious secrets on earth: Villa Feltrinelli. You could not fail to fall in love with this divine hotel, which has no spa or gimmicks, but does what a grand hotel should do to perfection. It is called hospitality: gracious, generous and kind. Everything is of the very best and most discreet: baskets of posh suncreams by the pool, a boat to play with, laundry swooped away free of charge and returned pristine, and with all the money you left in the pockets folded in an envelope.

Feltrinelli is eternal. Some guests come three or four times a season and have a Villa Feltrinelli wardrobe left *in situ*; others send suitcases ahead, the contents of which are unpacked, ironed, and everything from cosmetics to toothbrushes sorted. "We know what they want, how they like things, the thousands of little details," says Markus Odermatt, Feltrinelli's immaculate general manager. Of the 85 staff, only two have changed in the last 10 years at this baby (just 19 rooms) palazzo of peace.

Lefay Resort & Spa is the new kid on the lake. Through the charming lakeside village of Gargnano and up, up, up, the spa is suspended in mid-air 600m above the water. It is the first spa in Italy to be eco-certified, which means Lefay is tremendously PC on renewable energy, rainwater collection and all things that make the eco-purist's heart sing. The less virtuous can make a bee-line for the cigar bar. Yes, in a spa—respect—though it rightly takes itself seriously, with extensive doctor's appointments and an emphasis on Chinese medicine and acupuncture.

Onward and backward to Lake Iseo—the Sleeping Beauty of

the lakes, kissed awake last year by the artist Christo, whose Floating Piers drew some 1.5 million people to the island to walk on water from June to July. The iconic hotel here is L'Albereta, in the middle of the Bellavista vineyards, bosky with wood fires. Garda has the olive oil; Iseo has the sparkling wine of Franciacorta, of which Bellavista and Ca' del Bosco are the champagnes of Italy. L'Albereta is a temple of wellness. The Henri Chenot medi-spa is spectacular, properly medi and properly spa, but not a punishment zone. And the gastronomic restaurant, LeoneFelice, is now home to Fabio Abbattista, who works with produce from the local hillside and herbs from the vegetable garden to make food like Mamma made.

Monte Isola is the largest lake island in southern Europe. Of the 1,800 population, only the doctor and the priest are allowed cars—otherwise, use your bloody legs. A jewel of Lake Iseo is the Riva boatyard—by special invitation. Riva is the *grande marque* of motorboats, the *Mona Lisa* of the water. A trip on a Riva is a dream of chic, and the legend is told here at the boatyard, in the picture gallery of royalty and stars: Grace Kelly, Catherine Deneuve, Brigitte Bardot. Those were the days of real glamour, not Insta-glamour.

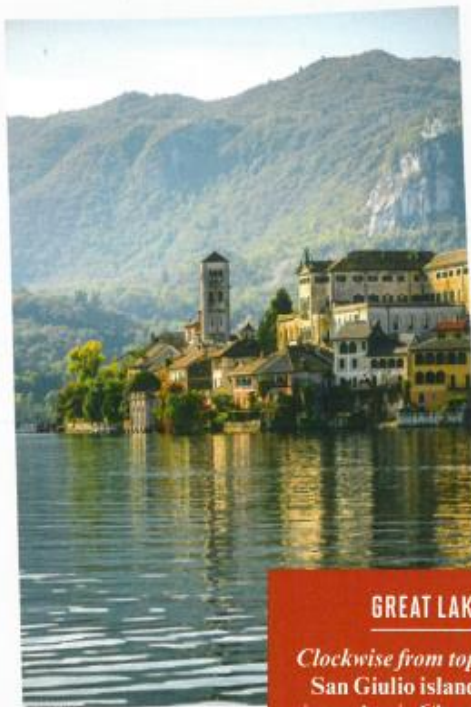


**O**n, on to Lake Orta, beautifully cuddled in the mountains. The light interplays with mist on the water, swallows swoop in the dusk, the woodland on the Sacro Monte conceals 21 chapels decorated with frescoes; the island, Isola San

Giulio, is a perfection of amber-washed villas, palazzos and a Benedictine monastery with a sign saying "The Way of Silence". Nietzsche, Byron, Balzac and Robert Browning all found their way here. Today, there's a British-run poetry festival in September. The iconic hotel is Villa Crespi, a mad castle of jewel-like rooms with a Michelin-starred restaurant; but Orta is less developed than Como, Garda or Maggiore so there are modest, friendly hotels and the village of Orta San Giulio has an endearing faded elegance in its narrow streets. What could be nicer than plates of *prosciutto* and hot *bruschetta* at Enoteca Al Boeuc, a trattoria lit by candles?

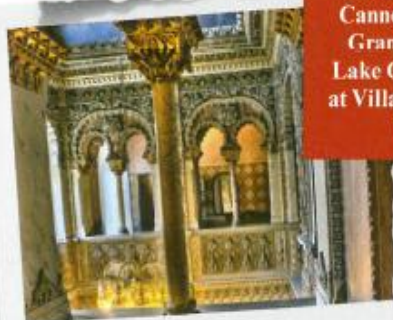
Maggiore is a bit of a shocker after this gentle charm: whacking hotels boasting conference facilities. I hitched a lift across the lake to Isola Pescatori, one of the Borromeo Islands, and the Hotel Ristorante Verbano. It is a darling. Three stars, but it is with Villa Feltrinelli in spirit: genuine warmth and generosity. As you have an *aperitivo* by the fire, a delicious bowl of piping-hot fried whitebait is brought, and chunks of Parmesan. The white

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### GREAT LAKES

Clockwise from top left: Orta San Giulio island; French singer Annie Chancel helms a Riva, 1960s; Monte Isola; Cannobio, Lake Maggiore; Grand Hotel Tremezzo; a Lake Garda beach; the lobby at Villa Crespi; lemon groves, Villa Feltrinelli



and taupe dining room is filled with vases of pale mauve roses; the beef tender, with rosemary cream. True style, by virtue of understatement. The bedrooms are soothing, with terrific marbled-white bathrooms. You wake to the sound of church bells.

So to the *grande dame*: Lake Como. To see all the other lakes puts Como in context. It is the grandest; its villas—Carlotta, Balbianello, Melzi, Monastero, Cipressi—the most spectacular.

Villa d'Este will always be iconic, a great lady with the best linen sheets in the world, but the crowd moves on, the allure of the latest, dinner-party-boastworthy hotel irresistible. Como has now had a shot in the arm with Il Sereno, designed by Patricia Urquiola: an astonishing accomplishment of modern classic, built over an old stone boathouse. Urquiola has used walnut, copper, bronze and travertine to create a 30-suite oasis of cool. The floating staircase is a cantilevered miracle; the hotel poses as the apogee of casual-smart. "You can ask for anything you want at any time," says Samy Ghachem, the general manager. "We want you to feel like a rock star." All I want is a room with less complicated techno and lighting—but I salute an establishment that has fabulous bread and olive oil (by these simple things shall you detect excellence).

And now we shall sail on to the sunlit uplands of the Grand Hotel Tremezzo. The Grand Hotel has four swimming pools, one floating in the lake, so everyone else can stuff that up their jumper. It is a wonderful, welcoming embrace of a hotel of the old school, over 100 years an icon, where, pre-revolution, a Romanov princess scattered so many

jewels around her suite that the hotel maid asked to be dismissed. Too much responsibility. The new spa is delicious, not least because the grim idea of a

"relaxation room"—never relaxing—is in a gorgeous salon fit for Shelley, overlooking the lake which he thought exceeding anything "I have ever held in beauty". Sad he missed the wafer-thin pizzas from the poolside oven, and the genius little restaurant in which you can cook exquisite steaks on hot plates in front of you. It's the Grand Hotel Tremendous.

There are two must-do things in Como. One: a flight from the Aero Club, est. 1913. A seaplane is hauled towards you with a boathook—ducks on the pontoon are unmoved—and it's up and away with Cesare in his cashmere sweater. "There is the house of George Clooney; there is the Versace house; and the Visconti house, where *Ocean's Twelve* was shot." The other must-do is lunch on Comacina, the lake's only island, at a restaurant that looks like a motorway café. Against every instinct and fibre of one's being, Locanda dell'Isola Comacina, where the menu hasn't changed since 1947, is a hoot. The antipasto with eight different vegetables and melting slices of tomato with salt, oregano and olive oil, is food of the gods; the trout, says our host Benvenuto Puricelli, "is still speaking. It leapt out of the lake this morning." A cabaret telling the island's story follows. It deserves to be excruciating, but it is a bit of a hit. Why? Dunno. It's magic. □

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