



PHOTOS BY LEAH STILL



LAKESIDE HOLIDAY:

Bellagio offers breathtaking views both on and offshore. View of Lake Como (above); a ferry ride reveals the picturesque town (top left); Salita Serbelloni, a cobblestone stairway, offers an oh-so-impressive Italian view (bottom left).

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Visit 417mag.com to find contact information for all of the hotspots Leah Still visited during her trip to Lake Como, so you can start planning your dream getaway.



NAVIGATING ITALY'S LAKE COUNTRY

Our writer traveled off the beaten path in Italy to visit Lake Como instead of the more popular urban destinations. Read about her adventure, then plan your own.

BY LEAH STILL

On my first two trips to Italy, I stayed on the well-traveled path: Rome, Florence, Venice, repeat. Don't misunderstand—those famous Italian cities are perfectly beautiful and deservedly on the must-visit list, but they are cities all the same. So when I had the chance last September to see a quieter, more pastoral region of Italy, I jumped at it.

The occasion? The wedding of two friends. The destination? Lake Como. Land of billionaires, celebrities and ancient Italian noble families. To get inspired, I watched *Ocean's Twelve*, *Casino Royale* and *A Month by the Lake*, three movies filmed and set, partially or wholly, on Lake Como. I also checked out every Italian Lakes guidebook from the library. But, even after all that research, I was still unprepared for the lake's beauty. It is jaw-droppingly, heart-breakingly gorgeous—an enchanting place, in an entirely different realm from the rest of planet Earth.

GETTING TO BELLAGIO

Long and narrow and shaped like an upside-down “Y,” Lake Como lies in northern Italy, just below the Switzerland border. It’s one of several lakes in the Italian Lakes region, a heavenly area of glacial origin, dotted with stately villas and waterside eateries where you can dine on pasta and drink wine to your heart’s content. An hour’s train ride from Milan is all it takes to be in Como, one of Lake Como’s larger cities, which sits at the southern end of the lake’s western arm. From Como, a high-speed ferry took me to Bellagio, the jewel in Lake Como’s crown and my home for the next eight days.

Perched on the tip of land that separates the lake’s two arms, Bellagio sits regally at the center of the lake, comfortable with its status as the star of Lake Como. Bellagio has been a resort destination since ancient Roman times, and it’s not difficult to see why. The village is famous for its pastel-colored buildings that house chic clothing boutiques, jewelry stores and restaurants. Visitors staying in other lakeside towns come pouring off the ferries in Bellagio every day, excited to wander up and down the many cobblestone staircases that lead up the hill instead of streets. Almost anywhere you look in Bellagio is a postcard-worthy view of sparkling blue water, towering mountains or winding alleyways lined with pink- and yellow-painted buildings.

I checked into Villa la Colombina, a 1920s-era home that was turned into six self-contained units (four studios, a penthouse and a separate cottage). The quiet villa was taken over by the wedding party and proved to be a most excellent place to stay. Its location on the southern outskirts of town really made Lake Como feel like home for a week. The 15-minute walk into Bellagio that we did a few times each day forced us to burn extra gelato-induced calories, and the units’ small kitchens allowed us to save money by shopping at the local grocery store (a lovely five-minute walk from the villa). Spending each afternoon on our balcony, eating wheel after wheel of cheese and drinking prosecco while we stared at the hilly landscape and the sliver of lake that was visible, brought the trip full circle. At Villa la Colombina, we weren’t tourists. We were temporary Italians, surrounded by our local neighbors who did their gardening and played with their dogs in their front yards.

VILLAGE HOPPING

We spent our first full day traveling by ferry to other lakeside towns. Bellagio may be the cherry on the sundae, but I soon realized that Lake Como is lined with one picturesque village after another. We first headed straight across the lake to Tremezzo, where we toured Villa Carlotta, an elegant lakefront mansion built in 1690 and named for a European duchess who was given the villa by her mother as a wedding present. Its splendid gardens alone are worth the visit. As you move up from the street, tier by tier, the lake views grow more and more stunning.

Hungry for lunch, we left the villa in search of an un-touristy, inexpensive restaurant. Tremezzo’s waterfront restaurants turned out to be the opposite, so we began wandering aimlessly inland—and uphill. Our efforts were rewarded, though, when we stumbled upon Pizzeria Balognetti, a hidden-away spot where we dined on prosciutto pizza and house vino and listened to the owner tell us about the time she turned George Clooney away because the restaurant was full. She was certainly not making an exception for some American celebrity, no matter how handsome.

Fully satisfied, we traipsed back down the hill and boarded the ferry to Varenna, a fishing village on the opposite side of the lake. As the ferry moved closer, the town came into view—a small grouping of colorful houses, a requisite church steeple and a quintessentially Italian cluster of fishing boats moored in a tiny bay. Towered over by tree-covered mountains, the village spreads out to the tip of a small point, giving the already-beautiful town a dramatic focal point. An hour spent in Varenna walking along the waterfront promenade and sitting on an outdoor terrace in a quiet piazza, sipping a Bellini, was truly an hour of *la dolce vita*.



WHEN TO GO:

While nothing compared to Rome or Florence, Lake Como will fill up with tourists in the summer months. Go in the early fall, before the lake all but shuts down come October. Late August and early September are good bets for still-warm weather and fewer crowds.

GETTING TO BELLAGIO:

Fly to Milan Malpensa Airport, and take a train to the town of Como. (Visit trenitalia.com for timetables.) Or, hire a private car to pick you up at the airport and drive you to Bellagio (barindelli.it can help with this).

TO GET FROM COMO TO BELLAGIO:

Take either a bus (the cheaper, windier option; buy tickets at the bus station across the street from Como Laghi train station) or a ferry (walk from the train station to the lakefront to buy tickets; visit navigazione.laghi.it for information).

A BLISSFUL ROUTINE

The Italian Lakes practically beg for an "Eat Pray Love" moment from each visitor. Prosciutto pizza from Pizzeria Balognett (left); beach beds at Lido di Bellagio overlook Lake Como (below).

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”

—Leah Still

RELAXING, LAKE COMO STYLE

The rest of our days were spent lazying around Bellagio, and not once did I feel guilty. Lake Como isn't about seeing monuments or visiting a famous museum or taking a claustrophobic elevator ride to the top of an iconic tower. It's about eating breakfasts of crusty bread and creamy cheese on your balcony; drinking prosecco; swimming and relaxing in the sun at the lakeside Lido di Bellagio; walking through town, stopping off for gelato every chance you get; drinking prosecco; shopping for scarves made of delicious Italian silk; enjoying a wine tasting at Aperitivo et al, a cozy wine bar; having dinners of prosciutto and pasta pomodoro at our favorite restaurant, Trattoria San Giacomo; drinking prosecco; and simply staring at the lake, which never, ever got old.

The only exception to this blissful routine was the wonderful wedding—the reason I was there. My two friends, Josh and Frances, said their vows at the Church of the Ascension, built in the late 1800s in Cadenabbia, a village across the lake. After the ceremony, we took a boat ride around the lake, passing spectacular sites like Villa La Cassinella (supposedly owned by Richard Branson) and Villa del Balbianello, an expansive estate featured in several movies, from *Casino Royale* to *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. The nuptials were then celebrated at Silvio, one of the best restaurants on Lake Como. Silvio specializes in fish from the lake. The owner is one of the few people who still has a license to fish on Lake Como, a privilege passed down through his family.

My week on Lake Como was a dream—an Italian fairy tale of balmy days, cool nights and lots of Parmesan. It's romantic without being cheesy. It's prepared for tourists without losing its feel of authenticity. It's an Alpine paradise with the right balance of summertime fun (it is a lake, after all) and secluded sophistication. It's pure bliss.

