

Panorama from our balcony on Lake Como

Lake Como and Milan Trip Notes **September 11-23, 2009**

Surprises abound

The biggest surprise was coming into the northern Italian lake region and realizing it is part of the pre-Alps and contains some huge and majestic mountains. Most of the enchanting little towns have very little flat land but rather are built up into the rocky mountainside (they have to blast or otherwise dig out a chunk in order to build). Most towns appear to be from the medieval Roman times and our little town of Varenna has retained narrow and cobbled streets and stone walks (think 2-3 inch river rock planted in cement) everywhere.

The next surprise is how many little towns do not appear touristy. Yet when we took a ferry across the lake to the more famous town of Bellagio it was hard to get away from touristy shops and crowds. By the way, Bellagio is a destination for Hollywood stars and other rich and famous folks and is truly one of the gems of Lake Como (George Clooney has a place somewhere near – on the western shore).

Maybe the real surprise was that this trip included Tom and did not include a marathon.

The players



The Lake is just one of many

Lake Como is generally thought to be the 'beauty queen' of all the Italian lakes. Our chosen little town sits across from the top of the upside down Y form of the lake. Since the lake is narrow, Varenna has a view of multiple mountain peaks as well as the towns of Bellagio, Menaggio and Tremezzo. Varenna arguably makes a good base for exploring the lake if one does not want the crowds of the more famous Bellagio. It's a splendidly maintained village of ancient Roman origin,

with a perfectly intact medieval layout complete with narrow and cobbled walkways. It's famous for its Villa Cipressi with its terraced garden and for Villa Monastero, built over a Cistercian monastery but now a conference center with an elegant garden stretching along the lake. All around Varenna were quarries for black Varenna marble, some of which was used for the flooring in the Milan Duomo.

Years ago we stayed in the town of Stresa, far across at Lake Maggiore, with its own little island where we visited the glorious Villa Borromeo. This was our first adventure to Lake Como.

Lakeside apartment

We took an apartment in Fiumelatte, just on the edge of Varenna, or about a ten minute walk along the lake shore and by the Villa Monastero's gardens. Fiumelatte is known for its short river of very white waters that come down with such force that the waters look milky. (More below about this natural phenomenon that was once investigated by Leonardo da Vinci and still mystifies scientists as to its origins and why it only occurs from March until October.) It is this river that runs through the edge of our villa's gardens. We rented the top two floors in what was once the famous Villa Capuano, built in 1605, and now cut in two by the road but retaining part of the original gardens and grottos. From our wrap-around terrace is a perfect view of the artificial grotto where the waters flow and bounce from a flight of steps to create nice small waterfalls.



The grotto with falls, the view from the kitchen and the garden patio and picnic area

Maybe the best thing about our apartment was the view of the gardens, of the waterfalls and grotto which are lighted through the night, but more importantly of the lake and its impressive surrounding mountains and high peaks in every direction. The villages would remind you of Cinque Terre except that they are much more spread out and probably not built up as high on the mountains resulting in cliffs and a treacherously narrow road where meeting a tour bus can cause a severe pucker factor. The houses are multi-colored (orange, red, yellow, ochre) with red tile terracotta roofs and look great from a distance but in many cases are showing their age when viewed up close. Of course there are plenty of new ones but are all made of cement and stone and must cost a fortune to build because of the extensive excavation required. We noted that our rental place – the two floors – were up for sale at one and a half million dollars.

Here's a view of the village from our terrace plus the Alps far off.

Apartment website with more pictures:

<http://www.lakecomohomes.com/displayproperty.asp?p=134>



The Italians do have a way about them

- Narrow and tiny little roads that we'd call one-lane but are used as main thoroughfares with cars speeding like they're on their way to a fire.
- Many motorcycles but no helmets.
- An emergency pull cord is in all showers according to the law, yet who are they calling?
- Restaurants refuse to serve tap water.
- Stores, even grocery store chains, close from noon to 3:30pm and some full days.
- Restaurants only serve lunch from noon to 2pm and then open again at 7:30pm.
- Roads and mountainsides are torn up all over and what isn't should be. Chaussee deformee is the norm.
- Trash bins also contain cigarette disposal ash trays and it would seem that many more Italians smoke than we are used to. They even walk around with cigarettes in their hands &/or mouths.
- Over and over I was reminded of their inefficiency while at the same time realizing that the Italians really don't care. It's the Mediterranean attitude, yes?

Italians seem to have their priorities mixed up -- the law to have emergency pull cords in the showers, meanwhile they smoke, drive crazy, without helmets, and on extremely dangerous roads. Maybe it's the Mediterranean attitude that saves them?

Our apartment was pure Italian

- It is high-tech to the extreme with no expense spared yet we had trouble getting it sorted out the first couple of days and even then had to give up on some things.
- Blu Ray HD huge TVs, DVDs, surround sound in each room, zoned and computerized air conditioning and heating, black marble slate everywhere, heated floors, huge indoor Jacuzzi as well as one on the terrace, push button motorized kitchen countertop by Ferretti that opens to reveal the stove and sink, induction stovetop, oven and combo microwave, central vacuum system, French Roche Bobois sofas that convert to different shapes, crocodile dining chairs by Jean Paul Gautier, Zazzeri Dada nickel fixtures, Alberto Cavali metal work, Mauro glass work, 18-person table by Bauline Puglia of Italy, unique kitchen island light by Elica with its own remote control, bathroom accessories by Zack and porcelain by Durquit Phillippe Stark, dual summer rain shower heads in total slate Swedish style bathroom, and garden furniture by Greenwood. I must admit that some of these names are unknown to me but the owner felt they were worth mentioning in his renters guide.
- Lovely little high intensity lights abound yet some were burned out and when we called the landlord to replace the bulbs the response was positive, but the results were negative. I think it's like when we lived in Belgium and they'd promise "We'll be there on Tuesday" but failed to say which Tuesday. Finally they were replaced on Thursday.
- Beds are very high quality, as are the linens and pillows, but all sheets are a bit too small so we wake up on bare mattress cover.

- Huge beds with remote control to adjust the contour.
- Towels are thick, sheet size, and glorious, but curiously, no wash cloths.
- The high tech kitchen is totally bare of staples. Strange. Who wants to purchase salt, pepper, dish soap, oils, coffee filters, etc. for a short stay? We've been in French apartments but never found one so barren but the renting agent says is common in Italy. I thought of it as cruel and unusual punishment.

Too many special villas to see them all

We walked, we took a boat tour, we sneaked a look over walls and fences, and we climbed fences, all to see some of the special lake homes. On one lakeside estate we found a sign that said 'No George' so guess we didn't find George Clooney's home. We did tour Villa Balgiano (below) on its



own little inlet near Lecco, walked around Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, the gardens of Villa Monastero and of Villa Cipressi both in Varenna and the extensive lakeside gardens of Villa Melzi in Bellagio. We saw numerous others from the water or roadway (including Richard Branson's estate which is for sale) which was plenty.

Varenna is especially special – our home for the week

From our home base of Varenna, we could walk up the hills to the castle, drive a few minutes to any number of towns, some lake side but all rising up from the lake, and some far up in the mountains via the curviest and most hairpin roads we'd ever seen. Bologna with its tiny narrow lanes that they called roads and their houses hanging from high above the lake; Bellano and the rushing waterfalls and split canyons; our own little edge of Varenna called Fumilatte, meaning rushing water that looks like milk and comes from some unknown source that even Leonardo da Vinci investigated, and giving us the sound of waterfall continuously; Bellagio and the home of the rich and famous, Menaggio across the lake from Bellagio said to have been taken over by the Brits; on and on. All just its own little Disney World except that it's been there in many cases since the Romans and Medieval Times.



Good night to Varenna – we'll see you in our dreams



You can see more of the Italian Lakes Region on Tom's photo show at www.photoshow.com/watch/DE5Yi3BE or see all any of his shows at www.photoshow.com/members/tomskoi.

Now enter Milan

A hotel! I think I'm a city-type gal. I think I like having a hotel and a concierge and someone to make my bed and bring fresh towels and clean up. We are however saved in the apartment by Tom's language, efficiency, and cooking and I know that while I'm a hotel-type gal, he's an apartment or villa type guy and it all works out.

Our home in Milan was the Hilton on the northeast side, an easy walk for us to historic town center and as importantly an easy walk to Central Station. We chose to upgrade to a suite (small by our standards) on the concierge floor and that floor turned out to really be worth the money. Not only was there wonderful and generous food from 7 to 11pm but all the booze one desired too. Prosecco the bubbly wine of northern Italy was my choice and they even had Johnny Walker for Tom. While the concierge floor was a steal, the connection to the internet was a rip off at 27 Euros a day or 12 Euros (\$18 US) for one hour. Pissed me off as I needed to be connected with the folks estate sale ready to come off and my desire to stay in contact with the realtor/auctioneer.

I was eager to see Milan and despite some telling us to expect a big business and busy city, I was delighted with the hotel, the city, the sites, and just everything. I could come back and spend a few days again since four days and nights was just not enough. There are enough museums to take up a week. There are enough streets that we walked miles and enjoyed them all.

You can see more of our Milan pictures at Tom's photo show at <http://www.photoshow.com/watch/fA8Pb4wX> or any of his photo shows at www.photoshow.com/members/tomskoi.

The Cathedral aka Duomo



I'd been in Florence's and in Siena's Duomo just this year and each were very exciting in their own right but I had no expectation of Milan's Amazing Duomo. The largest of its type in the world, nearly 4,000 spires, and 4,000 stained glass windows, and hugely old having been started in the 1400s, it took over 400 years to build. It is often cleaned up and probably recently sand blasted so it was pristine.

That little tiny gold Madonna up on the top spire is actually 14 feet tall. Now, if you don't know Milan's

Duomo, be ready to be shocked: you can go to the rooftop and walk among the spires. Honest. Exciting like no get out. I could hardly believe my eyes and we stayed up on top for over an hour just in awe. Only in Mont St. Michael have we been able to be near to and touch a flying buttress. Tom, who tries to limit the number of his pictures, couldn't stop. There will probably be a lot on his Photo Show.

Up on the roof top! -- Can I tell you again how exciting this was! That's me in the pictures. We took a picture of a young couple up there too but Tom thought it was sacrilegious

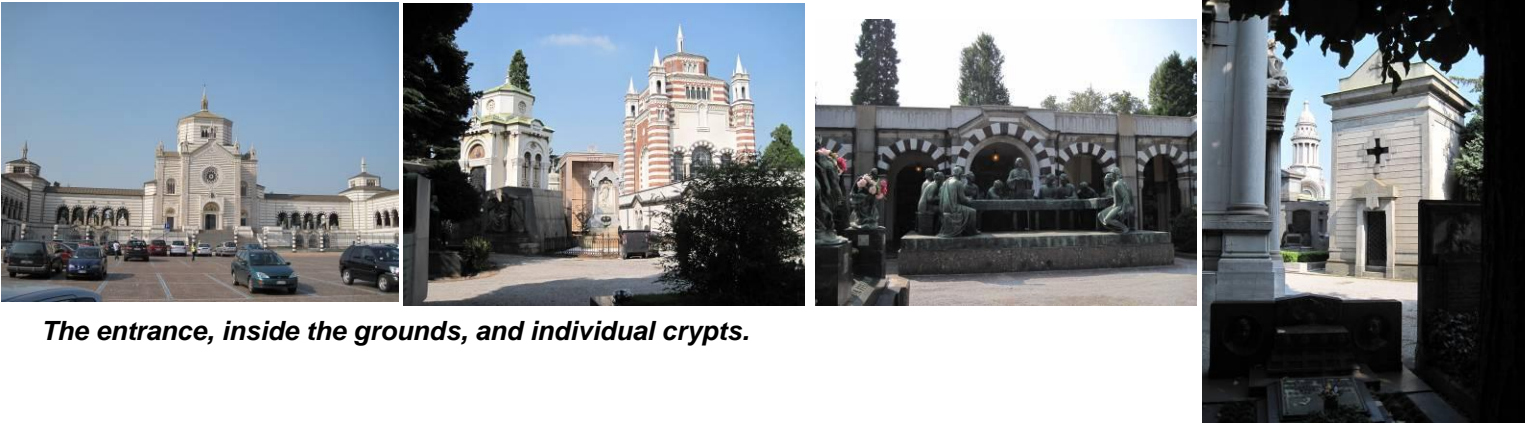


Milan's Cemetery

Extending over 300,000 square yards, this is the largest cemetery we've ever seen and we've seen a lot of them and taken tours in different countries and different states. This is also the most dramatic with one after another tomb that you'd expect to be the centerpiece of any regular town's cemetery. It's like an open air museum of art from the 19th century to the present, and pay attention to the inhabitants and it's full of history. There were famous people and famous sculptures. If this were in our country, there would be guided tours and tour books. There were neither. We spent hours walking, reading, taking pictures and being amazed. The Italians not only know how to live, they know how to die. Whoever had so much money and why do they want to spend it in death?

There were crypts larger than a multi story building. There were crypts in the round with dozens of sculpted people working their way up to the top. There were crypts of a dozen full size family members representing a Last Supper. There were more than we could possibly see in a day but we tried.

An oddity that I can't explain: there are two separate 'corners' that are walled off (huge in their own right) for Catholics and another for Jewish.



The entrance, inside the grounds, and individual crypts.

Other Milan highlights – I think we saw all the basics and covered many of the tour book's Top Ten including:

- Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper (from the late 1400s) in the Santa Maria della Grazie. These tickets are difficult to come by and cost about 9.50 Euros (\$15 US) if you can get them. We signed up for a guided bus tour to get in. There one has an assigned time and after being squied through a series of thermostatically controlled and guarded rooms, admittance is allowed for precisely 15 minutes. Our guide had to talk fast.
- Pinacoteca di Brera, one of Italy's finest painting galleries, set in an old villa surrounded by a lively area called the Brera. We were unable to tour inside since they close two days a week but it was surrounded by multiple works of sculpture art and the Accademia.
- Castello Sforzesco, a 15th century castle and now home to a museum, is just the opposite of Brera in that its set in a huge park setting in a sprawling castle. Entry there also evaded us but it's the park grounds that Tom likes and it's the interior that Diana should return to see one day.
- Pirelli Tower is the highest building in Milan and was next to our hotel. It was the world's tallest skyscraper for a decade and was the site of the first Pirelli tire factory
- San Lorenzo Maggiore is next to some remaining city walls and sits on a plot where a series of 4th century columns remain. It is huge and there was a "silence" memorial going on outside which reminded me of the couple student protests we witnessed.
- Many churches written about and said to be old and significant and they seem to appear in each district and some are plain and some are opulent, always making us wonder whoever pays for them.
- La Scala Opera House sits on the square outside the huge Galleries. We toured the museum and inside the opera house, returning a second time to see the costume displays. I once thought I'd try to collect opera house tours but can only remember those big ones of Paris, Budapest, Prague, Brussels, Vienna, Kresky Kumlov, and even Wilmington Delaware was super, but there must have been more.
- Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II is the glorious 19th century shopping mall. It was near to here that we indulged in a 5 Euro (\$7.50 US) cup of coffee and later in an 11 Euro small pizza.

- Golden Quadrangle and Via Montenapoleone is Milan's Rodeo Drive, Fifth Avenue and rue du Faubourg-St-Honore all-in-one. It was near to Fashion Week and we indulged in a lot of window shopping.
- Navigali or Canal System is apparently a hot spot for restaurants and night life but it was not anything more than a curiosity for us.
- Miles and Miles on our feet is our usual method of seeing the town outside of the tourist areas. This time was no exception, rain or not though that was only a couple days on and off.

Weather was okay though we used umbrellas a couple times and carried one many days. We figured it must be very hot in Milan because the sidewalks of asphalt had major indentations all over from moped stands and even from shoes. That's hot. Another indication that Milan suffers was the note in the Hilton hotel offering to bring mosquito zapping machines to the room if needed. We should have asked.

Yes -- we had gelato! This didn't happen until one of the last days and we felt like we weren't doing the right thing by the Italians by not indulging. Drats but it tasted just like what I had with Marie in NYC this summer but pricier. Here's a picture of the lovely shop in the Brera.



Finally -- all good things come to an end to include my computer's battery on the airplane.



Continued with Tom's emails during trip:

Sun, 13 Sep

Easy plane ride -- an hour late in leaving Newark but made up the time so arrived as scheduled (which made no difference to us), killed about an hour in the Milan airport so that we could have a return of the car before we entered another day and incurred a whole day's charge (about 60 bucks). Got a diesel VW Golf four door automatic (and boy am I glad -- I readily drive a stick over here but the traffic was pretty heavy with stop and go and, once we got off the roundabouts seem to occur every few feet. The fuel is about \$7.25 a gallon! Hopefully, this car will get good mileage.

Arrived at the apartment and got right in by opening the lock boxes as directed and with a few strange idiosyncrasies and quirks, we're starting to settle in. Went five minute's walk to have dinner in our little village (Fiumelatte -- translates to milk water -- the stream coming off the mountain is so ferocious that the water looks frothy/milky). We're just across from Bellagio on the point of the inverted Y and across from Mennagio. The views are mind boggling and from our huge terrace looking west we just can't get over how beautiful. (This grotto picture is part of our villa's gardens and through which the stream traverses.)



The biggest surprise is all the huge cliffs and mountains. Magnificent! A wee bit of Cinque Terre feel. We're all hemmed in by tall mountains and our balcony gives about a 280 degree view straight over the lake and all around, with the same scene as the Varenna tourist office uses to photograph their little medieval looking village. The tour books talk about the source of the huge waterfall that comes down the mountain and its right out the edge of our villa (of which we have the top two floors.) The tour books also talk about this 1605 villa and how it was cut in two for the roadway. Our terrace balcony hangs over the roadway.

We were pretty beat after all the travelling but went off to the grocery store for a few supplies and much to our chagrin, there was nothing in the apartment for cleaning, dishwashing, etc. First time that's happened and it's just the way it's done here we were told (by our agent). So I'm (that's Tom talking) typing this at 3:50 AM due to jet lag (I never used to have this problem -- I could convince myself of whatever the local time was and just adapt -- must be the advanced age).

I've just learned (from reading the owner's -- a Brit I think -- house manual) how he's spared no expense in outfitting this place. For example, the couches and chairs are Roche Bobois, Jean Paul Gattier dining room chairs (crocodile), high tech zoned air conditioning, under floor heated oak hardwood floors in some rooms (Austrian), slate in others, nickel plated fixtures, etc., etc. I noticed in the agent's book that the place (top two floors) is for sale at 1 1/2 million dollars. But, understand that real estate and most other things in this very high touristic area are hugely inflated. Got to pay a lot for these views. (The picture is sunset off our balcony the first night.)

Diana speaking now -- I could use a low tech place. We had a heck of a time learning how to make the lights, the stove, the a/c, the Blu Ray system, etc. work and still are in give-up mode on some of the equipment.



Turns out the owner was a ski instructor for 26 years (over here I assume), a tour guide for 23 years including four years with Rick Steves (we watch his travel shows often), even spent some time in CA, among other things.

We're suffering from sticker shock -- prices on most things seem outrageous. However, a cappuccino at about five dollars seems reasonable and boy is it thick and delicious.

Anyway, thought you might like a bring-up and now (after a few sips of JW Red) I'm going back to bed.

Stay tuned.

Tom

Mon, 14 Sep

It's 9am and we're stirring and off to an orientation by the rental agent up in the mountains behind our town. We expect it's going to be as much of a sales pitch as anything as they're real estate agents too but it's purported to be about things to see and do and a Q&A. (Turned out it was no more than a tourist update.

Yesterday and our visit of the ancient town of Varenna -- less than a mile away from our tiny village of Fiumelatte and an easy though somewhat dangerous walk as part of it is on the narrow, curvy road along the shore -- was beyond anything we expected or imagined. Narrow little rock streets/walkways (like river rocks) mostly quite steep going up from the lake into town but oh so picturesque. I just couldn't stop taking pictures. What a photo show this is going to make.

We had slept in to catch up a bit but spent from about 2 to 8pm walking and taking in the sights with a short stop for lunch of a delicious crepe of prosciutto/mushrooms/cheese and forno and a nice cool beer (it was probably in the high 70s) while Diana had a veggie crepe with a bit of cheese and she too had a beer. Lovely spot, on the water, in the shade the waiter is a local ski instructor with very good English. And though the Italians don't drink cappuccino after 11:30 AM -- they say it interferes with digestion -- Ha! -- I had one anyway. Its sooo good and sooo creamy -- you can almost stand the teaspoon up in it.



We were back at the apartment around 8pm or so and I cooked a big omelets with gorgonzola and we opened our bottle of Prosecco bubbly. You must try this. Better than French Champagne maybe. I was introduced to it last Sunday at the Breen's home and loved it so immediately bought it here. We ate out on the fabulous terrace looking at the villages light up all around the opposite shore. Magical! Candles, music, the waterfall next to us making just enough sound . . . We'll no doubt repeat this a few times but tomorrow night we're reserved for what's said to be the best food in town -- a tiny 5 table place. I'll let you know.

I've not had to depend much on my Italian but I'm so glad I spent the time to learn a little. My (little electronic) translator comes in handy to remind me what and how to say the necessary.

Got to get dressed now. More later.

See ya,

Tom

Tue, 15 Sep

We had a simple dinner in again but the place is so beautiful and comfortable, it's a pleasure.

Tomorrow we're taking the ferry to Bellagio for the day then back to our Varenna/Fuimelatte base for dinner in the restaurant I mentioned (five tables! but said to be the best food in town).

Tue, 15 Sep

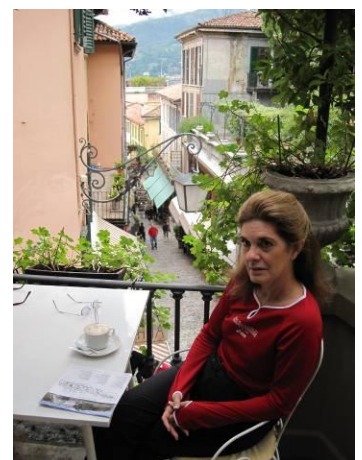
We took the ferry over to Bellagio late this morning as planned and though it's beautiful, charming and bigger than our little Varenna, it's really touristier and a must on everyone's list it seems. Lots of wonderful and lovely and expensive shops and the narrow little rock walkways but still hordes of people even though the "season" ended last weekend (when there were huge crowds in our town too and now all's very quiet). As a result, we took a hike around behind the town, even taking in an enchanting little graveyard sitting lake side, and next to a lovely old farmhouse with rows of olive trees.

We got back around 7 for our 7:30 dinner so had time to stop for a Prosecco (or as the waiter helped with a little hint -- if it's more than one it's Prosecci -- plural -- how'd I know?). As for the dinner, three tables of Brits, one of a Chinese (American?) couple, and us. There's only the chef/owner and (maybe) his daughter. Both very pleasant and accommodating. We were there an hour and a half before the main course came out (mine was filet with a nice red wine sauce and a dab of the chicken liver I'd had as a first course). Diana had a lake fish (often listed on menus here) and some grilled veggies (spelled thin slices of eggplant and zucchini to which we added olive oil and Balsamic). Half bottle of decent local wine from across the lake. The score: chicken liver a 7. The steak about the same. The overall a 6. With a typical charge of 2.50 Euro for bread, 9 for wine, 2.50 for a liter bottle of mineral water. Hardly any place will serve tap water. Bottom line: 55 Euro or about \$82 with the exchange rate of about \$1.50 to the Euro (painful). Oh the good old days when \$.96 would buy one Euro just after the EU adopted the Euro.



Anyway, we walked for miles outside the concentrated village area, saw some lovely homes and visited one of the grand villas with a fabulous garden. All very worthwhile even though we did part of it with our umbrellas. No big thing.

One of the highlights of the day (for me at least) was lunch. A lovely restaurant with an arbored terrace (we ate under the awning as it was



sprinkling), excellent service and no doubt the best ravioli I've ever had - the sauce was perfect and the homemade pasta with a chicken based filling was light and tasty. A full 10 as a single item. The whole experience was at least 9. What a find. We even went back later in the day for another one of their wonderful coffees. And even though they weren't open that early, our fine waiter invited us in and we had a coffee anyway. Our guidebook says - "For such a beloved resort, Bellagio, oddly lacks superlative eateries, save perhaps for this "little boat." The recipes are local and well-prepared, the ambiance amicable and the prices appropriate." We now know it was established in 1887 but had a wall of movie star pictures that'd enjoyed themselves as well over maybe four decades. We didn't read that until we came home but I'd spotted it as we were walking around and found my way back there and boy, were we glad. So, though the much touted local place turned out to be a disappointment (maybe because our expectations were inflated), the day was saved.

Tomorrow's itinerary is still undecided as the weather prediction is showing 80% chance of rain. So stay tuned.

See ya,
Tom

Wed, 16 Sep

RAIN!

However, we went to the next town north, Bellano, and ate lunch in a recommended restaurant (from the apartment's owner's manual for renters) and had a local special dish called pizzocheri -- no, not pizza but a buckwheat pasta, garlic potatoes, cabbage, wonderful cheese (and more cheese) -- and a local red wine from across the lake. Excellent! And a solid 7 for both. Our waitress (probably the wife of the owner) -- Italian blonde, maybe late 40s, lovely smile and demeanor but no English so she had to suffer my broken Italian -- then another great cappuccino to finish.

Then we drove a bit further north and decided the rain just really put too much of a damper (pun intended) on the day so came home and I finally figured out how to watch a DVD on the huge HD TV and watched Casanova. I say finally figured out because though the owner has spent huge sums on everything (you remember the Roche Bobois sofa and love seat, three huge TVs plus all the amplifiers and DVD players and satellite systems, convection cook-top, etc.) making this stuff work without an on- hands orientation has severely taxed my tech abilities (and I thought I was pretty good at this stuff). Anyway, it's been a bit of a challenge but the place is so nice, it sort of makes up for the bit of frustration. But it's so nice to have two full baths like we're used to, wi-fi, stereo, master bedroom downstairs, first class bits and pieces and equipment everywhere, quiet, and the big bonus, the mind boggling absolute knock-your-socks off views from our huge terrace (remember this is the top floor called the penthouse) with unobstructed visuals of the lake and mountains for a bit more than 180 degrees. Plus a gated/remote controlled parking garage with a designated space and a level specific key operated elevator so we can't have any surprise visitors. What a way to go!

Anyway, we're trying to decide on how to best see something we'll enjoy despite the predicted more rain (Friday looks good thought -- as he crosses his fingers).

See ya,

Tom

Thu, 17 Sep

Another full 10 day all around -- blue sky, puffy whites, little wind, maybe 75, back in Bellagio to take a speedboat ride by the major villa and a stop at this one -- the most beautiful of all -- including guided tour. Lunch in the same place of two days ago -- same wonderful ravioli (I know a good thing when I find it) and just as good. Same great cappuccino.



Back to our wonderful apartment terrace to have a bit of JW Red, to watch the sun hide behind the mountain and create a silhouette of each, crowned with pink and gray clouds and the beginning of the awakening villages with their twinkling lights, coming to life. I know I said this before but it really is magical. Had dinner this evening in Bellano, about 15 minutes from here -- same place we had lunch yesterday with the local buckwheat pasta dish. Local, down to earth trattoria. Tonight, gnocchi with rabbit sauce -- Diana had another lake fish and we both had some veggies (thinly sliced eggplant, zucchini, roasted red pepper, some kind of greens and some green beans). All very good with a half bottle of regional red wine. Family run, same great and friendly service (husband has pretty good English).

Pictures are worth a lot of words so



A very happy day.

See ya,
Tom

Fri, 18 Sep

Subject: Last day on Lake Como

Of course, all things come to an end sooner or later and we spent our day (and it was beautiful and nice and warm -- first day for shorts -- about 78 or so) on a leisurely pace. Slept in, a bite to eat, Diana on the computer and me on the terrace still drinking it all in. Listening to the waterfall, watching white clouds lifting off the peaks across the lake, thinking about lunch, the usual stuff. We took the written advice of our landlord and went about four miles down the road to a place he'd suggested in the house book. We were the only customers and it turned out fine though there was a

miscommunication with the waiter (though he had pretty good English) on what I wanted. No big deal and they threw in lovely custard for dessert to apologize. Still, every time we have a meal we suffer a bit from sticker shock (as you know, because of the exchange rate, we are paying 50% more than everyone else). I know, I say it's only money but even I have scruples about value for money (does that surprise you?). It doesn't keep me from doing pretty much everything I want but I do have a bit of chagrin about our weak dollar (remember, I've lived long enough to remember the good old days when \$.96 bought a Euro instead of a buck 50 now). Anyway, after lunch we drove way up a very narrow twisty road to a village where our landlord had suggested a very rustic and unusual place. We were just curious. Turns out it was closed as was pretty much all of the village. This area is very seasonal and it ended last weekend as we arrived (very crowded then but over by Sunday night). So about 80% of the houses are closed and won't open again until next Jun/Jul. In August, everyone in France and Italy is on holiday (and lots of them come here along with hoards of Brits) then September tapers off and goes into a sleep mode. Nice for us not to have to deal with lots of people though. If it had continued like when we arrived last Saturday I don't think we'd have been too happy.

After touring up on the mountain (you wouldn't believe the little switchback roads) we came back down to lake level and went up the other side to an ancient castle ruin that is privately owned and very well maintained - you'll see pictures. And speaking of such, we've taken so many already (and before Milan even) I think I'm going to have break things apart into maybe three photo shows.

By the way, the first picture is the terrace restaurant we liked so well (twice) in Bellagio. And in the fourth one, what do suppose that guy's drinking?

Tomorrow is a pretty early drive to Milan, back to the airport, turn in the car and then train into the city. We're staying in a Hilton very near the central train station in order to easily get back out to the airport for our 10:30 flight next Wednesday morning.

So, the next phase of the adventure starts

See ya,
Tom

Mon, 21 Sep

Subject: The continuing adventure

We rather reluctantly left our "perch by the waterfall" (as Ellen put it) yesterday morning and had an uneventful trip to Milano though the signage directing us hither and yon was in the inimitable Italian style - good to none, leaving some anxious moments and one stop to ask directions (on the Autostrada as we went over the top of the city to get back to the airport to turn in the car).

This lack of proper signage continued at the airport when we learned that our best bet was not the train that we thought might be the way to go, but a bus that would take us to within a 5-10 minute walk to our hotel. Fortunately, we did end up on the right bus and within 15 minutes of turning in the car and were in the city about an hour later. We elected to pay for an upgrade to our free for points Hilton room but since only one such room was available, we ended up on the front of the building (meaning, even though we were on the 8th and next to top floor, the busy street noise was rather continuous requiring liberal doses of JW Red to induce sleep -- not at all a bad thing and not all that

unusual). One of the perks of the upgrade was access to the Concierge Lounge meaning free breakfast, all day access to snacks and bottled juices and water and coffee, then hot hors d'oeuvres from 6 o'clock including free booze, Prosecco, wine, beer, etc. Very nice facility and what a deal.

As soon as we got in and unpacked we went out walking. Beautiful 75 or so sunny day and we headed the 3/4 of a mile down to the famous cathedral in the center of town. MIND BOGGLING! And they even let you go up and walk on the marble roof! Wait 'til you see the pictures from that. Diana acquiesced and joined me on the elevator (for a mere 3 Euro penalty per person over the 5 Euro stairs entry fee -- those Catholics know how to make money) -- I'm fine walking but have lost my taste for climbing (stairs, hills, mountains -- you name it). Absolutely fascinating and though I'd seen pictures, it truly defies description so you'll just have to see the pictures. Getting to there was an interesting experience in itself as we walked the main shopping street and diverted to the really classy pedestrian only area where Versace, Dolce & Gabana, Chanel, and others of the same high class, high priced stuff were abundant. Couldn't believe the prices - and people were ardently shopping and buying. Beautiful stores and some of the window displays were not to be believed either. Some fun. And after stopping at a really nice looking place for Cappuccino next to the La Scala Opera House (we both needed a pit stop), we got our first sticker shock of 5 Euro each for the coffee (= about \$7.50 apiece). It was good, but that good? Later we paid about maybe Euro 2.50 to 3.50 at other places. We had some input from a NY Times article and Top 10 books on where to eat and we decided on one, found it on the map, went there around 7, learned that it opened at 7:30, went to a nearby bar and coffee house, and a scotch and a Prosecco time killer later (cheap at 4.50 and 4 Euro) had a full 10 dinner - top scores on all counts - outdoors under a grape trellis, super service (and English speaking so I didn't have to subject the poor fellow to my Italian) and great food. A shared antipasto of a cheese sort of puffed pastry covered with the best cured ham I've ever tasted, then I had Osso Buco and risotto while Diana had el dente (she said the most el dente she'd ever had but perfect) large pasta with a veal based ragu/Bolognese sauce that was the waiter's favorite. Half a liter of a lovely red wine but as we sat down, we were served a complimentary Prosecco (I even had a second) and then at the end, we even had an uncustomary dessert - in house made chocolate thing for Diana and Tiramisu for me. Followed by a Cappuccino of course. We then walked the mile or so home and enjoyed the pleasant balmy evening and window shopped along the way. Good day all around.

This morning we were up at 6:30, full breakfast in the lounge - scrambled eggs, bacon, ham, Cappuccino, cereal, fruit, about six kinds of bread, juices - what a spread - then were picked up for our city tour and joined about 50 other people on this huge deluxe bus and visited several of the sites including a private viewing of the de Vinci's Last Supper. Well done. We took a trip through the La Scala museum and had a look at the beautiful theater and then amongst a cast of zillions (this being Sunday - and tourists and Italians alike had descended upon the city) strolled around until we were tired and ended up back at our hotel around 5:30, just as the evening feast was being laid out in the lounge. Why I don't know, but most restaurants are closed on Sunday (some even on Saturday) so the second one I'd picked out will have to wait for tomorrow or Tuesday. So we just "ate in" and came back to our very comfortable room. Tough life.

Anyway, enough for today,

See ya,
Tom

Tue, 22 Sep

Me again,

After a nice lie in, up for a big breakfast yesterday (Monday) then walked for miles -- through the business part of town around lunch time and saw very well dressed people (mostly men -- wonder why that is?) and tree lined streets of a few big old houses. Then to an older part of the city down to the last couple of canals that exist. We saw a few Roman remains, ancient churches, more of the rock lined passages and the typical old town maze of streets. All very interesting and the atmosphere that we came for. And then around 6 o'clock we needed a drink and a rest so stopped in for a scotch and a Prosecco and a neighborhood bar. Fully renewed, we walked about a block to our dinner reservation at a trattoria that's apparently rather famous as it was in the NY Times article I'd mentioned and was among the top 10 in the book of Milan's best. We were there at a good time and able to select a back corner table that gave us a perfect view of the goings-on. I had a braised beef dish that included lots of mushrooms and polenta and Diana had a cabbage roll filled with a ground veal stuffing plus cheese risotto. The place was booming by the time we left. At least half the patrons were local or otherwise Italian and a bunch of us who apparently read the same recommendations. All good but not up to Saturday night's full 10 experience (picture 1) so the score for last night only rated a 7. Nice wine though - Montepulciano (sp?).

More later,
Tom

Itinerary

Fri Sep 11

6:35pm Depart Newark EWR to Milan MXP via Cont #44

Sat Sep 12

8:50am Arrive Milan MXP and pick up rental car

Apartment Rented through www.happyholidaylakecomo.com

Della Fontana Penthouse, Via Statale s.n.c., Fiumelatte, Varenna, Lecco, Italy 23829

Description <http://www.lakecomohomes.com/displayproperty.asp?p=134>

Mon Sep 14

11:00am Orientation/briefing by Holiday Homes

Thur Sep 17

Bar BQ by hosts

Sat Sep 19

Hotel Hilton Milan (2)

Via Luigi Galvani 12, Milan, Italy 20124

Tel: 39-02-698 31 Fax: 39-02-667 10810

Wed Sep 23

10:20am Depart Milan MXP via Cont #45 arriving in Newark at 1:40pm

Apartment: A very luxurious apartment in the grounds of the historic Villa Capoana. Villa Capoana was constructed in the year 1605 for the Duke of Mount Marignano in the locality of Fonte Uga in Fiumelatte. It was home to noble families for many generations until just recently a part of it was reconstructed. In renovating, the construction company has ensured the preservation of the monumental fountain and garden area, a highlight of the historic villa and now showpiece of the condominium, thus retaining the beauty of the area.

This new, contemporary apartment, only 15m from the water's edge, offers quality fixtures and fittings throughout. The modern features are 'state of the art', with elegant floor tiles combined with under-floor heating, air-conditioning throughout, controllable from every room to the whirlpool bath in the bedroom and 'alligator' paint effect walls in the bathrooms! The kitchen is fully equipped with a large fridge/freezer with cold water & ice in the door, ultra modern appliances with a clever minimalist central island, concealing a working area beneath that operates electrically to open. The counter top can slide forward to create a breakfast bar. There is also a dining table which can seat from four - twelve people when extended! This large living space is great for entertaining - with elegant black leather sofas and a very unusual reclining 'snake effect' lounge which can be adjusted into a variety of positions. The entertainment systems are lavish - there is a wide flat screen SKY TV and DVD player in the living area and the whole apartment has been fitted with surround sound - even outside on the large terrace! The living area has very large glass sliding doors which gives you a magnificent, panoramic view of the lake. The large terrace is not only great for sunbathing but gives an extended living space to enjoy. There is a table and chairs for up to 12 people dining 'al fresco'. There is also a private garage with automatic remote control doors. The property is accessed by elevator directly onto the terrace!

The apartment is located in the town of Fiumelatte, just 1km from the beautiful town of Varenna on the Eastern shore of Lake Como. The property has been designed to take full advantage of the lakes premier view of the 'Golden Triangle' - Bellagio, Menaggio and Varenna.

Features: Gas Central Heating; Air Conditioning; Full floor wrap terrace; Garden; gas BBQ; Parking Space; Fireplace; Full Kitchen; Garage; Washing Machine; Tumble Dryer; Jacuzzi/Hot Tub both inside and on the terrace; Internet Access; Lounge/Diner; Dishwasher; Satellite/Cable TV; Large screen Blu Ray TVs in all rooms; DVD

Varenna is home to Italy's shortest river, the Fiumelatte. Only 250 meters long, it rushes, frothy and milky-white (hence the name) down the rock face and crashes into the lake from the end of March to the end of October each year. And then it stops - just like that. Leonardo da Vinci climbed down to find out where the water came from (without success!), as recorded in his Codices Atlántico notebook. This river runs to the side of the villa.

Two famed villas to visit here are Villa Cipressi, with terraced gardens cascading down to the shores & Villa Monastero, a true showcase with gardens. With the mild climate & abundant sunshine and warmth right into the evening; olive and cypress trees abound as well as many other varieties of lush, tropical plants, typical of the lake.

Hilton Milan - Just 1 block from the station and airport buses, the Hilton Milan hotel boasts an Executive Lounge with an outdoor terrace, and wireless internet access throughout. Work out in the well-equipped fitness room or enjoy the hotel's Italian cuisine. There's fantastic shopping just 2 miles away and Milan attractions like the La Scala opera house are on the hotel's sightseeing tour.

Guest Room - Feel at home in this contemporary, spacious room with wireless internet access. The bright and airy room has large opening windows. Catch up on work at the desk or curl up in the easy chair with a magazine or re-energize in the marble bathroom.

About Varenna

Varenna is an attractive village on the eastern shore of Lake Como, looking over the central part of the lake towards Bellagio. Varenna's picturesque lanes and old fishermen's houses are unpretentiously appealing, and some visitors prefer the town to its grander neighbors. Although Varenna is a tourist destination, and its pretty waterfront and tiny stone beach fill up with holidaymakers, it has a more authentic air than the other hotel-packed resorts. The main tourist activities in Varenna are relaxing by the lake, and visiting the gardens of two villas, Villa Monastero and Villa Cipressi.

Varenna sights and tourist attractions

From the ferry jetty in Varenna there is a footway leading around the shore to the right. This brings you to the village's pretty waterfront, with its characteristic lake harbor, an arcaded walkway and a little stone beach sloping into the water. Although this short stretch of lakeside is a tourist magnet, it is also very charming and a good place to while away half an hour with a cold drink or ice cream sundae.

Close to the water, you'll find a couple of *gelaterie* where you can buy ice creams to take away, several cafes with outside terraces and a few shops and boutiques aimed at tourists. Day trippers hopping around the lake resorts by boat may not go any further. But it is worth spending a bit more time in Varenna, to tour the picturesque pedestrian lanes which conceal more restaurants and bars, and visit at least one of the villa gardens which are open to the public. If you wish to sunbathe or swim, there is another small beach below the lanes of the headland, and a lido on the far side of the ferry stops.



Heading up the sloping alleys from the lake you'll come to the town's main piazza and the lake-shore road. The square is dominated by Varenna's principal church, the fourteenth-century Chiesa di San Giorgio, which features frescoes both inside and out - a large image of St. Christopher is painted on the facade. Opposite you'll find the smaller and more ancient Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista. If this is open, you can peer inside the church to admire more frescoes, some thought to date from the fourteenth century. The two gardens which you can visit are down the main road to the right. Villa Cipressi, the first, is now a hotel with its gardens open to the public. The entrance to Villa Monastero is just a little further on - read on for more about the villa's garden.

If the day is not too hot and you are feeling energetic, there are two more distant sights which can be linked up in a walk from the centre of Varenna. Along the lake, past Villa Monastero, is a hamlet called Fiumelatte which is notable for a stream of the same name, meaning 'Milk-river', which gushes white and is said to be the 'shortest river in Italy' (although since another river, near [Malcesine](#) on Lake Garda, claims to be the shortest in the world there may be some argument). The stream dries up in winter months.

An inland route leads back to the castle which has watched over Varenna for centuries, the Castello di Vezio. This medieval fortress now hosts falconry displays and other events. It's a quick but steep descent back down into Varenna.

Varenna is an old settlement, and legend says that it was founded (or expanded) by twelfth-century evacuees from Lake Como's island, the Isola Comacina, fleeing from the destruction of their homes. In the summer the village puts on a special commemorative event with local foods, a historical re-enactment and a firework display.

Villa Monastero

Villa Monastero is a fairly small villa, now used for conferences, with a long thin garden along the lake shore. If possible during your visit, it is worth paying extra to see around the villa on the days when the building is open. The decor includes some grand and some rather eccentric touches, including an impressive sunken bath, stylish nineteenth-century wallpaper and majolica portraits of notable Germans, commissioned by a German owner of the house. The garden is the main attraction of Villa Monastero, though, and it is a memorable sight. The position between the lake and the road means that the garden is extremely long and thin, stretching along as far as an ornate little summer pavilion which must have been created as a remote refuge from the villa. The garden has several different sections, including the grand landing stage, a formal terrace, sculpture-ornamented promenades and a collection of citrus trees. There are benches to sit on to admire the view, while hard-working gardeners are busy with hoses keeping flowers alive even in the hottest months.



About Bellagio

Bellagio is a small village at the tip of a long hilly promontory between the two southern branches of Lake Como. It is an elegant and long-established tourist resort, which still retains considerable charm despite the daily influx of trippers. The historic village of Bellagio only has a population of around 200 (compared to 900 beds for tourists), and most locals live in other hamlets and villages on the headland, all grouped together under the local authority, the Comune di Bellagio. The tiny town is an excellent place to while away an afternoon, to spend a relaxing romantic holiday or simply to base yourself for an exploration of Lake Como. With lovely views, classy boutiques, two gardens to visit, picturesque lanes, a choice of restaurants and bars, and frequent boat services, Bellagio really is one of Italy's top holiday destinations.

Bellagio sights and tourist attractions

Bellagio is one of the most attractively-situated of the lake resorts, and it is a pleasant place to ramble, explore or simply potter. Passenger ferries stop alongside a tree-lined waterfront. Across the road is a lovely arcade where cafes and restaurants afford shade and shelter from the elements. This is a good place to come for an aperitivo or after-dinner drink. Walking to the right as you disembark from the boat, you'll find more 'touristy' cafes - the types of place where you can sit in the afternoon on a lakeside terrace with a big fancy ice-cream and watch the boats passing by. A little further along in this direction you'll pass the car-ferry departure point, the historic Hotel Grand Bretagne which is currently abandoned and falling into disrepair, and then reach a pretty lakeside promenade. A few minutes further on, you come to one of the two gardens open to the public, Villa Melzi (see below for more information on the gardens).

From the central waterfront, stepped and cobbled lanes rise up the hill in a tight little network separating the lakeshore from the town's main street, Via Garibaldi. This is a pretty lane where you'll find more shops, cafes and also Bellagio's main town square, Piazza San Giacomo, or Piazza della Chiesa. The square is dominated by the town church, the Romanesque Basilica di San Giacomo, which is worth a visit for its frescoes and statues. Externally you can admire the attractive bell-tower and elegant apse. On the opposite side of the square is a medieval tower, once part of Bellagio's now-disappeared defenses and now a tourist office where you can buy tickets and rendez-vous for the tours of Villa Serbelloni's gardens (highly recommended; see below). The fountain in



the centre of the piazza is said to have been originally commissioned by a resident Englishman for his garden to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Walking from the piazza past the church and out towards the tip of the Bellagio promontory, you reach a viewpoint, park and little harbour at Punta Spartivento, where the lake divides. Heading in the other direction from the square, Via Garibaldi passes the main entrance to Villa Serbelloni and reaches the town hall (*Municipio*). At this point a paved footpath (signposted) leaves the road and heads towards Pescallo, about ten minutes' walk away. Pescallo is an enchanting little fishing hamlet looking out over the western Lecco branch of Lake Como, on the opposite side of the promontory to the main settlement of Bellagio. There's a restaurant with tables right on the water's edge, and although there are one or two hotels, the atmosphere here is low-key, charming and miles away from the smart, touristy world of Bellagio.

From Pescallo, following the 'Bellagio suburbs' walk suggested by the tourist office pamphlet, you pass by some agricultural ruins ripe for renovation, then the imposing, empty Villa Giulia and its dramatic 'Vialone'. This is a wide grassy path cleared by an early owner of Villa Giulia, in order to give his house views over both branches of the lake. At the far end of the Vialone you can head left down to another waterside settlement, San Giovanni, where local teenagers sun themselves on the harbor wall and where the little town square is decorated with a 'grotto' constructed by the local priest in the 1950s as a shrine to the Madonna of Lourdes. There is also a rather specialist museum at San Giovanni, dedicated to navigational instruments (the *Museo degli Strumenti della Navigazione*). Back in the direction of Bellagio, the next little fishing harbour is Loppia, where you can see examples of the historic local lake boats. Try to get a glimpse of the old village church, now enclosed in the private grounds of Villa Trivulzio Gerli. The route back to Bellagio lies through (or by road around) the gardens of Villa Melzi, described below.

In the tourist season you may see a little tourist train (*trenino*) tootling by; this takes a 20-minute tour towards the hamlet of San Giovanni. It's not a hugely scenic route as the roads don't run along the lakeshore, but it is fun, especially if you are travelling with children. The departure point is indicated by a notice-board, near the car-ferry jetty.

Villa Serbelloni

Villa Serbelloni is a large, grand building on the slopes of the Bellagio promontory. The villa's grounds enclose the wooded hill behind the town, which dominates the headland and the centre of Lake Como. The villa building isn't open to the public, but the gardens and grounds can be visited on organized tours, which take place twice a day. Tickets are sold before the commencement of the tour at the Promo Bellagio office in the little medieval tower in Bellagio's main square, opposite the church. Numbers are restricted, so turn up promptly. Up-to-date info can be found on the tourist board website.



The tour is a great way to start your holiday in Bellagio, as the villa's grounds look out over the lake, offering panoramas you can't see from the town. Our tour (in English and Italian, with an excellent guide) was very informative and gave context to what we would be seeing at Bellagio and around Lake Como, as well as providing ideas for further exploration. In addition to the views, you can also see the botanical plantings on the headland, various flowerbeds and ornamental water features, a grotto under the summit of the hill and the ruins of the old defensive fortress which once commanded the point, watching out over the lake's three branches.

In the twentieth century the villa belonged to whisky heiress and princess-by-marriage Ella Walker, who left the property to the Rockefeller Foundation. The Foundation organizes conferences and 'retreats' for scientists and

artists, who work in the little 'chalets' dotted around the grounds. The organization is very jealous of their privacy; guided tours avoid the attractive formal gardens nearest to the villa, and tourists are banned from taking photographs of the building while visiting the grounds. There is a lot of walking on the tour, mostly on gravelly paths, and you'll want sensible shoes. Uphill sections are at a gentle gradient.

Villa Melzi

The garden of Villa Melzi doesn't have the same historic significance as Villa Serbelloni, but it is a very pretty sloping garden along the lakeshore and is worth visiting if you are spending time in Bellagio. The villa was built for a nobleman of the Napoleonic era, and various mementoes related to the times are collected in the little orangery museum, along with church frescoes and archaeological oddments. Two of the prettiest features of the garden are a little blue-roofed pavilion at the water's edge (one of the landmarks of this shore), and a shady water garden. There are entrances at both ends of the garden, close to the waterfront, and one of the walking-tour leaflets from the tourist office recommends a route which passes through the gardens.



Around Bellagio

You can spend a couple of slow-paced, pleasant days in Bellagio without feeling the need to move on. But the town's position at the tip of Lake Como's central promontory also makes it ideal for boat excursions to the towns on the two opposite shores. A good-value one-day boat ticket for the central part of the lake allows you to cruise around and hop on and off. Varenna, on the eastern shore, is a very pretty little village with two gardens to visit, a minuscule beach and outdoors cafes. Lenno, further down the western shore, is the boat-stop for visiting Villa Balbianello, just about the finest villa on the lake. Menaggio is a pleasant tourist town with an attractive seafront promenade. Another stop for garden-lovers is Tremezzo, home to the terraces of Villa Carlotta.

Ferry services run from Bellagio to all three corners of the lake, allowing tourists to visit a variety of little towns, or simply to cruise enjoying the dramatic views. Taking a ferry down to Como town makes a long but interesting day trip, as the boat passes the grandest villas on the lakeshore. Como itself is worth exploring, and you could return by the cheaper bus service; a twisting and panoramic journey which compares with the Amalfi Coast.

Private taxi and water-boat firms offer tours and excursions from Bellagio. For an unusual trip inland, visitors could try an organized walk high above the lake, accompanied by donkeys, with minibus transport to the start and a local lunch included (information available from the local tourist office). In the shops in Bellagio you can buy guidebooks for walking in the mountains around Lake Como, and in the winter there is a certain amount of skiing locally.

Eating and drinking

Bellagio has a good choice of fairly smart, decent restaurants aimed at its tourist clientele; as it has a very small resident population you won't find many 'local' eateries. We enjoyed several meals at Far Out (Salita Mella, 4; see links), a slightly trendy restaurant with good pasta dishes, friendly waiters and (on our return visits) nice free extras. For a more homely atmosphere and satisfying pizzas you could try Barchetta, a few yards



uphill. We also liked the Enoteca Cava Turacciolo (Salita Genazzini), an intimate cellar wine bar with tasting-plates of local meats, and cheeses with honey, as well as more traditional meals. If you are on a tight budget, you could try the reasonably-priced light meals and snacks at La Torre, a bar with tables on the main piazza. Along the town's main street, Via Garibaldi, are some more cafes and a take-away shop selling pizza slices and snacks. If you fancy picnicking - or just saving money - visit the small food shop signposted 'Mini-Market' just below the church, where you can stock up on groceries or buy cheap rolls made to order. Like the other towns around Lake Como, Bellagio is generously dotted with drinking-water fountains where you can fill up a bottle or flask, so there's no need to spend a fortune on mineral water.

Bellagio accommodation

Bellagio has been a classy and popular resort for over a hundred years, and it is an expensive place to stay. If you can afford it, though, it is lovely to spend your holiday in Bellagio, enjoy the views and wander the little lanes at your leisure. The little town centre is full of costly and rather old-fashioned, stately hotels. The grandest option is the five-star [Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni](#) (a different building to Villa Serbelloni described above). We stayed in a smart two-star option with some lovely views, the Hotel Bellagio.

From www.initaly.com



Just half an hour from noisy, bustling Milan, Lake Como is a jewel-like oasis of tranquility, a magical combination of lush Mediterranean foliage and snowy alpine peaks. One of the best vantage points for this breathtaking view is in Piazza Cavour, on the banks of the lake in the town of Como. The cathedral here (pictured at left) is often cited as the best example of transitional architectural styles: to immediately understand what this means, compare the stunning gothic façade with the 18th-century dome above it.



At the heart of Como's walled Old Town, Piazza San Fedele has many 400-year-old buildings and the basilica, one of the masterpieces of the *maestri comacini* (masters of Como). At the top of Via Cantù you'll see the old wall's most spectacular standing tower, the Porta Vittoria. Nearby is the very austere church of San Abbondio. Rest awhile in its cloisters, then climb the hill behind it and go to the top of the Baradello Tower, for a lovely view of the entire lake. Next, walk back down the hill and visit Como's third great basilica, the early romanesque San Corpforo.



Walking (or driving) along the western perimeter of the lake, you can stop in at the *Tempio Voltiano*, a surprising classic temple with marble columns and mosaic floors, housing the apparatus of Alessandro Volta, inventor of a battery that was the first reliable source of electricity. His name lives on today in the term "volt." Walk a bit farther in this direction if you want to visit the beautiful formal gardens and wild park of *Villa dell'Olmo*, a sumptuous lake home named after an elm forest mentioned by Pliny the Younger in the days when Como was a flourishing Roman outpost.

Before leaving Como, be sure to take the *funivia* up to Brunate for a truly spectacular view (and a change of temperature!). If you're a hiker, take the footpath up to Monte Boletto.

From Como, it's just a short drive to *Cernobbio*, whose old town features a delightful collection of picturesque houses and narrow alleys. This is the site of the fictional Villa Baglianello, the elegant family-home-cum-*pensione* featured in the film "[A Month by the Lake](#)." Nearby is one of the grandest hotels in all Europe, the Villa D'Este (pictured at right), whose rooms are almost like museum galleries and whose grounds boast Italy's only "floating swimming pool" (it actually sits atop the lake). Up the road is Toriggia, where you can visit *Villa Passalacqua*, a late 18th-century home where Vincenzo Bellini once stayed.



As you travel north you'll see Como's only island, *Isola Comacina*. The best day of the year to take the ferry over to the island is the week end after June 24th, when St. John's Day is celebrated with a mass in the ruins of the S. Eufemia basilica, followed by a costumed procession and night-time fireworks.



Lake Como is renowned for its exquisite villas, and probably the most famous one is *Villa Carlotta*, a perfect combination of luxurious interiors (beautiful stuccos, lovely ceiling frescoes and a great art collection, including an *Eros and Psyche* by Antonio Canova) and luxuriant exteriors (over 500 species of plants, trees and shrubs from all over the world).

Tremezzo is another lovely lakeside town. There's a classic lakeside promenade, as well as many wonderful old villas (some of which have been converted to hotels), and it's from here you can take a car ferry over to Bellagio and Varenna, on the opposite shore.

Varenna may be the most picturesque town on the lake, its steep winding alleys lined with charming homes, flowering balconies and lace-curtained windows. Just above it is the ancient castle where Theodolinda, Queen of the Lombards, is said to have died in the 7th century. Two famed villas to visit here are *Villa Cipressi*, with terraced gardens cascading right down to the shores, and *Villa Monastero*, a true showcase.

On the southern shore is *Bellagio*, *la perla del lago* (the pearl of the lake), considered by many to be the most beautiful town in all of Europe. Its narrow cobbled streets, breathtaking views, impeccable homes and glorious villas (pictured above is Villa Serbelloni) make it a most enchanting spot to spend your own unforgettable "Month by the Lake."



From www.italylogue.com

Countless tourists flock to Italy and go no further than the historic and art-filled cities of [Rome](#) and [Florence](#). Others swoon their way through [Venice](#), never looking further afield. But thousands more, many of whom couldn't care less about art or history, flood the banks of Italy's lakes each year. And once you've set eyes on the lakes in Italy's northern regions, you may well understand the devotion.

There are several lakes in northern Italy which are, taken together, considered the country's lakes district. A few of the lakes garner more attention than the others, but there are lots of smaller lakes in the area which are also beautiful and may be less crowded - especially in the high season. Take note that if you're planning a trip to Italy's lakes during the busiest summer season, you'll want to be sure to book well in advance. In addition to the American tourists who are catching on to the appeal of the lakes of Italy, the bulk of the tourist influx to this region in the summer comes from Germany and the United Kingdom, so no lake town is left deserted in summer.

Because several of these Italian lakes are easily reachable from cities like [Milan](#) and Venice, they make not only great day-trips for tourists but popular weekend getaways for locals - which means that they're often crowded with as many (or more) Italians as visitors. The climate around the lakes tends to be a bit more moderate than the surrounding regions further from the water, but the winters are still likely to be chilly. The summer months are easily the busiest on any of the lakes in Italy, so if you're looking for a balance of nice weather and not as many tourists, try for either [June](#) or [September](#) - but be sure to still book ahead!

Italy's Lakes

- **Lago di Como, or Lake Como** - [Lake Como](#), possibly Italy's most beloved lake, is home to international celebrities and all kinds of beautiful people. It's shaped more or less like an upside-down "Y," and sits entirely within the Lombardy region. Lake Como towns worth noting are Como, Bellagio, Tremezzo, Menaggio, and Varenna.



- **Lago Maggiore, or Lake Maggiore** - Lago Maggiore is Italy's second-largest lake, and one of its most popular with visitors. The lake stretches from the Ticino canton of Switzerland down into the Piedmont and Lombardy regions of Italy, and runs about 65km long. Some of the towns along the shores of Lake Maggiore which are worth noting are Stresa, Cannobio, Arona, Verbania, and Baveno.
- **Lago di Garda, or Lake Garda** - Lake Garda is the largest lake in Italy, and touches three northern regions: Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, and Lombardy. It's about halfway between Venice and Milan, making it a great day-trip destination from either direction. Notable towns along Lake Garda are Riva del Garda, Garda, Sirmione, Malcesine, and Desenzano del Garda.
- **Lago d'Iseo, or Lake Iseo** - Lake Iseo really takes a back seat to its more popular neighbor lakes, but if you're looking for Italian lake charm without the tourist hordes this is definitely one to consider. This lake is entirely

within Lombardy, and a few of the noteworthy towns along the shores are Iseo, Sarnico, Riva di Solto, Lovere, and Marone.

- **Lago d'Orta, or Lake Orta** - Lake Orta, in the Piedmont region of Italy, is another oft-forgotten Italian lake. It's quite small, but it's not far from Lake Maggiore so it's easy to combine visits to both lakes. Some of the Lake Orta towns worth noting are Orta San Giulio, Omegna, Ameno, and Armeno.
- **Lago di Lugano, or Lake Lugano** - Lake Lugano lies mostly in Switzerland, but it ducks in and out of Italy on both ends. In Italy, the lake lies in the Lombardy region. It gets its name from the primary Swiss town on its banks, but some of the Italian towns on Lake Lugano worth noting are Valsolda, Porlezza, Campione d'Italia, and Brusimpiano.

Lake Como, or *Lago di Como* in Italian, is undoubtedly Italy's most popular lake - and it's held that title since long before the exceptionally hunky [Mr. George Clooney bought his house on the shore of the lake](#). In fact, although there are plenty of people each year who flock to Lake Como in the hopes of getting a glimpse of George (or one of the lake's many other famous residents), the lakeside towns can't blame their overflowing feeling on the local celebrities. Summers on *Lago di Como* have seen congested roads and tourist hordes for decades.

It stands to reason that if so many people are heading for Lake Como, there must be something there worth heading for, right? The answer is a resounding yes. There are lots of reasons *Lago di Como* is incredibly popular, not least being its stunning views and gorgeous water. The towns which dot the lake's shores are picturesque and charming, and each one of them feels like it could be home to any number of the rich and famous set. Summers find these towns brimming with not only overseas visitors but also floods of tourists from northern Europe, particularly Germany and the United Kingdom, while weekends throughout the year tend to be when residents of nearby [Milan](#) take the time to get out of the smog-filled city. In other words, while the winters are certainly slower, there isn't really a time of year when *Lago di Como* is deserted.



Of course, lots of savvy travelers read about the crowds and take that as an invitation to avoid the lake altogether. This is a reasonable reaction, and while the crowds will be big enough for some people to never make the journey to Lake Como, it's really a shame to never lay eyes on it. So if you're one of those people who'd like to take in the natural breath-taking beauty of *Lago di Como* without getting swallowed alive by big bus day-trippers, I've got [some budget hints for you](#) below so that you can still make the trip without needing a trust fund to do it.

Lake Como is easily identified on maps of Italy by its shape. You'll find it in Italy's North, in a part of the Lombardy (Lombardia) region that's known as [Italy's lake district](#), and it looks roughly like an upside-down "Y." It's the third-largest lake in the country, behind Lake Garda and Lake Maggiore, and although it's narrow enough that you can see across it easily it is one of Europe's deepest lakes. *Lago di Como* has glacial origins, and it's known as a pre-Alpine lake because of its location nestled among the pre-Alps.

These are some of the better-known towns on Lake Como:



- **Bellagio** - This beautiful town sits at the intersection of the three branches of Lake Como, and it's a great base from which to explore the lake. Bellagio benefits from the lake's overall temperate climate, so it's nice to visit year-round, although it's decidedly more popular (and way more crowded) in the summer. This isn't a town that has a ton of budget options, especially if you're hoping to sleep in a room overlooking the lake, but if you're willing to stay a bit further from the center of the action you can find good deals. This is the town where George Clooney's villa is, so be on the lookout for star sightings!



- **Como** - The town of Como, from which the lake gets its name, sits at the top of the lower-left arm of the upside-down "Y" of Lake Como. It's the biggest town on the lake, being home to more than 80,000 people - so you can imagine how crowded it can get in the peak of the summer high season! Despite its size, you'll find it to be charming and romantic (especially when it's not so crowded), and because of the plethora of transportation options it's also a good base for seeing the lake and the region. Como is a popular day-trip from Milan, and due to its size you'll find a wider range of accommodation choices than you might in smaller lake towns.



- **Menaggio** - Menaggio is a small town on the western side of Lake Como, in an area which was under Roman rule around 200BCE. Visitors today can see what remains of the medieval city's former walls, but for the most part Menaggio is seen as an incredibly charming lakeside village that serves as the perfect backdrop for romantics and honeymooners. The town's population swells in the summer months, and it's considered a resort town, but it's also a popular destination for budget travelers because the only hostel on Lake Como is in Menaggio.



- **Tremezzo** - Like the other towns on this list, Tremezzo is primarily known as a lakeside resort town. It lies on the western side of Lake Como near Menaggio, and across from Bellagio. Tremezzo has its fair share of lakeside villas, like many of the towns along the lake do, but it's particularly well-known for the gardens which come with those villas. The best-known villa in Tremezzo is Villa Carlotta, which was built in the 17th century and boasts an elaborate and beautiful Italian garden. The villa is now a museum, and visitors can tour both that and the gardens themselves.



- **Varenna** - Set on the eastern side of Lake Como across from Bellagio, the town of Varenna is noted for its more rustic appeal. It's a bit less polished than its upscale neighbors across the lake, but that's part of what makes it special - and just because it's been called "rustic," don't expect this town to be any less beautiful. Varenna is home to several gorgeous lakeside villas, extravagant-looking gardens, and a nice array of restaurants and shops (many of which have lake views). The town's tiny population grows exponentially during the summer, but in the off-season it remains blissfully overlooked by day-trippers who head for Bellagio and Como by the bus load. Do note that because of the geography of the town, most of the accommodation options require a bit of an uphill walk away from the lake - but that means you'll be rewarded with great views in the end.

Now, for those of you who are - like me - unwilling to fork over all of my hard-earned money for one night in a luxury lakeside villa, but who don't want to forgo the pleasure of visiting the lake, there are a few things you'll want to think about.



1. Consider doing the lake as a day trip instead of an overnight venture. This does mean that you're giving up on the kind of early-morning or late-evening peace and quiet that generally comes to towns that are popular with day-trippers, but it also means that you don't have to even look at the high prices the hotels in those towns charge. And if you're staying in another city within a reasonable distance - say, Milan - for any length of time, you can even make a couple day trips out to explore different shores of the lake and different kinds of towns.
2. Planning your Lake Como trip for the slower season can save you a bundle, especially in the most popular lakeside towns. Yes, they're going to be relatively busy all year long, but Bellagio in January is going to cost far less than Bellagio in August. And if you stay in one of the lesser-known lakeside towns instead, you can save even more in the slow season. The good news is that because the lake's weather remains pretty moderate year-round, you're not likely to be subjected to biting winds and torrential rain if you're visiting in the winter. It'll obviously be chillier than in the summer, but it's unlikely to be downright miserable the whole time.
3. Just as visiting in the slow season can save you money, avoiding the most popular towns can, too - and that's going to be true almost any time of the year. Instead of setting up camp in Como or Bellagio, find a quieter and smaller town on the other side of the lake and see if you can't get a better deal on a room. No matter where you stay, you can always visit the bigger and more touristy towns because they're all relatively close by - but this way you'll avoid paying through the nose just to say you're in a hotel in Como.
4. Choosing a hotel that's not right on the lake can usually save you quite a bit, as it's the lake view that those lakefront properties are charging an arm and a leg for. Most of the towns on Lake Como have a central area that's just a short walk from the lake itself, so you'd still have easy access to all the perks of the beautiful scenery - you just might not have them right outside your hotel room window. But unless you're planning to spend the bulk of your vacation in your room, the view from the balcony probably isn't worth what they're charging for it.

ITALY'S ROMANTIC LAGO DI COMO

The mid-lake towns are ideal spots to explore Italy's most beautiful lake

The view from our flower-adorned terrace is dazzling with the distant Alps softly silhouetted against the morning sky. A romantic lake promenade skirting the shore clings to the cliff below the steep-stepped streets. Colorful rooftops, vividly painted walls of ochre, sienna and yellow, and small sailboats in the deep-blue harbor create a perfect picture.



Our tour of the Italian Alps has taken us to one of the most scenic spots in all of Italy, Lake Como. Virgil once called it the "greatest lake." Just 25 miles north of Milan, charming towns ring its shores with elegant 16th to 19th century villas. Ferries carry passengers across its shimmering waters from town to town, while lovers steal kisses in the shadows. This is one of the most romantic places in Italy.

Varenna

The small mid-lake fishing village of Varenna with its 800 permanent residents is home base for our Lake Como explorations. My husband, Les, and I are staying at the Albergo Milano, an eight-room hotel that sits above the lake and soaks in its grandeur. Special touches of lace curtains, and a balcony overlooking the harbor makes our room inviting. This morning we are taking our breakfast of sweet pastries on the sun-drenched terrace. As we sip hot coffee, Amelia, the proprietor, converses with us in her broad smile and flowing Italian. Though she speaks no English, we understand she enjoys her clients and this beautiful spot she calls home.



A trek into town turns into a breath-defying experience as Les and I climb precipitous steps that stretch uphill. At the top of a trail we stumble upon the crumbling Castle of Vezio. Here Theodolinda, Queen of the Lombards, is said to have died in the 7th century. Below, the small town square is dominated by a 10th century Romanesque church, and a few street cafes that dot the tree-lined streets. Before descending, we savor the panoramic view of the Alps, and Menaggio and Bellagio, two neighboring towns on the lake. The two of us wander the town and discover the Villa Monastera, an elegant villa (now science center) where physicist, Enrico Fermi studied. Nearby, lies the Villa Cipressi. Its lush gardens are inviting, so we pay a small fee and explore the spectacular perfumed pathways, rich with foliage, that cascade to the shore.

It's time to catch the ferry, so we hurry along the lake promenade towards the harbor. Our destination is Menaggio, directly across the lake, for a bit of sightseeing.

Menaggio



On the middle west bank of Lake Como, Menaggio is larger than Varenna and home to many residents who commute daily to Lugano, Switzerland, just eight miles away. The ferry dock right outside town is crowded with sightseers waiting to board. We stop in a small store to buy our lunch and begin the short walk into town. Stretched out alongside the lake, a beautiful, flowered promenade runs the length of the village. Benches are filled with lovers and other tourists who drink in the view. Les and I stop to absorb the atmosphere and eat our picnic. This is the true ambiance of Italy.

Menaggio has a few piazzas spread throughout the town. In one we discover "loaner" bikes which we are able to borrow for an hour. What a great way to see the sights! Peddling up one hill, we pass by multicolored shops and trattorias, then whizzing downhill, they go by in blinding brilliance.

The "Pearl of the Lake," Bellagio

Our next ferry stop is Bellagio, the most famous Lake Como resort. Bellagio lies at the tip of the headland that splits Como's two branches (the west branch toward the town of Como, and the east branch toward Lecco). One of the "prettiest towns in Europe," it is home to the rich and famous. Royal visitors, like King Leopold I of Belgium, once owned the 18th century Villa Guilia. Other Lombard aristocrats of that century built their villas in grand style. Villa Melzi was home for Duke Francesco Melzi d'Eril, then vice-president of the Italian republic founded by Napoleon. The Villa Serbelloni, once belonged to Pliny the Elder. Today, it is the property of the Rockefeller Foundation, and used as a study and conference center.



Like its neighboring towns of Varenna and Menaggio, a colorful promenade with flowering trees, quaint outdoor cafes that serve cappuccinos and gelato, and elegant restaurants, hug the shoreline. There are boutiques galore huddled along the narrow steps that march up the hill. Elegantly dressed patrons purchase Italy's famous silk, pottery, and leather goods. Window boxes of red geraniums and fragrant bougainvillea decorate the cobblestone streets. Arcaded buildings with flowing draperies (to shade the shoppers), palm trees, and balmy weather give Bellagio a Mediterranean feel.



Near the ferry dock we find a unique wine cellar run by Tony, fondly called "the wine king." Tony insists that you taste every variety of his wines. We met tipsy tourists and locals who had been sampling his liquors for hours. After sipping a few reds, we settled on a mellow Montepulciano, and we're on our way to the "the point that divides the wind."

Photo courtesy:
Tony's Wine Cave

La Punta Spartivento is land's end for Lake Como's central headland. There, a park filled with linden trees and park benches overlooks the grand waterway. Gazing northward, past Menaggio and Varenna, the Swiss Alps touch the waters at the end of the lake. Les and I find a spot near the breakwater and dine alfresco with the gulls and pigeons. Tony's vino is a fine addition to our focaccia, cheese, salami, and fruit. We relish our meal and remark, "This is what Italy is all about."



Our mile walk back to the ferry is pleasant as we pass Renaissance-styled villas and enjoy the sounds of chirping swallows. Before departing on the afternoon ferry, we stroll through the manicured gardens of the Villa Melzi with its many sculptures and magnificent view across the lake to the mountain Crocione.

A short ferry ride brings us back to picturesque Varenna. As the sun sets, we find ourselves at Nilus Bar near the small harbor. Its lakeside tables are perfect to enjoy our dinner of crepes and salad, drink in the landscape, and sip another rich glass of Italian wine. Our Lake Como getaway has been postcard perfect.

Top 10 Things to Do in Milan (According to Jessica)



1.

[Survey the City from the Duomo Roof](#)

This one is kind of a no-brainer, because the famous [Duomo in Milan](#) is *the* center of tourist activity in the city. But while a visit to the interior is easy and free, not everyone knows that you can take an elevator up and walk around on the cathedral's roof. Now, Milan is notoriously smoggy, so even on a clear day you're not guaranteed a good view of the nearby mountains, but in my opinion there's almost no better way to spend an hour in Milan (especially if you're really limited for time) than by wandering around on top of the Duomo. If you think all those spires look impressive from the ground, you'll be thrilled to walk around with them within reach. And it's only by walking up the last couple flights of stairs to the tippy-top that you can get an up-close (well, up-closer) look at the city's symbol - the golden *Madoninna*, or little Madonna, who sits atop the Duomo's tallest spire.



2.

[Spend 15 Minutes with da Vinci's Last Supper](#)

Another entry that's perhaps obvious to anyone who's making a special trip to Milan just to see Leonardo's masterpiece, a visit to the Santa Maria delle Grazie church to see "The Last Supper" is definitely a must as far as I'm concerned. The problem is that getting tickets to see the famous fresco can be incredibly difficult - they strictly limit the number of people in the room at any one time, which limits the number of tickets they can sell each day... You can see where this is going. During the high season, [tickets to "The Last Supper"](#) can be sold out months in advance, and that's also not unheard of during the low season, either. If this is on your must-see list, you'll want to plan well ahead. Luckily, you can book tickets online - and, in some cases, you can also join a walking tour of the city, many of which include this as a stop.



3. **Spin on the Bull's Balls**

In the center of what I think is the world's prettiest mall is a tile image of a prancing bull who, if you look closely, is missing his private parts. They're missing because in their place is a rather pronounced hole. What gives, you ask? Well, the tile floor at the center of the gorgeous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II bears the insignia of four prominent northern Italian cities. The bull represents nearby Turin, and for some reason the tradition developed that spinning on the bull's balls would give the spinner good luck. The practice persists to this day, and you can't walk through the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II without stopping for a spin. This Milanese tradition isn't just for tourists, either. In fact, if you stop and watch passers by for awhile, you'll notice people who do a twirl on the poor bull's balls while in mid-conversation, then just keep walking and talking to their companions. And the fact that the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II is right next to the Duomo means it's easy to swing through and do the twist even on a tight schedule. (Scroll to the bottom of this post for a short video of some people doing a twirl on the bull.)



4. **[Visit the Museum at La Scala](#)**

I like opera, and I'd love to see an opera at this world-famous theatre someday, but tickets can be really hard to come by. So instead of trying to squeeze two hard-to-get tickets into one top 10 list, I'm cheating a bit with this one - because a visit to La Scala's Museum comes with a peek inside the theatre. Near the end of the self-guided museum tour (the museum's okay, but nothing to write home about - unless you're a major opera fan, in which case you're going to want to see a performance, not just the museum), so long as there isn't a performance or practice going on, you'll be able to walk into one of the beautiful theatre boxes and look out over the stage. You can pretend for a moment that you're one of the Milan elite, fanning yourself as you listen to some splendid aria, peering at the singers through your ornately decorated opera glasses. And all this without paying the high price of an opera ticket!



5.

[Window Shop in the Quadrilatero d'Oro](#)

Milan is the fashion capital of Italy, so it shouldn't be surprising that there is some great shopping to be done in this city. The problem for us mere mortals is that the best shopping is the kind we can't afford to do. But for me, watching the beautiful people parade up and down the streets of the Quadrilatero d'Oro carrying their purchases in pretty bags overflowing with tissue paper is an interesting enough pastime. And even if you'd feel out of place walking into the fashion boutiques in your travel duds, you'll be perfectly comfortable strolling down the sidewalk and checking out the elaborate window displays at places like Prada, Armani, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, Ferragamo, and Valentino. And if you just can't stand the idea of visiting Milan and coming home empty-handed, then consider seeking out [one of the city's many fashion outlets](#). They're harder to find, but there are incredible deals to be had.



6.

[Cheer on the Home Team at San Siro](#)

Milan is blessed with two soccer teams based in the city - [AC Milan](#) and [Inter](#). Being an AC Milan fan, I am, of course, inclined to tell you to make it a point to see one of *their* games instead of rivals Inter. But really, from a tour guide's point of view, simply [seeing an Italian soccer game](#) in one of the world's most well-known stadiums is good enough. And because there are two teams based in Milan, that means that during the soccer season you stand an even better chance that one of them will be playing a home game, making this must-do item easier to check off your list. San Siro, the stadium AC Milan and Inter share, is the largest in Italy and is a fantastic place to do some people-watching in addition to sport-watching. You can figure out who's got a home game by [learning to read the Italian soccer schedules](#), and find out some [travel information for San Siro](#) as well - and if there isn't a game going on when you're in Milan, you can always [tour the San Siro Museum](#) instead!



7.

Get Cultured at the Pinacoteca di Brera

Yes, this busy business-centric city has a world-class art museum, too - it is in Italy, after all. The lovely Pinacoteca di Brera isn't huge, but it's got a truly impressive collection of primarily Italian paintings. You'll find masterpieces (meaning paintings you'll probably recognize from any art history classes you didn't totally sleep through) by Caravaggio, Raphael, Mantegna, Hayez, Rembrandt, and Tintoretto. And after you've taken your tour of the artwork, you can enjoy what is perhaps my favorite neighborhood in the city right outside the doors. The Pinacoteca di Brera has the good fortune of being in the [Brera neighborhood](#), which is full of picturesque streets lined with cute shops and corner restaurants. You'll have every reason to slow your pace to a stroll here as you do a little more window shopping (though in this part of the city you might actually be able to afford a trinket or two) and stop for a leisurely coffee or lunch in one of the streetside cafes. When you've spent an afternoon gazing at famous art and soaking in the Brera atmosphere, you just might fall in love with Milan. I know I did.



8.

Escape the City in Milan's Parks

There's no getting around the fact that Milan is a busy place, not at all the charming medieval Italian city that you pictured when you were reading "Under the Tuscan Sun." But even if you like Milan from the start, chances are good you're going to want a break from all the traffic and noise at some point - heck, the Milanese do, why should you be any different? Luckily, there are a couple of good-sized parks in the city center where you can surround yourself with something other than concrete for a bit. Now, we're not talking about green spaces on the scale of Central Park in New York where you'll forget you're in a big city - you may still hear traffic and other city noises from the parks in Milan - but at least you'll have some beautiful scenery around you. The easiest park for most tourists to take advantage of is Parco Sempione, which sprawls around and behind the imposing Castello Sforzesco (there are lots of museums inside the castle now, so it's a popular stop anyway), but there's also the Giardini Pubblici to the northeast of the historic city center beyond the Quadrilatero d'Oro.



9.

[Eat a Panzerotto from Luini](#)

Many Italian cities are known for a particular culinary treat, and Milan is no different - but I'll still take a stop at Luini for a panzerotto (Milanese fast food) over a traditional *osso buco* any day. This hard-to-describe treat is a favorite with locals, who line up outside the shop year-round, although its origins are much further south. You might be tempted to call it a calzone, but it's not. After tasting it, you might be tempted to call it a donut. But it's not that, either. It's essentially a slightly sweet and spongy piece of flat bread that's had a nice layer of mozzarella and tomato sauce slathered on it before being folded in half and deep fried. (Hey, I never said this was *health* food.) There's nowhere to sit at Luini, so a panzerotto is the perfect food when you're on the go. And, at roughly €3 apiece, it's an ideal lunch for the budget-conscious traveler, too.



10.

[Discover Milan's Canals in the Navigli](#)

Canals? In Milan? Yes, you're reading that right. In fact, not only are there canals in Milan, one of them was designed by none other than Leonardo da Vinci himself. Now, I don't advise you to be dreaming of the kinds of canals which Venice or even Amsterdam is famous for, because you'll be seriously disappointed. The Navigli district of Milan has two - count 'em, two - canals, and you can walk around much of the district without even seeing them. But in the summer months you can take boat tours on the canals, and they're certainly an unexpected thing to come upon in the middle of such a concrete-filled city. The Navigli has long been one of the areas of Milan that's less-than-beautiful, but in the last few years it's become much more of a haven for artists (low rents tend to draw the artists and writers) so these days you can expect to find cute shops, small art galleries, and charming restaurants. This is also one neighborhood that's well-known for its nightlife, so if it seems too quiet during daylight hours just come back after dark.