

Como lake and its towns

Lake Como may be renowned as a playboy playground and favorite of George Clooney, but it makes for a surprisingly affordable family holiday, says regular visitor and journalist Sam Delaney.

Lake Como is so beautiful, so peaceful, so crammed full of great restaurants and swanky hotels, you could be fooled into thinking it's the exclusive preserve of holidaying oligarchs and film stars (George Clooney owns a place there). But on numerous trips to visit relatives in the area, I've found it to be an affordable and fun place to take the family. There are loads of budget flights to Milan and from there the lake is just a 90-minute drive. Plus, as long as you know the right places to go (and the right ones to avoid) you don't need a Clooney-sized budget to enjoy a week of amazing scenery, perfect food and all-round lakeside frolicking.



Best day trip

A ferry around the heart of Lake Como (between the key towns of Bellagio, Varenna, Menaggio and Cadenabbia) is a must. The most popular of the stops remains Bellagio, but it can be a bit overrun these days: in the evenings, the quay resounds with the noise of local musicians performing corny cover versions outside average restaurants. Meanwhile, American tourists cram the streets in futile search of a glimpse of the aforementioned Clooney. But if you climb the steep, cobbled steps that lead up from the lake towards the main

shopping streets, you will find the more agreeable environment of Ristorante Bilacus. It's a family-run restaurant serving local dishes and has a gorgeous, secluded terrace, enshrined with flowers. After lunch, take a stroll through the pretty gardens of Villa Melzi.

Best place to stay

Forget the pricey lakeside villas with pools: you won't find a better spot to sip an aperitivo and watch the sun set than on the terrace at Cioccolato, one of four beautiful apartments within the Borgo Montenero building in the cobbled streets of Bonzanigo. Each of the modestly priced homes boasts a spectacular view of the lake and a pleasingly modern, comfortable interior. Amid the ancient setting, Wi-Fi and flat screens may seem incongruous but are nevertheless welcome. The company you book it through, Bella Como, is run by two charming English expats, who know the area inside out and are happy to serve as free-of-charge concierges.

Best beach

The term "artificial beach" might sound a bit Las Vegas, but Lido de Leno's sandy oasis couldn't be more elegant. Five euros gain you entrance to this isolated little spot, where a smattering of locals wile away the days lounging under gazebos, dangling their feet in the warm lake waters and having inexpensive drinks and snacks served to them by the pair of friendly waiters. Kids love it in the daytime; after dark it transforms into the area's hippest outdoor bar.



Best boat ride

There are all sorts of overpriced boat hire companies preying on tourists around the lake. Many of them involve a surly driver giving you a quick zip round the water for the price of a six-course meal. But head for Lido de Lenno and ask for Igor, who will hire you his easy-to-use speedboat. After a one-minute driving lesson, you and up to four friends are your own bosses out on the water, free to go wherever you choose. Five

minutes round the corner you'll find the magnificent Villa Balbianello, where Casino Royale was filmed.

Best assassination site

Benito Mussolini and his mistress Claretta Petacci were on their way to a safe haven in Switzerland in 1945 when they were captured beside Lake Como. They were kept in a villa in Mezzegra for the night before being shot dead by partisans outside the gates of Villa Belmonte on Via XXIV Maggio. Today, macabre tourists have their photo taken beside the commemorative cross that sits outside the building. Persuade the owner to let you have a peek inside: Il Duce's room is said to have been preserved just the way he left it on his last morning.

Best olive oil

They've been producing olive oil in Lenno since 1850, using traditional cold-pressing methods, and chefs far beyond Lombardia send for bottles of this stuff to drizzle on their salads (Jamie Oliver is a fan). Every grocer in the region stocks Vanini oil, but why not go straight to where they make it, amid beautiful scenery, and pick up a bottle on the cheap? They might even let you take a sip from the precious, extra-tasty first pressing, straight from the stone mill.

Best pizza

Pizzeria Balognett, a modest neighbourhood pizzeria among the residential streets of Tremezzo, is a hidden gem. It's a tiny place staffed by one manager and one pizza chef, with a few plastic chairs and tables sat on the pretty lawn out front. But the inexpensive pizza, with garlicky toppings and crust so thin it's hardly there, is some of the best you'll taste anywhere. They do takeaway, too.



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Best fish

You'll find the lake's indigenous perch cropping up in risottos and pastas at most decent local restaurants. Le Specialita Lariane is where the fisherman deliver it fresh from the lake, ready to be smoked before your very eyes. Take some back to your apartment to cook on the barbecue. The local primary schools run yearly day-trips here; to Italian kids, this kind of thing trumps Alton Towers any day.

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