



Far from the madding crowd

Hidden away in the foothills of the Italian Alps, Lake Iseo has all the beauty of nearby Como, but not so much of the glitz and bustle

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PHOTOS **ALBERTO BERNASCONI**



ROMANO BELLINI (LEFT) rents out Riva motor launches, “the Ferrari of the Seas”

To travel in the 1950s and '60s was to travel in style. This, after all, was when the jet-setting adventures of James Bond introduced us to places we'd never heard of; when paparazzi pursued Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton around handsome Portofino; when Brigitte Bardot idled about on Riva motorboats off the Côte d'Azur. Fast forward 50-odd years and you'll find me, sipping sparkling wine in the middle of a glittering lake. I've even got the oversized shades and blond hair like Brigitte. What I don't have is an Hermès scarf neatly wrapped around my head, leaving strands of hair to whip me painfully on the forehead. Luckily, any onlookers will be too busy ogling my ride to take any notice of my pained expression. That's because I'm sitting in a 1962 Riva Aquarama, whose gleaming mahogany hull and cream leather seats have earned it the

nickname “the Ferrari of the Seas”. And while you might associate such a boat with the French Riviera or glitzy Lake Como, I'm actually on Lake Iseo, a smaller, quieter lake at the foot of the Alps in Lombardy, Northern Italy, a 45-minute drive from Bergamo. It's also where the Riva brand was born.

Battista Bellini, my boat's affable skipper, provides a little background as he edges out of the quay in Clusane, a traditional fishing village on Iseo's southern shore. In the 1840s a young shipbuilder named Pietro Riva, who'd started out repairing local fishing vessels, founded a boatbuilding business and named it after himself. By the 1950s, Riva had become a byword for classic Italian style. The Aquarama I'm in now belongs to the Bellini family, who have been restoring classic Riva powerboats for the past 30 years. At Bellini Nautica, you can rent one of their fleet and feel like a film star – at least for three hours. “Listen to that roar,” Bellini says, hitting the throttle. “Riva wanted to emulate the sound of a Cadillac, and you can really hear it, can't you?”

Bellini Nautica (bellininautica.it/en) is one of only three places on the lake that rents out these famous vessels, so you don't see as many of them as you might on Lake Garda or Lake Como. But then this sums up the vibe of Lake Iseo, which has all the beauty of these other destinations, but with a more low-key ambience.

If you haven't heard of Iseo, you're not alone. Flanked by mountains and fringed with orchards and olive groves, this S-shaped, blue-green lake is so off-the-radar that my Italian neighbour in London looked baffled when I told him about it. (That may have been due to my pronunciation: It's →



“isayo” for future reference.) A 45-minute drive from Bergamo, Iseo tends to attract Italian tourists, though a smattering of in-the-know foreigners come to hike its secluded forests, cycle through its vineyards and dine at its traditional restaurants.

“In Como you get all the celebrities, crowds and paparazzi,” says Silke Ferrari, the German-born co-owner of excursion company Sailing Iseo Lake (sailingiseolake.it), who moved here a few years ago from nearby Lake Garda. “Iseo is much less chaotic.” She gestures at a cluster of pastel-coloured houses from the deck of a beautifully restored Venetian sailing boat. “Here, you have a chance to experience the traditional Italian way of life,” she says. “You can visit villages in the slow way.”

It is warm on the lake, despite the mist lingering over the surface. Other than rippling sails and lapping water, the only sound is the squeaky yap of a reed warbler, one of 50-odd bird species that nest in the area. As we near Monte Isola, the island that rises from the centre of the lake, I can just make out the russet rooftops of the village, its tightly packed houses clinging to the hillside.



TRADITIONAL BOATBUILDERS

(above) can still be found working the old fashioned way on Monte Isola (top), the island in the middle of Lake Iseo



“On Iseo you have a chance to experience the traditional Italian way of life”

With a population of 1,800, Monte Isola is the largest inhabited lake island in Europe. Despite its proximity to the mainland – it’s just a three-minute ferry ride from Sulzano – life here is very quiet and simple. Cars are prohibited (people get about by zipping around on scooters). Locals gather together outside crumbling ochre buildings sipping endless espressos and catching up on the gossip. “I don’t think things have changed here in over 100 years,” says Ferrari.

In fact, some things have changed. As recently as 50 years ago, most of the men on

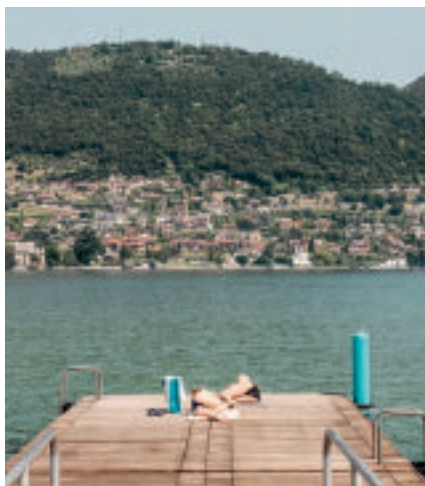
the island were fishermen. That may no longer be the case, but the industry has left its mark. The island is famous for its fishing nets, which for centuries were handwoven by local women. These days, humming machines knit towering piles of nylon strands together. The local company La Rete, meanwhile, has branched out into hammocks and football goal nets. The company supplied nets for the World Cup in 2002, and still makes nets for most of the teams in Italy’s Serie A.

There are a few boatbuilders on the island, too, the most prominent of which is shipyard →

“I don’t think life has changed here in over 100 years”

Archetti Ercole, active since 1450. Strolling along the shore, we stop to watch a craftsman sand down hunks of wood, then follow the aroma of grilled fish to the waterside Locanda Al Lago (locandaallago.it). I order sardines and polenta, followed by char and gazpacho. Lake Iseo’s “sardines” are actually a type of freshwater shad, called *sardina* in Italian because of their shape. I learn that they’re salted and dried for 35 days, then covered in olive oil for four months. The result is mouth-puckeringly salty – definitely not a good look when you’re trying to channel Brigitte Bardot.

I wash it down with an Aperol spritz back at my hotel, Rivalago (rivalago.it) in Sulzano, the low sun lighting up Monte Isola. I think of Bardot’s famous definition of a photograph – “an instant of life captured for eternity” – then pull out my phone to take a picture of the island. Times change, even here. →



A SLOWER, QUIETER PACE

of life is found on Monte Isola. Cars are prohibited, so scooters are the vehicle of choice (above). Boats are a way of life in Clusane, on Iseo’s southern shore (below)

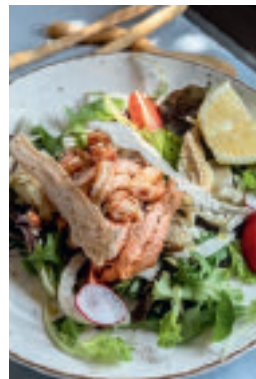




It's early morning and I'm in the kitchen of Trattoria Al Porto (alportoclusane.it), across from the marina in Clusane. The striking stone restaurant has been here for over 150 years, making it the oldest in town. I'm about to make *tinca al forno con polenta* according to a 200-year-old recipe, overseen by Gabriella Bosio, whose family has been running Al Porto for six generations. But before we can start, we need to find our star ingredient.

Three doors down from Al Porto, on a narrow cobbled street, we find stacks of containers brimming with perch, eel and carp, brought here by local fishermen. Soon we see what we are looking for: a small pile of grey-green *tinca* (tench). This is the lake's signature white fish. We buy the lot and head back to the kitchen.

"First, we prepare the spices," Bosio says, setting down jars of cinnamon, cloves and black pepper. To these we add parmesan, nuts and fresh parsley. "We cook with tench because it's the most plentiful fish in the lake," she says, coating fish slices with breadcrumbs and throwing on chunks of butter. "Lake fish isn't like sea fish. Fish from the sea is →



GABRIELLA BOSIO

(above) sources seafood from local fishermen, before turning it into beautifully presented, delicious dishes (left) at Trattoria Al Porto

"Here, you can experience life in a slow way"

“Other than the wind and the water, the only sound is the squeaky yap of a reed warbler”

already seasoned. Tench and carp need more consideration and more robust flavours.” We cook it for two hours on a low heat, with me eyeing the clock until I can eat.

At noon on the dot, locals pour into Al Porto’s sunny dining room. I follow suit, receiving a plate heaped with fish paté on wafer-thin toast and vinegary whitebait. Then the tinca arrives, sizzling in a terracotta dish. Oozing butter and melted cheese, it’s rich and meaty. Bosio recommends an accompanying glass of sparkling wine from Franciacorta, a blossoming wine region south of Clusane.

Wine has been made here since the 13th century, but the bubbles are a new addition – Franciacorta’s sparkling wines were first bottled in the 1960s. Wine from the region has now been granted protected status, and in the last few years visitors to the region have started to take notice.

After lunch, I take an e-bike tour of Franciacorta, pedalling through a scenic wetland reserve to get to the area’s 100-plus vineyards. My first stop is Barone Pizzini (baronepizzini.it/en), one of the oldest wineries in the region. It was the first among its neighbours to create organic wines (overall, 70% of the region’s wines are now organic), and in 2012 its Franciacorta Rosé was named the world’s best organic wine. Further south I find



Ca’ del Bosco (cadelbosco.com), a design-led winery whose grounds are scattered with bold contemporary sculptures (a suspended rhino, a pack of periwinkle wolves). The wine, though, is made in the traditional way – grapes are hand-harvested each August and the wine is double fermented, like Champagne.

I cycle away through rolling hills, their slopes sprinkled with wild flowers, birdsong filtering through the trees. Earlier, I’d been told that Ca’ del Bosco is a favourite of George and Amal Clooney, who have a villa on nearby Lake Como, which is the kind of thing that would normally have me on high alert, primed for a celebrity sighting. Right now, though, there are other things to look at.

✈ Wizz Air flies to Milan Bergamo and Milan Malpensa

CA’ DEL BOSCO (ABOVE) DOTS modern art throughout its winery and vineyards. The equipment may also be modern, but its winemaking methods and philosophy are strictly traditional

THE WRITER RENTED A CAR WITH AVIS FROM MILAN BERGAMO AIRPORT, AVIS.COM