Stairways lead down through Villa Passalacqua's ornate gardens to Lake Como

STILL WATERS RUN CHIC

Its cachet may date back to the days of Bellini and Manzoni, but in 2019 Lake Como – abuzz with haute hotel openings and sleek new restaurants – still has it. **Mary Lussiana** drives, dines and gets a couple of first looks

The romantic charms of Lake Como stretch back across the centuries, immortalised in watercolour by JMW Turner, in film by Visconti and in work by Alessandro Manzoni. Rossini composed *Tancredi* on one side of its shores; Bellini, his two-act opera *La Sonnambula* on the other side. Franz Liszt retreated here away from the attention of his ardent fans, writing home: "I do not know of any place which is more demonstrably blessed by heaven."

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At first glance, little has changed here on what the Italians call *un uomo* – referring to the lake's upside-down Y shape. The blue waters are still embraced dramatically by steep, densely green mountains; mellow-stoned bell towers still ring out the hour from their tiny lakeside towns; and stately villas framed by slender cypress trees continue to flaunt their beauty to passing Rivas. But through that timeless, nonchalant glamour that Italy does so inimitably a new pulse is beating. The city of Como itself now has its first five-star hotel; along the lake, a couple of clean-lined, contemporary hotels have swung open their doors, offering a more 21st-century choice for the increasingly present millennials at the other end of the spectrum from those who celebrate the local grandes dames, Villa d'Este and Grand Hotel Tremezzo. Villas, once staging posts on the Grand Tour, have been dusted down and opened up to filmmakers or, as last summer with Dolce & Gabbana, stage sets for opulent haute-couture shows. A masterpiece of national heritage, the 18th-century Villa Passalacqua (gardens pictured above; villa overleaf) is back in Italian hands – and available to stay in. And April saw the arrival of the first international five-star hotel chain when Mandarin Oriental took up residence in Villa Roccabruna (pictured overleaf), surrounded by a garden lush with camellias and magnolias.

New life has also been breathed into the culinary offering along the lake's shores. While the utterly moreish lemon ravioli at tiny, decades-old Locanda La Tirlindana in charming Sala Comacina is not to be missed, young chefs such as Federico Beretta and Davide Caranchini are now

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pushing boundaries that have remained rooted for generations, reimagining Comasco cuisine for a more demanding and sophisticated audience.

All of this is happening, appropriately, where the *uomo* has put his best leg forward, stretching it almost to the Swiss border. His toes are in Como, while Tremezzo and Bellagio mark, one on each side, where his legs meet his trunk. The outer – or left, as you look at it – bank is called the "gold coast", as it is sunshine-soaked for most of the day; the inner – or right – bank has shade but also the benefit of being the best place to watch the sunset, ideally with aperitivo in hand. This stretch of coast was once accessible only by boat, but a winding road has been cut into the mountainside; from there, steep steps bring you down to the water's edge – or, if you stay at Villa Làrio (pictured overleaf), dramatically via funicular lift. A perfect example of Como's new minimalist chic, Villa Làrio was created from a long-abandoned property comprised of several 20th-century buildings carved into the cliffs above the main 19th-century house. The former have been painstakingly restored by local designer Pietro Castagna. The hotel offers just nine suites; the six in the main building are serenely white-on-white, with matchboard ceilings and arched windows looking across the lake to the jumble of coloured façades tucked under the mountainside at Laglio. Three more lie in the gardens beyond the sleek, infinity-edged pool. Down stone steps overhung with purple wisteria, across the lawn dotted with ancient cedars, is the original family house, built in 1893, with stone pillars fronting the classical façade. This is the next project, with restoration planned and 10 rooms, including a tower suite, due to open in 2021.

That will give it one more than the 18 suites and rooms Vista Palazzo (pictured below right) opened with last year. Como's first truly exclusive hotel was worth the wait. Originally the Palazzo Venezia, it was built in 1870, its ochre, neo-gothic façade complete with stone balconies and single- and triple-lancet windows bringing Venetian elegance to the corner of the square on which it stands. Once the headquarters of a silk company – an industry Como still thrives on today – it makes a perfect base for exploring the region, with Como's impressive duomo just to its left and the lake to its right. The rooms offer the ultimate luxury of space, with oval tubs positioned in the bathrooms under long windows for lakeside views and basins set in green or dark-grey marble. Sheets are made of exquisite linen from Rivolta Carmignani, the wood is walnut, and rich textiles from Dedar add hits of deep green and peacock blue. But it is the staff who embody the five-star quality of this hotel; they could have originated the adage: "The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer". And while Vista Palazzo doesn't have

It is the staff at Vista Palazzo who embody the hotel's five-star quality

the grandeur of some of its lakeside neighbours, it has the warmth and personal service that 18 rooms allow. Helicopter transfers from the airport, sunset cocktails on a private Riva and even a "made-to-measure" line of emerald and diamond jewellery are there for the asking.

It is worth dallying a day or two in Como, for it is here, in Alessandro Volta's hometown (*Life Electric*, an avant-garde homage to the inventor of the battery by Daniel Libeskind, now stands in the harbour), that some interesting restaurants have opened. Feel Como is set in an old stone barn once inhabited by goats and specialises in honest but exquisite plates – fish from the lakes and rivers, meat and dairy from the mountain farms, wild herbs and plants from the surrounding fields. In a seriously interesting and confident menu, chef Federico Beretta begins with soured ricotta ravioli sprinkled with bottarga, candied lemon and a drop or two of pureed nettles and ends with a smoked milk pannacotta (they cold-smoke the milk themselves using pinewood from the mountains), delivering a real taste of the terroir. Nearby, The Market Place has just moved into an industrial chic space with an open kitchen. Here, Davide Maci serves international fare – think scallops with caviar and daikon – with great aplomb. As you head out of town along the lake towards Cernobbio, there is the ideal lunch stop in the form of Kitchen. Owned by the De Santis family (of the venerable Grand Hotel Tremezzo), it brings all of Italy to the table with the help of chef Andrea Casali, including succulent prawns from Sicily's Mazara del Vallo in an excellent tartare, while pastry chef Pietro Marco Cherici wins the prize for prettiest puddings with his passionfruit mousse with white chocolate and yuzu, topped by a mint sorbet. And just near Cernobbio's Villa Erba, once Visconti's summer residence, is Materia Restaurant. Winner of a 2019 Michelin star, chef Davide Caranchini, who worked at Noma, aims to shake up conservative Como with his dishes of wood pigeon cooked in salt and cocoa-nib crust, bay leaf and red fruits, or deliciously textured pickled-red-cabbage salad with smoked marrow, caviar and bitter-almond milk. "If Copenhagen, why not Como?" he says of his ambition to put the lake on the culinary map.

Food is a good reason to visit Villa d'Este, but there are plenty of others too. Originally the summer residence of Cardinal Tolomeo Gallio, it became a hotel in 1873 and has long been famed as a haunt for actors and aristocracy alike. This season sees the opening of its 19th-century Villa Cima, which lies in the gardens, showcasing a makeover courtesy of Loro Piana, whose lush textiles in deep reds

Clockwise from top:
the dining room at Villa Passalacqua with frescoed ceilings by neoclassical artist Andrea Appiani. The Library at Vista Palazzo. Mandarin Oriental's Villa Roccabruna was once owned by opera singer Giuditta Pasta

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From top: the infinity pool at Villa Làrio; a funicular lift provides access to the lake. Villa Sola Cabiati, part of Grand Hotel Tremezzo, has six suites and trompe-l'oeil ceilings

and sea greens clad the headboards, trim the cashmere throws and carpet the wooden floors.

But it is another villa that is the biggest news this year. After more than 100 years out of Italian hands, 18th-century Villa Passalacqua, a national monument, was bought at auction last October by the De Santis family. One of the largest properties on Lake Como, its simple, symmetrical façade, designed by Swiss architect Felice Soave, belies dazzlingly elaborate interiors – frescoed ceilings by neoclassical artist Andrea Appiani, walls with ornate, gilded stucco work, and painted panels by Giocondo Albertolli. Light-filled and feather-light in feel, the nine-suite villa looks onto gardens considered to be some of the most beautiful on the lake. Twelve terraces run down to the water's edge in classic Italian style, with fountains and stairways, olive trees, cypresses and camellias. It has already written itself into the history books courtesy of its most famous resident, Vincenzo Bellini, who lived there from 1829 until 1833, during which time he composed *Sonnambula* and *Norma* for the soprano Giuditta Pasta (inspired, the story goes, by her voice floating across the lake from the opposite bank, where she lived at Villa Roccabruna – on which more shortly). Opened in time for *How To Spend It* to be first in, a sprinkling of new beds and silk curtains was enough for it to be ready for this season, with a more in-depth refurbishment planned for next year.

It is the second of two magnificent villas that form part of the Grand Hotel Tremezzo, the first being Villa Sola Cabiati (pictured above) a little further up the lake, which reopened two years ago. The original 16th-century structure had two wings added in the late 18th century by then-owner Gian Galeazzo Serbelloni, creating the six suites available today. The shutters were painted deep blue in homage to the lake, and a formal garden, divided into four elegant parterres, was designed. The interiors – with extraordinarily intricate stuccowork by Muzio Canzio and frescoes by Francesco Conegliani, a pupil in the Milanese Bottega of Tiepolo – delight with their perfect proportions, soaring trompe-l'oeil ceilings, Murano chandeliers and a delicacy of touch that defines the villa itself.

Across the lake and down towards Como lies Villa Roccabruna; it is here that Mandarin Oriental Hotels has opened its first western European resort. The ancient Lebanese cedar under which Giuditta Pasta sang across the water still stands on the lawn; above it is the villa, designed in eclectic Renaissance style with *sgraffito* walls. Eric Egan has done extraordinary things with the interiors, particularly the public spaces – original chinoiserie plays with bespoke Fromental wallpaper in the Sala Mandarin, and gilded and stuccoed ceilings with Fortuny wallpaper in the CO.MO Bistrot. Handcrafted Italian furniture, from Marta Sala among others, contrasts with the oriental touches in Shuhei Matsuyama's art adorning the bedroom walls. A spa, restaurant, bar and bistro, 73 suites and rooms and two private villas are dotted throughout the botanical gardens, cast in muted shades of duck-egg blue and soft grey with views onto Lake Como – timeless as ever, and these days the only constant in a rapidly shifting tableau. ✦

TOP OF THE LAKE

Mary Lussiana was a guest at **Villa Làrio,** villalario.com, from €400; **Vista Palazzo,** vistalagodicomo.com, from €495; and **Villa Sola Cabiati,** grandhoteltremezzo.com, from €7,000. **Abercrombie & Kent** (01242-386 463; abercrombiekent.co.uk) offers three nights at **Mandarin Oriental, Lago di Como** on a B&B basis from £1,450pp, including return flights from London, private transfers and a locally guided tour. **Feel Como,** feelcomo.com. **Kitchen,** kitchencomo.com. **The Market Place,** themarketplace.it. **Ristorante Materia,** ristorantemateria.it. **Villa Cima,** villadeste.co, from €7,500. **Villa Passalacqua,** grandhoteltremezzo.com, from €8,000 per night for up to 18; four more rooms available in nearby **Villa Bellini,** from €2,000. per night.

PHOTOGRAPH: LORENZO PENNATI