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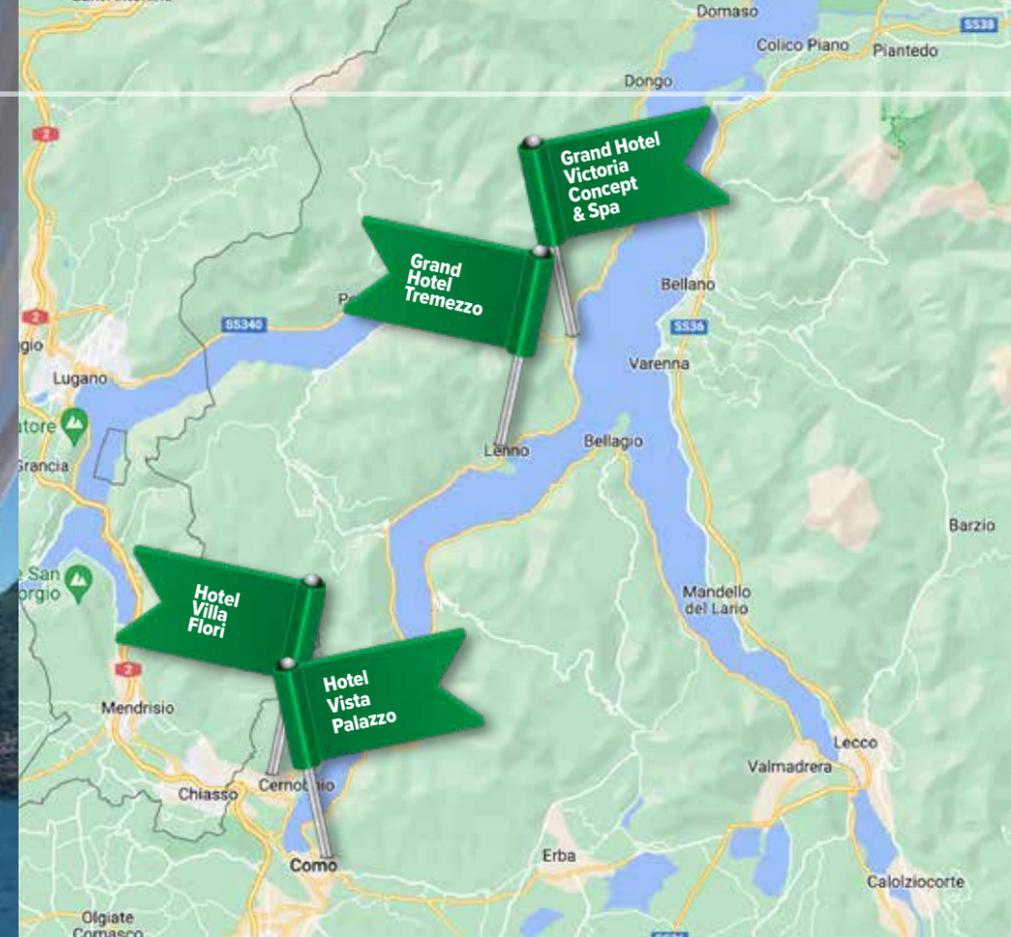
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LAKE EFFECT

The singular glory of Lake Como's Grand Hotel Tremezzo was unbridled—everywhere, inside and out, were celebrations of color and unerring expressions of heightened design.





Choose Your Pleasure

Lake Como is many things, and a successful trip requires knowing what you want

More than any other Italian resort destination, Lake Como defies an obvious itinerary. For example, a trip to the Amalfi Coast presupposes Positano, Ravello and the town of Amalfi. An Italian Riviera holiday implies time spent in Cinque Terre and Portofino. But two people who have been to Lake Como at different times would likely tell two completely different stories.

One reason for that is its peculiar ge-

ography; located around 30 miles north of Milan, the upside-down, Y-shaped lake—a skinny body of water wherever you look—has no obvious center. Another reason is that no one town or village (and there are many) registers as an obvious base. This is why a traveler to Lake Como must be very self-aware about what they like to do and what makes them happy.

Lake Como, though timelessly beautiful, can be confounding enough that even last fall, on my third trip to the area, I was still figuring things out. For example, the

town of Como, located at the southwestern point of the upside-down Y, is usually so little remarked upon, except as a way station to points north by ferry and hydrofoil, that I'd never spent any time there previously. So, I decided to divide this trip into two: I would spend the first half in and around Como, and the second half in smaller, quieter towns set near the middle of the "Y."

For a place that no one talks about, Como was lovely. It's not that its lakefront was especially manicured; with the lake

winding down for the season, there was some construction going on. But surprisingly, as I walked inland away from the water, Como's undeniable charms revealed themselves. Como Cathedral's impressive dome lords over the city; the late-Gothic church boasts an impressive history, as it was built over three centuries. Though the façade, replete with columns, arches, a rose window and inset statuary, dates from the mid-15th century, the cathedral was not completed until 1770.

With my base at Vista Palazzo, a de-

sign-forward boutique hotel on a lakefront piazza, the pedestrian pleasures of Como were easily accessible and redolent of Rome's historic center, or Bologna's. It offers the delight of strolling aimlessly around the festive Piazza del Duomo, filled with tables set under market umbrellas, then finding even more lively piazzas, and between them, narrow, tiled streets leading to discreet, romantic trattoria set in buildings washed in rose and pale yellow.

From Vista Palazzo, I moved on to Hotel Villa Flori in Cernobbio, Vista Palazzo's sister property, reachable in minutes via ferry. That slight sense of remove was key: Now I found myself in a garden setting at the edge of the lake, in beautifully appointed traditional accommodations that seemed to float above the water. In this corner suite, I flung open the doors to my vast L-shaped terrace and let the lakeside breeze cool the space from two sides. I arrived early enough to linger over breakfast—and long enough to learn that in this part of Italy, the crescent-shaped rolls (what we, and the French, identify as croissants) are not called *cornetto*, but *brioche*.

From the hotel, I walked around 10

minutes south (back in the direction of Como), so I could explore Villa Olmo.

Because Villa Flori is another boutique hotel without a pool, I took the opportunity to swim with the locals at Villa Olmo's lido for a few euros. I savor these types of experiences, living as the locals do, swimming my laps (bathing caps required, a reminder that I was decidedly not in more laid-back southern Italy); looking up from the water to admire the mountains on the opposite side of the lake; grabbing a pizza at the bar; and picking out a red-and-purple striped slingback lounge chair on the lawn to relax in. After my workout, I wandered the grounds of the early 19th-century Villa Olmo; the majestic neoclassical building is available only for events and exhibitions, but the formal gardens, with their meticulous flowerbeds and bulbous topiary, are open to the public.

If part one of the vacation was about some (mild) exploration, part two was about luxuriating. Lake Como is home to some of the world's finest and amen-

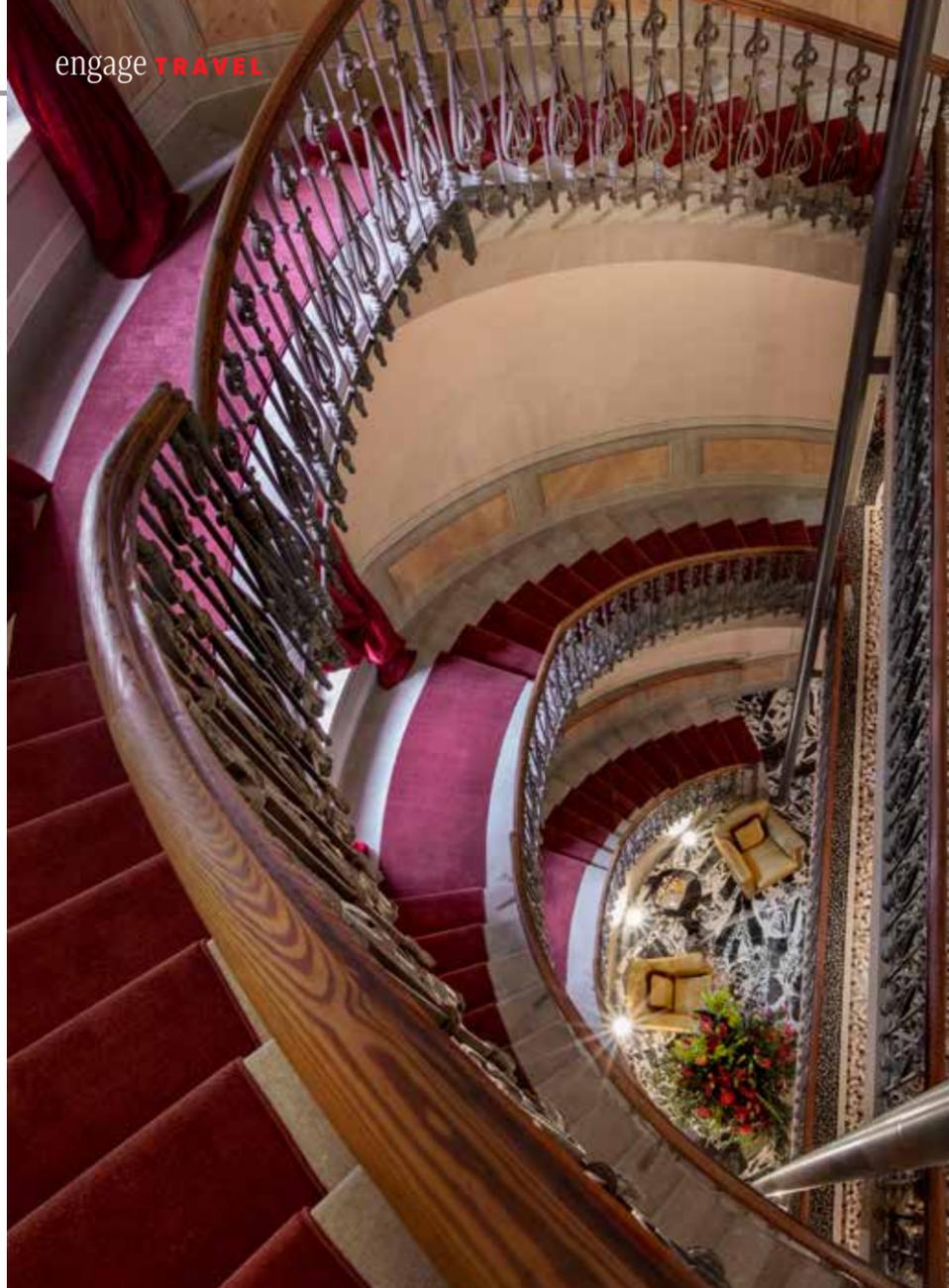
AIR APPARENT

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Grand Hotel Tremezzo.

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Hotel Villa Flori



ity-rich resorts, many of them located near the fork of the lake, which is the most famed section and arguably its most scenic. This is where the picturesque towns of Bellagio, Varenna and Menaggio are located, and it's easy to hop from one to the other on the ferry for lunch or shopping jaunts. But for me, the point of this part of the trip was to put the amenities of chosen resorts to the test—and not go anywhere.

To be pithy, Hotel Grand Tremezzo was a wonder—a Belle Époque retreat that helped define what luxury was a century ago, and still epitomizes it. When you talk about Lake Como, of course, it's inevitable that Villa d'Este comes up, as the iconic Cernobbio resort is all-but synonymous with the destination. Grand Tremezzo is not only its equal, but surpasses it in several ways. For one thing, it's less formal, and the staff exudes greater warmth. The singular glory of Grand Tremezzo was unbridled—everywhere, inside and out, were celebrations of color and unerring expressions of heightened design. The common areas featured one opulent sala after another, my favorite the Sala Contessa, a plush sitting room decorated and positioned so cunningly that when the sun came streaming through the French doors, the room turned pink—even what was not already pink-hued in this pale rose and silver room turned pink.

If pool time was something that took some planning at the start of the trip, such was not the case at Grand Tremezzo. In true Lake Como fashion, one of the two swimming pools actually floated on the lake; the art deco-inspired deck, with its spectacular views, was dotted with unstructured daybeds the color of orange sherbet. The pool was adjacent to Giacomo al Lago, the “beachside” restaurant that served a peerless prawn tartare with mandarin sorbet, and an unforgettable seafood gnocchi.

My Lake Como sojourn ended at

SUBLIME SHAPES

From top: Vista Palazzo; salt room at Grand Hotel Victoria's Erra Spa



Grand Hotel Victoria, which was a stone's throw from the center of Menaggio, one of the area's most magical villages, the place to shop for artisanal soap or grab an equally artisanal gelato. I got there—eventually—but it was just as difficult to leave this property as it was to tear away from Grand Tremezzo, and it offered an illuminating contrast. Whereas Grand Tremezzo was a paean

SITTING PRETTY

From top: Grand Hotel Victoria; Grand Hotel Tremezzo

to turn-of-the-century splendor, Grand Victoria struck me as a reinvention, as its stately façade gave way to interiors of bracing, slick surfaces and postmodern juxtapositions.

And it must be said that the hotel's Erra Spa is one of the best executed spas in Italy, with creatively conceived experiences (an ice room, a fire room, a Himalayan salt room, a waterfall shower circuit) arrayed around a brilliant blue thalassotherapy pool. What I admired about the



Hotels in Brief

- **Vista Palazzo:** The design-forward boutique hotel located in a central square is convenient to every ferry and attraction in the town of Como. Its Sottovocce restaurant, where the service is masterful, offers excellent dishes such as the Ravioli Alla Norma (ravioli filled with scamorza cheese and eggplant). The rooftop terrace is the perfect place to admire the lake over the rim of a Bellini.

- **Villa Flori:** The suites in this lakefront hotel offer a notable level of lushness, with considerate design touches—like padded, elegantly printed wall coverings. To dine in the garden, either for breakfast or dinner, is to experience a level of serenity and refinement for which Lake Como is celebrated.

- **Grand Hotel Tremezzo:** The palatial façade and floating pool are merely the appetizers to this living work of art; behind the main building, an Asian-style greenstone-tiled pool and tropical gardens provide additional wow factors. Some suites boast direct access to the gardens and vast decks overlooking the lake and mountains. Don't miss the grotto-like indoor-outdoor spa pool.

- **Grand Hotel Victoria:** Representing a bold reimagining of a Lake Como palazzo, the Grand Victoria embraces state-of-the-art style, from the high-tech guest rooms and gym to the imaginative spa experiences. The personalized service, under the watchful eye of general manager Marco Montagnani, goes above and beyond in every respect (COVID-19 testing arrangements included).

Grand Victoria was its confidence: Here was a proudly 19th-century landmark palazzo that, when recently renovated, drew upon the best of hospitality from around the world; even the seating surrounding the pool was composed of ample daybeds set within Balinese-style pavilions.

It delivered delight and surprise, without sacrificing sense of place, which is exactly how luxury hospitality stays relevant. ♦