

Lake Como *Rediscovered*

Rachael Martin takes a nostalgic off-season road trip exploring Lake Como and its hinterland

View over the historic lakeside town of Gravedona

 rachaelmartinwrites

It begins with a *cappuccino* and a *brioche* on Piazza XX Settembre in Lecco ❶ on a sunny Friday morning.

I'm here with my husband, Stefano, for a road trip around Lake Como at the end of March. It's always my favourite time of year here; quieter, with fewer tourists and cooler temperatures, and the perfect time to see the sights and really enjoy those lake views framed by snow-topped mountains and cobalt blue skies. I look up at the Campanile of Basilica di San Nicolò against Monte San Martino, and the white chapel of the Madonna del Carmine al San Martino below. Lecco is where I arrived twenty-six years ago, a young woman who got off a plane and built herself a life here.

FROM SHORELINE TO THE FOREST

Our first stop is Villa Manzoni (www.eccolecco.it), the summer residence where Milan-born writer

Alessandro Manzoni spent his childhood and youth, to meet museum director Mauro Rossetto. The magnificent descriptions of Lake Como and its mountains which open Manzoni's novel *I Promessi Sposi* (1824) are because Manzoni knew the area well. At the time Italy was regional, having not been unified yet and each region having its own dialect. Manzoni took the spoken language of

Tuscany, of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, and tried to reproduce it on the page. He even took the Tuscan nursemaid back to Milan and insisted that everyone spoke in a refined Tuscan dialect. In this way he contributed to giving Italy a national language. The museum has books, documents, costumes, and a video introduction by local writer Andrea Vitali. ➔



Villa Manzoni, our first stop on this trip



Lecco, where I began my life in Italy



Uncaptioned images, clockwise from below right:

Tagliolini pasta with mushrooms, bresaola and truffle at Rifugio S.E.L. Rocca Locatelli

The lakeside comune of Mandello del Lario, where we stayed at Mamma Ciccia

Interior of the Villa Monastero, once the refuge of nuns from Isola Comacina

La Montagna più bella del mondo exhibition at Bellano

Mayor Antonio Rusconi proudly standing at the Orrido di Bellano

Il Parco Valentino, an invigorating walk through peaceful beech forest



and venison *ragù*, both generous portions. We then try the rabbit and venison stew, with polenta made in a traditional large copper *paiolo*. It's delicious. After lunch, we walk up past purple liverwort and snowdrops through the beech forest of the Parco Valentino to the Belvedere panoramic balcony, and views of Lake Como, the River Adda, the mountains to the north and Brianza towards Milan.

The rest of the afternoon is dedicated to a guided tour of the cheese factory at Formaggeria Carozzi, followed by cheese tasting. We make our way back down to Lecco and up the lake to Mandello del Lario ③ and our room at Mamma Ciccia (www.mammaciccia.it), who offer bed and breakfast in several locations in the historic village. The room is very pleasant, spacious, and extremely central. Dinner is at Il Giardinetto



(www.ristoranteilgiardinetto.it), which has a terrace on the lake for warmer weather. After dinner, we walk under old beams and archways and past the boats. Across the lake we can see the lights in Onno and it feels like we have one of the world's most-loved tourist destinations entirely to ourselves.



BELLANO AND BEYOND

Saturday begins with breakfast and an early morning walk in Mandello, and then it's off through lakeside villages to Varenna ④ and the Villa Monastero (www.villamonastero.eu). The nuns fled here from Isola Comacina when the people of Como took the island by night in 1169 and destroyed all that was there. The nuns then went to Lecco, and the villa later became



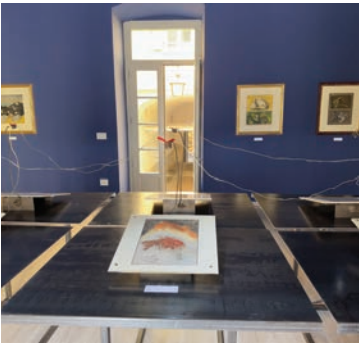
an elegant lakeside residence. The botanical garden, with its rows of cypresses and cedars of Lebanon, has many rare and exotic species.

Our next stop is Bellano ⑤. There are some men by the jetty, where wooden boats known as *batèll* are moored. These boats are traditionally associated with



the lovers Renzo and Lucia in Manzoni's novel. One man stops to tell me of the days when he was young and the hills above Bellano were filled with vineyards which made local wine which was drunk by the local people.

Local mayor Antonio Rusconi explains how Bellano has dedicated itself to art. It hosts exhibitions, outside installations and other cultural events, thanks to a collaboration between the council and local cultural organisation, ArchiViVitali. Bac – Bellano Arte Cultura (Bellano Art Culture) is an exciting project, with plans that should place this beautiful *borgo* on any art lover's itinerary. We visit the exhibition, *La Montagna più bella del mondo* (the most beautiful mountain in the world). It's a dialogue of local artist Giancarlo Vitali with the works of geologist Antonio Stoppani, who was born in Lecco two hundred



Five hidden gems

1. The Carozzi cheese factory

The Carozzis have been making cheese for fifty years, including Taleggio DOP and Gorgonzola DOP. They pride themselves on their artisanal techniques. Take a tour followed by a tasting, and have lunch or dinner in the bistro. Don't forget a visit to the deli!

Via Provinciale, 14/a – 23818 Pasturo
www.dacarozzi.it



2. Forte Montecchio Nord

Forte Montecchio Nord was built just before the First World War to protect against possible attack from the Germans or Austro-Hungarians. Its position was strategic because it's near five mountain passes, all of which lead into northern Europe. The cannons, as it happens, fired only once, after Liberation Day. For a guided tour, fill in the form on their website.

Via alle Torri, 23823 Colico
www.fortemontecchionord.it



3. The churches in Gravedona

Gravedona is rich in Christian heritage. From the 12th century it was part of the Repubblica dei Tre Pievi, the Republic of the Three Parishes. We saw the 12th-century Chiesa di Santa Maria del Tiglio with its 14th-century frescoes, the Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie with its original convent cloisters, and the 16th-century Chiesa di San Gregorio.

www.northlakecomo.net



4. Wine tasting with a view

Cantine Sorsasso is a family-run vineyard above Gravedona which forms part of the group IGT Terre Lariane. They started with less than a hectare of vines, but their vines are now spread between the three towns of Gravedona, Domaso and Dongo, and near Villa Balbianello further down the lake. They produce Domasio wine (red, white, and rosé), along with spumante, extra-virgin olive oil, grappa, and *grappa al mirtillo*.

Via Gaggio 1/bis – 22013 Domaso
www.sorsasso.com



5. Hotel Regina

We felt very spoiled and well-looked after at Hotel Regina. Its position at the top of the lake offers first-class views down the lake to Bellagio and of the surrounding mountains, while the lovely gardens, swimming pool and beach offer the perfect way to relax. We stayed in the V Vasca Junior Suite with lake views and bath. See their website for prices and availability.

Via Regina Levante, 18 – 22015 Gravedona
www.reginahotels.it



years ago this year. Stoppani dug scientifically, while Vitali digs on an emotional level. Stoppani's most beautiful mountain is Monte San Martino, above Lecco.

We then visit the Orrido, the fifteen-million-year-old natural gorge for which Bellano is so well-known, up past the old cotton mills. Writer Antonio Balbiani called Bellano "the little Manchester of Lake Lario". Lario is another name for Lake Como, from the Latin Larius. We walk around the Orrido on metal platforms, visit the multimedia rooms and strap ourselves in for a virtual reality experience which takes us flying over the Lecco mountains to see the Orrido from above. The house at the entrance is known as Casa del Diavolo, the House of the Devil. It's thought that it led to a series of tunnels to help the people of Bellano return home safely after the curfew during the Austrian occupation.

Our next stop is Colico ⑥ and Forte Montecchio Nord, Europe's best-preserved fort from the First World War. We then drive through the natural reserve, Pian di Spagna e Lago di Mezzola, the wetlands at the top of Lake Como, across the bridge over the River Mera, and to Gravedona. We arrive at Hotel Regina to a room with a view – and better still, a bath with a view! At dinner we are in the care of Giuseppe, and feast on dishes using well-researched and often locally sourced produce and carefully selected wines. We walk outside in the garden after dinner and enjoy the dark contours of the lake, and the silence.



MOUNTAINS AND MORE

On Sunday I wake at half past five. I want to see the sunrise. I get dressed and go down to the beach. To my left are the mountains of the Valchiavenna and Switzerland. Monte Legnone is on the other side of the lake, while in the middle I can see the lake stretching all way down to Bellagio. To my right lies the centre of Gravedona, with the dark mountains above, topped with snow. For a short time Gravedona is bathed with a warm pink light. Later, the light is different as the sun climbs higher in the sky and lights up the whole scene. Yet I have my memory of that warm pink light as I sit in the hotel garden drinking my *cappuccino*.

After breakfast, we meet our guide, Melissa Neri, for a tour around Gravedona ⑦. Melissa's tour is fascinating. "During the 1830s, when the Austrians were here, the Austrians issued very few commerce permits because they thought that the people of Como were getting too rich. So those who didn't have permits resorted to smuggling flour, sugar, salt and coffee. During this period, smuggling was directly linked with the *Risorgimento*, the movement for independence which eventually led to Italian unification. Revolutionary leaflets were printed in Lugano because it was neutral. The smugglers



brought these leaflets into Italy with their goods. They arrived at night and threw the leaflets into the gardens of the villas of those who were pro-*Risorgimento*, which they recognised because there were strawberry trees at the entrance. During the Second World War, the smugglers also knew the routes to go and get provisions from Switzerland for the displaced people who arrived here." When we get to the Church of Santa Maria del Tiglio, we see the priests in their red and gold robes, and altar boys and girls in red and white robes. It's Lent, and they're carrying olive branches, the symbol of regeneration and of peace.

We're booked for lunch at Crotto Sorsasso for wine-tasting and home-cooked *ravioli*. After, as I'm driving back down the SS36, I think about the young woman I was who got off that plane from Manchester. This trip has confirmed a love story, with a lake, its mountains, and everything it has to offer. It's also confirmed just how much I love it all out of the busy season, when you can take everything more slowly and really get to know the history and stories of the places you visit. ■

Images, clockwise from top:

I got up early just to see the sun rise over Gravedona

View from a window at Chiesa di San Gregorio Magno, Gravedona

La Chiesa di Santa Maria del Tiglio, where we saw altar boys and girls carrying olive branches

Forte Montecchio Nord, Europe's best preserved First World War fort

