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RASSEGNA STAMPA

Alex Pacifico
Management

www.alexpacificomanagement.com

press@managementapm.com

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Varenna: A jewel in the Lake Como crown

Mark Browne takes a look at the picturesque village of Varenna on Lake Como



While Lake Como has long been a famed touristic hotspot and has even enjoyed a renewed level of interest in recent years thanks to high-profile visits from Hollywood A-listers like George Clooney, the village of Varenna has perhaps remained less well known than larger local centres such as Como itself or Bellagio. However, in recent years it has blossomed into another jewel on the lake that not only enjoys fantastic lake vistas but has multiple points of interest in its own right. With lockdown thankfully ending and the region being open to tourism again, I went to find out more.

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The village of Varenna

Dating back to the Middle Ages, Varenna, located on Lake Como's eastern bank approximately halfway up the lake and opposite the peninsula of Bellagio, is a traditional, historic Italian village nestled between the lake's waters and the hillsides above. Its town centre, Piazza San Giorgio, is dominated by the San Giorgio church, which dates back to the 14th century. Its relatively plain Romanesque exterior contrasts with the interior's colourful fresco decorations. Cobble lanes wind past and through blocks of ancient houses leading off the square down to the lake and a small collection of



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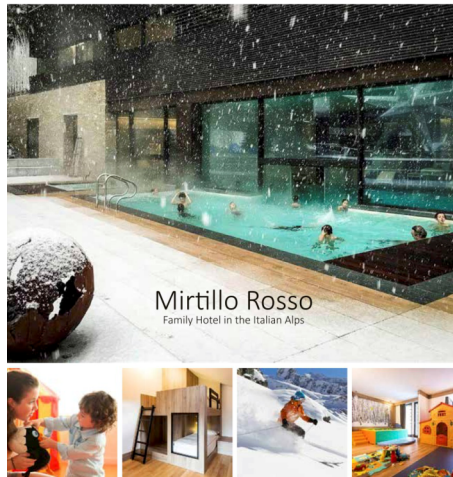
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leather shops, bars and restaurants, as well as a lake-side walkway to the ferry landing on the northern end of the town.

At the southern edge of the town lies the Villa Monastero. Founded as a monastery in the 11th or 12th century, it currently serves as a museum, botanical garden and convention centre. Strolling of botanical gardens, the nearby Villa Cipressi also boasts beautiful gardens overlooking the lake. Strolling the levels of its paths amidst its verdant foliage and statues affords beautiful vistas amidst a contemplative and calming environment characterised by the verdant foliage of cypress trees. It is one of the most famous botanical gardens of the area and is part of the prestigious Grand Giardini Italiani.

For the benefit of those seeking education and enlightenment while enjoying the natural beauty of the location, QR codes are now included on the plants to provide visitors with detailed information, and a recommended route is suggested to best appreciate the gardens.

Perched on a hilltop overlooking the town, lies the Castello di Vecio, an ancient medieval fortress that nowadays serves as a museum. The path up from the village affords an inspiring stroll.

Other Activities

Varenna can also be used as a base from which to explore the surrounding area and other towns on the lake. The ferry landing facilities day trips by boat to other spots of interest around Lake Como. For example, Bellagio is only 15 minutes away across the lake while Villa Carlotta in Tremezzo is a little over 25. It's easy to arrange private nautical transfers or arrange boat hires. For those seeking exercise, a greenway walking route, the Green Way di Patrarchi, winds along the lake shore from Varenna town

centre southwards to the nearby town of Fiumelatte. The area is also a popular cycling route.

To the north, the nearby town of Bellagio has an interesting geological feature worth visiting. The Bellagio Ravine is a natural gorge, formed over approximately 15 million years by the waters of the Povera, which carved a deep ravine through the rock. It is now accessible by a series of walkways and bridges that give impressive views of the waterfalls and caverns of the gorge. Bellagio also has a sailing marina and several leisure schools. It is possible to arrange tours of local vineyards and tastings of cheese and other local produce to experience the regional delicacies at first hand in their native environment.

Dining

One of the highlights of any visit to Italy is of course the marvellous cuisine, and Varenna certainly does not disappoint in this regard. The village offers myriad dining options, many of which afford panoramic views over the lake. In fact, the northern part of the town centre is replete with restaurants, primarily featuring local Italian specialities. These include lakeside locations but also venues throughout the atmospheric backstreets of the town. They also feature local wines, many of which are made from the Nebbiolo grape that flourishes in the mountainous terrain of the region.

“HOLLYWOOD A-LISTERS LIKE GEORGE CLOONEY”

All budgets are catered for but, for those wishing to indulge themselves, the Royal Gourmet restaurant located on a veranda overlooking Lake Como within the Royal Victoria Hotel offers a five-course tasting menu featuring typical Larian cuisine, as well as dishes with a more international flavour.

Where to stay

The pre-eminent hotels in Varenna are the Hotel Villa Cipressi, a traditional luxurious lakeside villa that is characteristic of the Lake

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Como area, and the neighbouring Royal Victoria Hotel. Both are four-star hotels. The latter, named in honour of Queen Victoria, who visited here in 1826, is set in a historical building which has recently been fully renovated to reflect modern tastes and standards, including a full spa, while still capturing its historical character and charm. With its entrance facing onto the town square, Piazza San Giorgio, the hotel's rear affords direct access to a beach on the lake itself as well as its own pool.



The hotel's rooms command fantastic vistas over the lake towards Bellagio, as well as the gardens of Villa Cipressi, which are directly accessible from the hotel via a short pedestrian bridge – a great spot for a pre-dinner stroll. While there are numerous botanical gardens in the Lake Como area, the Villa Cipressi is the only one with a four-star hotel within its grounds. The town also has a number of smaller establishments offering accommodation.

Accessibility

One of the great features of Varenna is how accessible it is, with road, rail and even water transport affording easy access. Located not far from the north-bound Autostrada, motorists can quickly reach the town directly from this or alternatively take the more scenic lakeside minor roads winding towards it. Either way, a large multistorey car park in the town provides plenty of capacity to leave the car while enjoying your stay or exploring the area by other means without the stress of seeking roadside parking.

The minor roads are also popular with cyclists touring the area. The town is on a main train line from Milan and has a station right in the centre so it's readily accessible for those preferring not to drive. The train from central Milan takes only one hour. Finally, it's possible to arrive by water transport. The town enjoys a busy schedule for various boats that facilitate both pedestrians and even vehicles on small car ferries, so Varenna can be included in a nautical tour of the lake.

It's also possible to arrive in style across the water via a traditional iconic wooden speedboat, which is available for private hire or used as a water taxi. Varenna is probably best viewed from the water, and it's close-packed, colourful buildings along the water's edge make a beautiful picture when viewed from approaching boats, especially in the late afternoon sunshine. Definitely a picture for the album.

In summary, very accessible and well worth a visit in its own right, Varenna is certainly not to be missed on any visit to Lake Como. It can be enjoyed throughout a stay and can be the perfect location to use as a base for broader local travel.

Mark Browne was a guest of the Royal Victoria Hotel.
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