

Think this is beautiful? You should try the ice cream

Can Como get any better? It has the lake, the mountains, the history, the romance. And then, discovers **Sally Emerson**, there's a man in a bobble hat with a dessert to die for

On a mysterious wooded island on Lake Como, reachable only by boat, there is a restaurant where the same set menu has been served since 1947. It is perfect, so why change it? And at the end of the meal — of every meal served there — the proprietor performs an exorcism to rid the island of a curse dating back to the 12th century. Brandy, coffee and fire all mix together in a strange brew of showmanship and superstition.

You reach the sunny terrace of the Locanda dell'Isola

Comacina by a two-minute boat ride from Sala Comacina. Steamers and ferries drift back and forth all the time, trailing gently through the silk-grey waters. Across the lake, the villages of Torno and Varenna huddle in their fresco colours, displaying delicate deserted churches and fabulous lakefront villas.

No wonder the Romantics were enraptured by Como, with its light, its mystery, its depth — as much as 400 metres in places. Wherever did I get the notion it was bland? It is outrageously exotic, a place of mists and ghosts and incantations. And if ever the question should arise,

my last meal alive will follow the 60-year-old menu served there on the island of Comacina.

For starters, there's the setting. The shores of the lake squeeze together right here, so the view across to the mainland is just a little smudgy and magical, without feeling out of reach. Lake Como is a place of such luscious beauty, such fine interplay of lake and mountain, sun and gloom, it is hard ever to be bored. Everywhere you look, the view composes itself into a fine painting.

First come bowls of radiant antipasto vegetables: onions baked in their jackets, sweet

peppers basking in olive oil, purple beetroots, fagiolo, carrots — all shimmering like a rococo still life. A bottle of Soave turns up on the table, a loaf of bread beside it — "friendly bread", to be torn. The waiter carves a chunk of ham of such sweetness that the pig must have been fed on honey, and then a soft pyramid of bresaola. To follow, he bones a huge salmon trout, clenches half a lemon in his hand and squeezes it all over.

Olive oil, lemon, sunshine... Life could hardly get better. But then comes succulent chicken, and a hunk of parmesan gouged from a vast cheese and placed in my hand. And finally, with a flourish, the lake god appears — the proprietor, Benvenuto Puricelli, an Eric Sykes lookalike in a tartan waistcoat, a white shirt and a bobble hat. He bears some astoundingly rich vanilla ice cream, served with fresh pear

and banana sauce. The bobble hat, it turns out, is ceremonial wear for the exorcism.

Eccentric, theatrical, confident, this is Como at its best. I stumble off over broken stones edged with ferns to explore the island's tiny church, pressing out the smell of wild mint from under my soles. A choir of church bells rings soft, shrill and loud by turns, and a grey heron soars up into the blue sky.

MY WEEK in Como was illuminated by many beautiful walks — across hills and parks, finding villa after villa to take the breath away. The rich have long lodged in fantasy houses around the lake — from Italian aristocrats and the great scheming cardinals of the past to Richard Branson, the Guinness dynasty and the area's new resident mascot, George Clooney. The houses really do seem made of dreams,



suspended in the morning mists, just floating over the water.

In 1568, the Cardinal of Como built the Villa d'Este in the village of Cernobbio. It is magnificent, one of the classiest hotels in the world, with its lake view and its monumental statues.

At first, the grandeur of the hotel feels overwhelming — the sweep and shimmer of its immense marble halls, the

THE SUNDAYTIMES TRAVEL DIRECT

LaSource - Grenada

From just £1,499pp all-inclusive

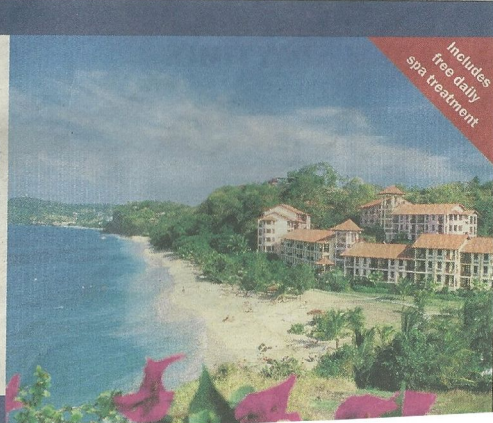
A beautiful palm-fringed beach bordering a tropical estate, provides an idyllic setting for LaSource, the place to rejuvenate the body and soul. Whether you choose to pamper yourself at the Oasis, where a range of treatments await, or enjoy the numerous activities available on land or sea, you can rest assured that you will return totally refreshed. Enjoy excellent cuisine, and relax with a cocktail, whilst watching a romantic Caribbean sunset — LaSource has every ingredient for a memorable stay.

Four-star LaSource, Grenada - all inclusive			
	7nts	14nts	
Feb 8 - Feb 28	£1,589	£2,729	
Mar 1 - Mar 31	£1,639	£2,849	
May 1 - Jun 30	£1,499	£2,529	
Jul 1 - Jul 21	£1,539	£2,569	
Jul 29 - Aug 25	£1,719	£2,749	
Sep 2 - Oct 27	£1,509	£2,539	

Based on a Luxury room
Flights are from London Gatwick with Monarch Airlines

Prices are per person for two people sharing a luxury room. Offers are subject to availability and we reserve the right to amend or withdraw part or whole of any of the featured offers without prior notice. Price includes: flights, accommodation on the board basis shown, transfers, all taxes and surcharges. Tropical Sky booking conditions apply. Travel insurance not included. Full payment required eight weeks before departure. The holidays are operated by Tropical Sky ATOL 979, ATOL 9799, a company independent of The Times Newspapers Ltd.

Please call Tropical Sky on 01342 331799 quote Sunday Times or visit tropicalsky.co.uk





Massimo Rip

disapproving figures gazing down from the dark oil paintings, the alarming swirl of naked nymphs when you're trying to find the right staircase. But after my first day, I began to behave with a certain grandeur myself, parading into breakfast at the Veduggia restaurant as if I were Princess Caroline of Brunswick, who used to live there. In hotels, after all, we can live pretend lives. The hotels are the set and we, and the staff, are the actors.

On the hill above, floodlit at night, stand the broken battlements built by a ballerina who inherited the villa in the 18th century. Her second husband was a handsome Napoleonic soldier, and she made these follies so he could play at battles with his friends and wouldn't miss fighting.

Then again, Como has always been a playground. Virgil referred to its beauty; the younger Pliny had two villas here, named Comedy and Tragedy. The shelleys tried to rent the wrecked but glorious Villa Pliniana for Byron, even though its garden seethed with snakes.

I remembered this in the gardens of the villa Monastoro, outside the old fishing village of Varenna, where immense grapefruit lolled from a tree and the gigantic leaves of a magnolia reached down towards the dark green water. The air was temperate, and here and there palms and cactuses sprayed out hooks and hands and spikes. It was as though Como was on the edge of something dangerous.

I could have sat there for hours, listening to the rustle of the lake and watching the soft greys of the interlocking mountains change colour.

OF ALL the dreams conjured in Como, the one that astounded me most was at the Restaurant Mistral, part of the Grand Hotel Serbelloni in Bellagio. This opulent hotel commands the lake, and has been visited by everyone from Mary Pickford and Clark Gable to Roosevelt and Churchill. In the summer you can swim

in the lake, diving from the platforms floating out in the water.

There are plenty of hotels among the pretty cobbled streets of Bellagio, but the G. and Hotel is the best. As if the wonders of the lake weren't enough, the Mistral is a world-class restaurant, its food inspired by the molecular cooking of Heston Blumenthal. At the end of a fine meal, two waiters made magic before my eyes. They started with a mixture for ice cream — sugar, cream, eggs, vanilla, and so on — then poured onto it

liquid nitrogen, which is -197C.

One poured and the other stirred, and smoke spilt out across the floor like dry ice. The mixture became stiffer and stiffer until it was delicious ice cream, with crystals much smaller than standard ice cream. It disappeared into my mouth leaving no sense of cold.

As culinary melodrama goes, that exceeded everything. But, even so, I enjoyed the rough magic of the hunky ice cream at the Locanda dell'Isola Comadina best of all — eaten on my first day on Lake Como as the sun sank into my skin, and served by that funny lake god with the bubble hat.

✦ Sally Emerson travelled as a guest of Citalia



Among the rich living round the lake, resident mascot is George Clooney

TRAVEL BRIEF

Getting there: the central section of Lake Como is about 30 miles from Milan Malpensa, Linate and Bergamo, which are served from more than 20 UK airports, plus Dublin and Shannon. Airlines include British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), Flybe (0871 700 2000, flybe.com) and EasyJet (easyjet.com).

Where to stay: Villa d'Este in Cernobbio (www.villadeste.it) has doubles from £438; Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni (villaserbelloni.com) in Bellagio has doubles from £335. More modest is the Hotel Villa Maria (www.hotelvillamaria.com) in Cernobbio, with lake-view doubles from £108; or the peaceful residence La Limonera (residence.limonera.com; doubles from £22) in Bellagio.

Tour operators: Citalia (0871 664 0254, citalia.com) has two nights' B&B at Villa d'Este and three half-board at Grand Hotel Villa Serbelloni from £1,069p, including flights. Or try Italian Expressions (020 7433 2675, expressions.holidays.co.uk) or (adogan (0845 615 4990, cadogan.holidays.com).

Su
real
greece

call now for
summer offer
including two
for the price

call 020 8758
or visit sunvil.co.uk

AOL Protected Buy Affili

You can
all over

Vienna is always worth
all fans of the master

Top tip: The 200th anniversary
celebrations at the Hay
www.vienna.info/hay

STOP LOOKING
Information, packages

WIEN-HOTELS
Tel. 143 1 24 555
www.vienna.info