

THE SOPRANO ON COMO

Long serenaded by poets, favoured by European aristocracy and adored by Hollywood A-listers, a discerning residence on Italy's famous Lake Como is most likely to leave you feeling like a blue-blooded diva.

BY APARNA PEDNEKAR

SOME JOURNEYS HIT A HIGH NOTE EVEN BEFORE THEY BEGIN.

At Istanbul's Atatürk Airport, I chat with an American-Italian art director, at the Turkish Airlines CIP Lounge. She's back from the airline's complimentary layover service—a six-hour tour of Istanbul, bearing a tangerine and turquoise halo. Hearing that I'm off to Como, she mentions that Istanbul's Sariyer district could be Como's Oriental cousin, with its candy-coloured villas fringing mirror-calm waters. The palatial lounge we're in, with its stylish twists on kervansaray (roadside inns), has been conceptualised by Istanbul's avant-garde design firm, Autoban. It's the classic melting pot of East-West borders, which continues onwards to Milan, thanks to the airline's chef-on-board, who cheerfully customises a perfect sea food rigatoni for me.

It's my first time exploring North Italy. The country's Southern treats evoke a fuzzy warm feeling, one that I suspect may freeze over as we move towards the Lake District and the snowy Alps. But warmth and Providence have followed us from Istanbul. The weather in Milan is perfect and after lunch, the 40-minute drive to Lake Como is over before one can say, 'Ciao'.

VIRTUOSO PROPERTY

How often does one get to rest one's head at the sprawling residence of one of the world's greatest opera stars? A gorgeous estate lovingly restored by opera singer Giuditta Pasta in 1829, Casta Diva is now a 5-star luxury resort by the shores of the village of Blevio. The name Casta Diva which means Virtuous Goddess is derived from an aria in composer Vincenzo Bellini's opera Norma. (Bellini was a regular guest at Pasta's home and Casta Diva went on to become one of the most famous arias of the 19th century.) Villa Rocca bruna, which now forms the heart of the Casta Diva resort with its 75 rooms, two restaurants, parks and a divine spa, was lorded over by a maverick Parisian dress maker before Pasta bought it with her first earnings as a singer.

ITALY'S
FAMOUS
LAKE COMO



1. A PORTRAIT OF THE FAMOUS SOPRANO, GIUDITTA PASTA
2. SPA SUITE ARIA.
3. CHEF-ON-BOARD TURKISH AIRLINES.



My Roccabruna Suite is a neo-classical goddess herself, bathed in bright shades of fuchsia, purple, and emerald. Along with the living room, bedroom, kitchenette and plush bathroom equipped with fragrant Lorenzo Villoresi toiletries, there's a massive lake-facing terrace. Even swankier is the Suite Fiordiligi with a 6,200 square foot terrace and a private swimming pool. All other suites are equally grand, with themes ranging from Victorian to classic sixties American. With the sun setting

over the lake, an aperitif at Bar Bellini is par for the course, with that poetic lake view described by Shelley as, "exceeding anything I ever beheld in beauty".

VITA DI LUSO

At breakfast at the L'Orangerie restaurant next morning, there's talk of how George Clooney and Amal have dined here with a hush-hush entourage. Chef Alessio Mecozzi's Parmigiana style eggplant with Parmesan fondue is the show-stealer and I'm promised a generous serving tonight along with polenta, scallops and tarte au café. To rev up an appetite, we take off for the customary Como boat ride, a jolly good excuse to gawk at the tony villas that fringe its shores along 30 miles. Just across Casta Diva is Versace's Villa Le Fontanelle, which was bought over by a Russian restaurant tycoon, and down the lake is a massive property owned by Sir Richard Branson. The biggest curiosity is Clooney's Villa

L'Oleandra up in Laglio, cleverly shielded by thick cypress trees. Apart from being the actor's favourite vacation home, it has also starred in his film *Ocean's Twelve*. Over the years, rumours of Clooney selling out to the Russians, increasing takeover of the lake, have circulated as wildly as the paparazzi. But Clooney and the Russians are hardly Como's first famous residents. Stendhal, Verdi, Bellini, Wordsworth and Da Vinci form part of the sterling line-up of artists and statesmen, who have been inspired by Como's tranquillity. In 1945, after Churchill lost his prime minister-ship, he vacationed here, "far away from the brutal war that had ravaged Europe", with his family.

Besides keeping an eye out for Hollywood A-listers, our boatman says he ferried Robert de Niro just a month ago. There's much R&R in Como town itself, and the pretty-as-a-picture Bellagio. I linger over a cappuccino and cookies at Il Gatto Nero restaurant, and consider returning for their lamb chops. The elegant Teatro Sociale in Como sees productions varying from Hans Christian Andersen adaptations, to flamenco. The villages on the Westside of the lakes Cernobbio and Tremezzo, are charming and free of tourist traps.

WATER, FIRE AND CAVIAR

Back at Casta Diva, opera continues to waft in the air, over fine lunches and suppers. The resort routinely organises world-class epicurean events; last year, they flew down Enrico Derflinger whose signature 'Queen Victoria risotto' has captured the palates of Tokyo's beau monde and Washington DC's political honchos. The hoi polloi at Casta Diva often celebrate at the striking Floating Pool, where a dazzling show of water jets, lights and opera, is known to transform the genteel property into a megawatt glamorous setting.

My last morning is spent unwinding at the spa, over a hydro massage in the chic Acqua suite. Post mint fritz, the therapist recommends Swiss brand La Vallée's Caviar Essence and Juvenescence facials for plump, born-again skin. I've put those at the top of my (long) list of reasons to return to this enchanting Italian paradise. ■