

# *escape to* lake country

northern italy's idyllic lake district  
proves an ideal hub for outdoor adventuring

BY JIM CORNFIELD PHOTOGRAPHS BY WERNER PAWLOK





Edgy, urbane Milan seems an unlikely gateway to some of the most idyllic country in all of Europe. But just north of the city, across the Lombardy plain, an exquisite necklace of deepwater lakes is nestled at the base of the Italian Alps. Farthest east is Lago di Garda, Italy's largest lake, while Lago di Como, Lago Maggiore, and a handful of satellite lakes are scattered to the west. Snow-dusted mountains, rolling foothills, and quaint hamlets complete the panorama, producing an overall effect that Lord Byron aptly described as "paradise on earth."

A view of San Giulio  
across Lago d'Orta

Other poets and writers, from Virgil to Dante, Longfellow to Hemingway, also have rhapsodized about Italy's Lake District. The Victorian novelist Henry James was so swept away with the region that he advised against even mentioning it. "One can't describe the beauty of the Italian lakes," he wrote, "nor would one try if one could."

With apologies to Henry James, I've decided to try.

The Lake District is a popular European destination for sports and adventure travelers who enjoy hiking, cycling, and sailing. Over the years, I've trekked, biked, and set sail in over a dozen interesting stretches of the planet. Now, with five days to spare after visiting Milan, I'm thrilled at the opportunity to give these activities a whirl among the fabled lakes of northern Italy.

### *the lure of winds*

Early in the day on Lago di Garda, the cloud cover is just starting to dissipate. A small diesel engine coaxes our 33-foot sloop away from the dock in Porta San Niccolò, a harbor for small craft in Riva del Garda, a resort village on the lake's northern shore. With the first hints of a breeze, we turn off the engine, unfurl the headsail, and ghost southward, picking up speed.

Immense rock precipices glower over this corner of Lago di Garda, a narrow lake that stretches 32 miles north to south. A promontory of the Ledro Alps plunges vertically into the water from heights that aren't even visible from the boat deck. On the opposite bank, Monte Baldo, rising some 7,300 feet, completes a scene more suggestive of a Norwegian fjord than an Italian lake.

Our skipper is Giorgio Giuliani, of Gardaseecharter, a sailing school and charter service in Riva. Standing at the helm, Giorgio explains how Lago di Garda's spectacular topography

Clockwise from below: sailboats tucked in the harbor of Riva del Garda; kiteboarding is a popular sport on Lago di Garda; a view of the breathtaking Tenuta Le Selve di Filippini Cesare, surrounding Lago di Garda; facing page: the super-modern lobby of Hotel Luise





shapes the airflow that makes this spot a worldwide lure for sailors and windsurfers. Wind has distinctive mojo among Garda locals, who've given the prevailing winds their own names. Right now, we're running ahead of Pelèr, the stiff northerly wind that blows almost on cue from midevening until around 11 a.m. most days.

Giorgio eases the boat closer to the forested western headlands as the wind speed increases, and I pull my cap visor down a little as the boat slices faster through the water. This is a moment sailors treasure — finding a puff of wind and “playing” it to improve the boat's performance. At midday, Pelèr will be replaced by Ora, the southerly wind that rises like clockwork and blows past sunset, keeping boats and sailboards skimming across the lake until last light.

We tack eastward toward the ochre and whitewashed quayside *piazza* at Torbole, a picturesque windsport mecca tucked against the lower cliffs of Monte Baldo. An early-bird windsurfer hisses past our bow, followed by a matched pair of Melges 24s whose skippers are prepping for the Volvo Cup race on Garda in July. The Volvo Cup is one of many sailing and windsurfing events that take place around Riva and Torbole throughout the year, continual reminders that sport at this end of Lago di Garda is mostly about wind.

Not always, however. The surrounding Trentino-Alto Adige region is also a popular destination for such activities as rock climbing, trekking, Nordic (ski) walking, canyoning, abseiling, paragliding, canoeing, and, of course, cycling. Back ashore at the waterfront Hotel Luise, I unpack lycra shorts, a jersey, a helmet, and bike shoes in preparation for the next day's ride.

### *trentino on two wheels*

Bicycling is practically a religion in this country. There's even a patron saint of cyclists — La Madonna del Ghisallo. Italy has produced numerous top professional racers and boasts thousands of miles of bike routes, through some of Europe's most luxuriant scenery.

My connection to Italian cycling for this journey is Ciclismo Classico, a U.S.-based operator specializing in cycling tours of Italy (among other countries). My guide and companion is

#### ABOUT TOWN

### A World unto Itself

Northern Italy's Lake District is rich with choices for sports, exploration, fine dining, and pure relaxation. Consider these options and resources:

#### WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel Belvedere, Bellagio.** Since 1880, this has been the landmark of luxury on Lago di Como. 39.031.950414, [belvederebellagio.com](http://belvederebellagio.com)

**Hotel San Rocco, Orta San Giulio.** This quiet lakeside gem faces Isola San Giulio. 39.0322.911977, [hotelsanrocco.it](http://hotelsanrocco.it)

**Hotel Luise, Lago de Garda.** This modern hotel in central Riva is close to the lake and marinas. 39.0464.550858, [hotelluise.com/en](http://hotelluise.com/en)

**Lago di Como la Brevia.** These Lago di Como specialists rent privately owned holiday homes. 49.8178.997.8744, [lakecomo.info](http://lakecomo.info)

#### WHERE TO EAT

**Osteria Il Gallo.** This friendly, bustling restaurant near the main piazza of Riva del Garda is a popular family spot for locals. Try the *canederli al burro fuso* (bread dumplings with speck, swimming in butter) and a regional wine, Teroldego Rotaliano. 39.0464.556200, [osteriailgallo.com](http://osteriailgallo.com)

**La Darsena.** In addition to the great menu, this small hotel restaurant on the shore of Lago di Como offers docking for boats and a stunning view of Bellagio. Don't miss the seasonal chestnut spaghetti ice cream with chocolate sauce for dessert. 39.0344.43166, [hotelladarsena.it](http://hotelladarsena.it)

**Ristorante Al Boeuc.** This rustic tavern/enoteca (wine bar) in Orta San Giulio offers old-world ambience, with wooden beams and bottle racks that climb to the ceiling. Sample a classic Piemontese wine like a Barbera d'Asti or *barolo*, with creamy local Maccagno cheese, prosciutto, and bruschetta with truffles and radicchio. 39.0322.925854

#### TRAVEL OUTFITTERS

**Country Walkers.** The *ne plus ultra* of hiking tour providers offers travelers both luxury and adventure, with encyclopedic knowledge of the Lake District. 800.464.9255, [countrywalkers.com](http://countrywalkers.com)

**Ciclismo Classico.** This outfitter offers tours throughout the Lake Region for every age and skill level, from town cruiser to elite athlete. 800.866.7314, [ciclismoclassico.com](http://ciclismoclassico.com)

**Gardaseecharter.** With a fleet ranging from catamarans to live-aboard cruising boats, Gardaseecharter has boats available for lessons (with a skipper) or bareboat charters on Lago di Garda. 39.338.527.4554, [gscharter.com](http://gscharter.com)

#### WEB RESOURCES

**General information** [navigazione.laghi.it](http://navigazione.laghi.it)

**Lago di Como** [lakecomo.it](http://lakecomo.it)

**Lago di Garda** [gardatrentino.it/en/lake-garda](http://gardatrentino.it/en/lake-garda)

**Lago d'Orta** [orta.net](http://orta.net)

**Lago Maggiore** [illagomaggiore.com](http://illagomaggiore.com)

Ciclismo's European operations manager, Davide Marchegiano, a veteran cyclist and an articulate tour leader. Davide's staff of guides leads groups on cross-country rides of 6 to 15 days. Today, we'll do one loop of a popular Ciclismo tour along the Sarca River, which feeds into Lago di Garda.

In crisp morning air, on the outskirts of Riva del Garda, we pedal toward the Alps, past fruit orchards, vine-covered stone walls, and small, tidy farms. Approaching the village of Arco, we pass a group of rock climbers shouldering their gear to one of the local *vie ferrate*, prebolted climbing routes. Arco is a world capital for the sport, no surprise given the dizzying limestone cliffs that soar above the town to the west. Perched atop one of these cliffs is Castello di Arco, whose crenellated battlements date back to the 10th century.

Farther north, I'm surprised to find citrus trees around us even though snowy, 7,150-foot Monte Bondone is visible in the distance. Lago di Garda and the neighboring lakes are not far above sea level, resulting in microclimates that are more Mediterranean than alpine. Here in Arco, we even see palm trees planted along the road, and as we coast by one small farm, the aroma of freshly harvested olives fills the air. The olive groves of the Trentino lowlands are the northernmost in Italy.

Our path narrows and we turn onto the cobbled surface of a Roman-era bridge, stopping in a village called Dro for an espresso at a *paninoteca* oddly named the Green Bar. Across the sunlit piazza is a Romanesque church with an incongruous Russian-style onion dome, one of many reminders that this alpine region of Italy is very much a part of northern Europe.

Leaving Dro, we pedal fast along a manicured bike path to Pietramurata, arriving at the family-run winery of Gino Pedrotti, a favorite watering hole on Ciclismo Classico's tours. Pedrotti's specialty is vino santo Trentino, a rare and delicate wine that he makes from Trentino's indigenous

## NOT TO BE MISSED

### Save Time for Milan

Milan has an international reputation as a center of *haute couture*, high finance, and ultra-hip media. But if you're spending a day or two on your way to the lakes, you might want to investigate historic Milan as well. Here are some notable landmarks.

#### Il Duomo

*Piazza del Duomo Via Arcivescovado 1*

If you never look at another church, see this one. The world's second-largest cathedral is an architectural marvel that took 500 years to build.

#### Castello Sforzesco

*Piazza Castello*

Impressively huge, this restored medieval fort and ducal palace was originally built by Milan's notorious Visconti family in the 14th century and rebuilt and expanded in the next century by the Sforzas. In its lush park setting, the castle now houses museums, a library, and Michelangelo's unfinished final art work, the *Rondanini Pietà*.

#### La Scala

*Via Filodrammatici 2*

This is the spiritual and physical home of world opera and its great names, from Verdi to Pavarotti. Recently renovated, Teatro alla Scala opened in 1778 and still hosts major performances. If the opera is sold out when you're in town, catch a tour of the venue and its museum.

#### Santa Maria delle Grazie

*Piazza Santa Maria delle Grazie 2 (off Corso Magenta)*

One of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous paintings, *The Last Supper*, is actually a mural in this church and Dominican convent.



#### WEB EXCLUSIVE

Want to share your own photos of the Lake District or Milan? Visit us online at [continental.com/magazine](http://continental.com/magazine) and add to our virtual photo album.





**Facing page: cycling by Lago di Garda; this page, from left: despite the proximity to the snowy alps, lakeside palms are a common sight near Lago Maggiore; pick up a bottle — or two — at Gino Pedrotti's winery near Lago di Cavedine**

Nosiola grape. His daughters fuss over guests, bringing us plates of local delicacies, pickled vegetables, marinated trout, locally grown prosciutto, pancetta, and a fine artisanal cheese, Spressa delle Giudicarie. The meal ends with a glass of vino santo and another reminder of the local northern influence — a slice of the best apple strudel I've tasted outside of Vienna.

We reembark for Lago di Garda, spinning hard along the east bank of the Sarca, past pine forest and the ancient rock slides of the Marocche geologic preserve. Back in Riva, Davide locks our bicycles in the hotel basement. Although today's ride was only a segment of Ciclismo Classico's regular excursion, I can honestly call it one of the best cycling experiences I've ever had.

### *a lake of saints*

Coiomonte, a tantalizing *frazione*, or village, in the western end of the Lake District, straddles a steep road near the town of Armeno. Equipped with Gore-Tex boots and a Leki trekking pole, I'm prepared to set off over the undulating hills that lie between Lago d'Orta and Lago Maggiore. My hosts are Alessandro Pini and Fiorella Casartelli, two exuberant veteran guides with Country Walkers, an international adventure travel outfitter based in Vermont.

A short drive from my new hotel, the elegant San Rocco on the shore of Lago d'Orta, we pay a visit to Omnidiet, a small, comfortable inn. Over a glass of classic Piemontese Barbera, I get my first sample of Toma, a mild, semihard cheese from one of the nearby dairy farms. After lunch, we head up the road and strike out north on our first hike, passing a leaf-covered trailhead and padding over soft earth between stands of chestnut and birch trees. Alessandro satisfies my curiosity by recounting the lore surrounding our hotel's namesake. St. Rocco was a 14th-century healer of plague victims, always depicted in religious paintings and statues with a telltale lesion on his leg.



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The highlight of today's trek is Tre Montagnette, a series of three adjacent peaks. At the 3,540-foot summit of one, Fiorella lays out the panoramic view for me: to the west, Lago d'Orta; to the east, Lago Maggiore, with an afternoon ferry churning its way across; and dominating the northern horizon, Monte Rosa, at 15,203 feet the second-highest peak in the Alps.

Over breakfast the next morning, we watch the early sunlight drench Isola di San Giulio, a fairytale setting just 1,200 feet offshore. A seminary and medieval basilica dominate the island, and their warm colors of stone and stucco reflect off Orta's placid surface. The island and the little peninsula town of Orta San Giulio are named for St. Julius of Novara, who, much like Ireland's St. Patrick, is said to have banished snakes from the shores of his island.

Another saint enters the picture on our next hike, a morning climb up Orta's Sacro Monte. A cobblestone path passes 20 small 16th-century chapels that depict the life of St. Francis of Assisi with frescoes and elaborate statuary. The payoff at the end of the "sacred mountain" ascent is a postcard vista: the lake, the small island, and the tapestry of the green pine forest on the opposite shore.

### *silk and george clooney*

Heading out on my last day of trekking with Country Walkers, my guides and I find ourselves in beachfront traffic in the town of Stresa, on the west bank of Lago Maggiore. The ornate Grand Hotel des Iles Borromees on our left briefly takes me back to my college literature classes. Parts of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* are set on this very spot. But the spirit of Hemingway is one Maggiore attraction I'll forgo for another time. Our destination today is a brisk day hike on the shores of Lago di Como.

These days, Lago di Como is home to two industries: designer silk and George Clooney. The movie star's recent purchase of a villa in Laglio has amped up the region's public profile. But Lago di Como's appeal still lies in iconic gems like the enchanting Bellagio peninsula and the lake's lavish pre-alpine setting and signature Mediterranean climate.

Following a light lunch in the tiny *comune* of Lenno, where I had my first taste of sautéed *persico*, Lago di Como's succulent native perch, we begin our climb on the edge of town, over earthen and cobblestone paths and through hilly upper hamlets and olive groves. The broad expanse of deep water below us resembles a vivid blue-black carpet. Our trail winds down a steep gorge, past torrents of alpine water, and up to Tremezzo, home of the historic palazzo, Villa Carlotta.

In the village of Mezzegra, we chat with the parish priest



Facing page: one of San Giulio's cobblestone streets; this page, clockwise from top: the unique Madonna del Ghisallo Cycling Museum near Lago di Como; the house where Mussolini was executed; a ferry boat crossing Lago di Como

of the church of Sant'Abbondio, whose bells peal, by coincidence, just as we mount the little hill to the churchyard. Alessandro stops me for moment and points to a modest home beyond the gate, where a wisp of wood smoke rises in the dusk. In 1945, Alessandro tells me, the dictator Benito Mussolini and his mistress spent their last night in that very house. The following day they were executed there by the partisans, Italy's antifascist resistance fighters. This sober vignette, it occurs to me, is the only grim recollection I'll take with me after five days among the magic of these lakes.

With darkness falling, the three of us make our way back into Lenno for farewells and a last glass of vino.

*California-based freelance writer Jim Cornfield calls his style of travel journalism "adrenaline lite."*

**Getting There:** Continental offers nonstop service to Milan from its hub in New York/Newark.