

The promenade in Bellagio is great for soaking in the spectacular scenery

The sweet life

This weekend destination of the rich and famous is a perfect spot to get a taste of real luxury

LAKE COMO



GETTING THERE

British Airways, Swiss International Airlines, Air France, Turkish Airlines, Air India, Air Emirates have regular flights between Mumbai and Milan.

MILAN TO LAKE COMO

Milan is a 40-minute train from Como. There are regular trains between Milan's Stazione Centrale and Stazione Porta Garibaldi, and San Giovanni, Como's main station.

AROUND LAKE COMO

The lake area and towns situated on its shores are best explored by boat. Log on to http://www.nav-igazione.laghi.it/home_e.html



LAKE COMO, ITALY
KALPANA SUNDER

George Clooney has a home here. So do maverick tycoon Richard Branson and the Versace family! Captivating lake-views, pure air, and tiny villages with just a couple of thousand residents that ooze old world charm are just a few things that add to its wide appeal. It's a bright, sunny day in Lake Como, a popular weekend destination near Milan that's just a stone's throw away from the Swiss border. The place attracts many day-trippers who drive down here in their flashy cars.

Lake Como's claim to fame is that

this three-pronged lake — or Lago de Camo as it's locally known — is the deepest lake in Europe. It was gouged out by glaciers and is surrounded by hills, morphing into snow-clad peaks, and lush Mediterranean foliage. The region's jaw-dropping scenery has been the backdrop to many Hollywood movies like *Ocean's Twelve* and *Casino Royale*!

Ferry of a lifetime

We take a ferry on Lake Como to get a sense of life on its shores in a day. Luxurious million-dollar villas of reclusive celebrities dot the lake's banks along with smudges of villages and a water-colour mistiness cloaking up the whole lake like a shawl. Our first stop is Bellagio (*belle* is Italian for pretty and *agio* means comfort), which is one of the prettiest towns on the lake. Also referred to as 'The Pearl of the

Lake', it's situated on a promontory where the lake divides. There is an Italian feel to an otherwise Swiss scenario here — electric cars purr along the narrow roads and arcaded buildings sell the famous silk stoles, ties and dresses that this region is famous for. What appeals to me is the vertical layout of this place!

An uphill climb in Bellagio

Steep flights of steps everywhere serve as streets, and we traipse up and down the warren of alleys in our enthusiasm, discovering quaint souvenir shops that leave our quadricep muscles protesting and our appetites raging! We have a vegetarian meal of gnocchi with potatoes and a risotto washed down with some Vino Rosso, the local red wine. Post lunch, we take a leisurely stroll along the lake to the white Villa Melzi, with its immaculately maintained gardens. This used to be the

home of Duke Francesco Melzi, the first Vice President of the Italian Republic.

A peek at the Swiss Alps

Higher up is the Villa Serbelloni, which now houses the Rockefeller Foundation. Far in the distance, we see the jagged line of the Swiss Alps — villages sprinkled on their slopes — and we soak in the general air of indolence. Ferry boats hoot and the gulls cry overhead.

We hear all about the \$1,000-a-night Villa D'Este, a luxury hotel 3 km north of Como with a long list of celebrity guests like Robert De Niro and Greta Garbo! We are so drawn to the place that it seems like the setting of our retirement dreams. Someday, we will have a villa here and Como will be home.

Kalpana is a Japanese language specialist based in Chennai who's also a freelance writer and photographer



Ario electric cars are the local transport in Bellagio



Browsing for souvenirs at a market in Como town



A little town on the slopes around the lake

PHOTOS: KALPANA SUNDER