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MAGAZINE



Italy's Lake Garda Offers Exquisite Wine and Food, Rustic Charms, and a Touch of Glamour

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I am zipping across Lake Garda on a sleek, cream-colored powerboat, sipping rosé sparkling wine made in the surrounding hills. Wind in my hair, sunglasses on, gazing out at the distant Italian Alps, it feels unreal—truly a sliver of *la dolce vita*.

Most Americans have never heard of Lake Garda—the largest lake in Italy, conveniently located between Milan and Venice. But everyone knows glamorous Lake Como to the northwest, playground of celebrities like George Clooney and Madonna. Lake Garda has a reputation for being less posh and luxurious than its cousin, and I guess it depends upon what you are looking for. While it may not have the same number of five-star hotels or celebrity weddings on its resumé, the area's more rustic charms include 250 mainly family-owned wineries, excellent hiking and biking trails, and UNESCO World Heritage sites—not to mention traditional trattorias serving regional food.



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But the glamour is here as well, starting with that boat ride. Bertoldi Boats has been showing visitors the charms of Lake Garda for more than 100 years, since the first tourists arrived in the area. Over that storied history, guests have included Elizabeth Taylor and Winston Churchill, and the company boasts a stylish fleet of boats available for private rental, as well as scheduled itineraries.

I'd recommend a private tour: English-speaking captains and guides can build your perfect day, and it's an ideal way to get the lay of the land. Starting from Peschiera del Garda, a charming town on the southern shore of Lake Garda, we sped past cormorants and crested grebes, with ospreys circling overhead, to the peninsula of Sirmione.

Approaching by water is breathtaking—the spectacular Scaligero Castle, built in the 14th century, appears to emerge out of the lake itself, medieval walls rising from the water. Our speedboat traveled a canal right alongside the castle and under a bridge where tourists gaped from above, and we enjoyed a water's-eye view of the historic town. Visitors can tour Scaligero Castle, stroll the streets of the car-free town center, and visit the thermal baths. But I had a lunch date across the lake.





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Cala delle Sirene is a beach club on a lovely cove on the lake, shaded by ancient olive trees. Entry comes with a stylish sunbed and umbrella for the day, and the lunch offerings are not your average beach-shack fare. Think chilled octopus salad, grass-fed burgers with Parmesan sauce, and, of course, plenty of spritzes. This is the area where the classic cocktail of sparkling water, sparkling wine, and a bitter liqueur was invented—and it makes perfect sense. The region is home to Trentino, where excellent Prosecco is made, and the sunshiny Mediterranean climate demands a festive low-alcohol quaff. In every town in the Veneto, including nearby Verona, locals mark the end of the workday with spritz hour—drinks usually accompanied by salty snacks.

After a refreshing dip in Lake Garda, it was time to return to my hotel. Le Ali del Frassino bills itself as “the nature’s way resort,” perched on the edge of Lake Frassino, a UNESCO World Heritage Site recognized for its biodiversity and unique flora and fauna. The hotel sits in the midst of a 17-acre preserve, and a sign near the reception building, built with all-sustainable materials and running on solar power, shows pictures of the dozens of birds that guests may spot on the property.



My cozy room is tucked into a historic low-slung building with thick stone walls and a charming outdoor living room where at dusk a half-dozen votive lights—among the likely hundred or so throughout the property—were lit as if by magic. The hotel has a delightful spa, with plunge pools and steam rooms, and an infinity pool overlooking the lake.



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The next morning, I was drowsy from jet lag, and the generous buffet breakfast was almost too much to contemplate: a spread of fresh-baked croissants and breads, eggs and sausage, yogurt, and fruit. A very fancy self-serve espresso machine generated everything from iced lattes to cappuccino—as long as my caffeine-deprived brain could sort out which button to push.

Le Ali del Frassino is surrounded by the vineyards of Lugana, one of the many famous geographical wine classifications that surround the lake, from the aforementioned Trentino to Valpolicella. Because the lake is surrounded by both volcanic and glacial soils while also enjoying a unique climate that mixes Mediterranean (think olive trees and lemon trees) with Alpine, the area grows a wide range of grape varietals. In addition to the indigenous grapes grown for centuries, the Lake Garda region produces everything from Riesling to Chardonnay—and that luscious sparkling wine I enjoyed on the boat.



Italian wine regulations are very strict. It's been only a few years since area producers, other than Prosecco, have been allowed to make sparkling wine, under a new Garda DOC, a certification applied to Italian wines that are of superior quality, determined by grape varietal and production area, as well as the techniques for processing and aging.



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Whether you want to taste these new expressions of the area or classic wines, plan ahead, as many wineries have small staffs and limited tasting hours. Visiting these cellars gives a peek into traditions going back centuries, but it also requires an appointment. Wineries like Santa Sofia, a 200-year-old winery in Valpolicella with a storied cellar, allow guests to book a tasting and tour online. There, you can explore some of the classic wines, as well as some newer offerings under the Garda DOC label.

If you didn't plan ahead or want to explore all of Italy's wine regions in a single stop, visit [Tenuta San Leone](#). Part of a family-run company with holdings throughout Italy, it is one of the few places in the country where you can taste and purchase wines from throughout the boot.

Lake Garda doesn't yet have a huge wine tourism infrastructure, which is part of its charm—there are no bus tours, and the roads are narrow and windy. Your best bet, if you're planning to taste, is to rent a car and designate a driver, or hire a so-called NCC, a car with driver, from a place like Benacus Car Service. A chauffeur-driven tour around a spectacular lake, visiting rustic wineries? That's truly the best of both worlds.