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REAL COOL KID

THE SHORES OF LAKE COMO ARE ELEGANTLY FRILLED WITH GRANDE DAME HOTELS. NOW A CLEAN-LINED UPSTART IS BRINGING AN UNBUTTONED, PARED-BACK LOOK TO THE PARTY

BY MICHELLE JANA CHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY PATRICIA PARINEJAD



WHERE TO STAY

'FANCY A RIDE?' 'Sure,' I said.

Duilio pointed at the mahogany Riva Jetto tied to the dock. 'That's the pretty one,' he said, tossing me the keys. 'You don't need a boat licence. Have fun.'

'Do you need to have it back by a certain time?' I asked, pretending it was no big deal.

'No. It's all yours.'

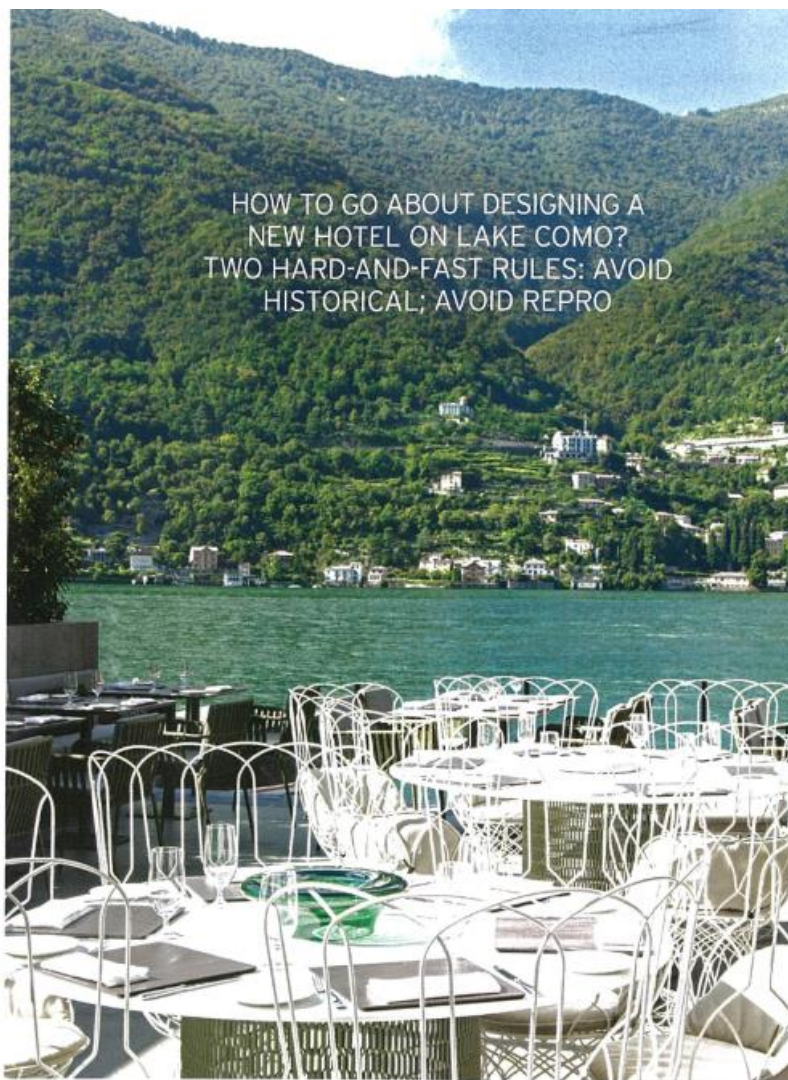
I untied the ropes, turned the key and motored, rather too aggressively at first, into the wide-open, mossy-green waters. Had I really just been given a Riva to cruise Lake Como? I pinched myself.

I'm not the first to be seduced by the unimaginable allure of Como. It has served as an escape from hot, sweaty, city summers since the Roman Empire. The lakeshore architecture is a testament to this history, from the walled city of Como built by Julius Caesar to Pliny the Younger's villa, from Renaissance palazzos with grand façades, 10 sash windows by five, manicured gardens and cypress trees, to pretty little houses in butter-yellow, cream and rose with terracotta-tiled roofs.

Yet it is still the lake itself that's the wonder, more like three steep-sided fjords joined at a nexus – which by chance is the enchanting town of Bellagio – with slender proportions and deep waters bound by imposing mountains clad in chestnut trees and conifers. Where the cliffs are too sheer, pale granite peeps through the thick vegetation.

The latest, greatest place to stay among all this incredible loveliness is Il Sereno, the second property by have Le Sereno in St Barth's, a handsome hotel, clean and elementary, and the favourite of a smart Manhattan crowd. The family choose their destinations well. And their designers. In St Barth's, they went with Parisian mastermind Christian Liaigre. Here they plumped for Patricia Urquiola, one of the most prolific and talked-about interior, furniture and product designers (Mandarin Oriental in Barcelona, Das Stue in Berlin), who also dabbles in architecture. And boy, she has created a modern masterpiece.

So how to go about designing a new hotel on Lake Como to stand proud next to big-hitters such as Villa d'Este and Villa Tremezzo? Two hard-and-fast rules: avoid historical; avoid repro. But it's still complicated, not least because Mr and Mrs Contreras are architects themselves,



HOW TO GO ABOUT DESIGNING A NEW HOTEL ON LAKE COMO? TWO HARD-AND-FAST RULES: AVOID HISTORICAL; AVOID REPRO

as is their daughter, and their sons are civil engineers, which is the training you might need to build a hotel jutting over the water and cut into the solid rock of a cliff-face. But the family assure me they aren't meddlesome. 'I called [Urquiola] because she's better than us,' the father, Ignacio Contreras, says frankly and with a twinkle. 'She's a hurricane.'

Como has a long history of architectural movements, even as recently as the early 20th century. The simple, stark Casa de Fascio in the town of Como is a precursor to modernism and seriously radical when you realise it was constructed not far off 100 years ago. The building was, in

part, Urquiola's very obvious inspiration, or starting place. But instead of concrete, here there is glass and sliding louvres made of toulipier wood; it's still boxy and linear with strong grid work, yet almost camouflaged by wobbly reflections of the lake and green walls. There are echoes of Scandinavian cabins and Japanese *ryokans* where nature plays a more dominant role than the man-made.

'We didn't want to make an impact,' Ignacio tells me. 'You don't want to come to a place like Como and say, "We are here, we've arrived."'

But move inside and the design statement is strong. As the new art director at Cassina and a key player at B&B Italia, Moroso and Alessi, Urquiola is an interiors phenomenon. At the centre of the atrium is a stairway caged by glass and vertical copper poles with

Clockwise from above: the lake-side terrace of the restaurant at Il Sereno; the hotel entrance hall; sun loungers by the pool; a bedroom. Previous page, the lobby



wide, heavy-set treads that seem to levitate. In the 30 suites, which all face the lake, there are dozens of styles of chair, sofa and lounger – hand-braided nautical rope; a mix of leather and worsted-spun fabrics in saddlebag brown, denim blue and steel grey – alongside iridescent glass tables shimmering in the pinks, blues and greens of soap bubbles. In the bathrooms tortoiseshell travertine sinks stand opposite matt-white bathtubs. And the lighting is just right: bright lamps for reading, subtle elsewhere.

The gardens are bountiful, thanks to Patrick Blanc, a rock-star botanist with green hair and green nail polish, who's responsible for the 300 different plant species in the vertiginous green walls. On the horizontal plane, landscaper Flavio Pollano has terraced the rock-face, planting orange trees, oleander, fan

palms and a large plane tree beside the green-marble lap pool.

There is a very good casual restaurant, with seating outside and in, by Andrea Berton of Milan's one-Michelin-starred Ristorante Berton. It serves pan-fried *verallo* fish from the lake, caught by a groundsman, a two-inch-high veal Milanese coated in breadcrumbs as fine as pixels, and *al dente* minestrone which tastes more like a warm, crunchy salad. All of this is paired with mostly Italian wines, including 20 choices of grape, and *spumante* that puts Champagne to shame.

Il Sereno has been crowned the innovative, invigorating design hotspot on the lake. And the Contreras family tell me they are dreaming up a third hotel in Venice, and then perhaps the South of France, promising new properties with enviable addresses by the most sought-after designers.

I loved the location. And I loved the design. But of course what I loved most were the three Rivas. And really that is the only thing you should do on Como. Take a boat out. Hug the shore with all its glories. Then make your way to the middle of the lake, kill the engine, take off your clothes and jump in.

Elegant Resorts (+44 1244 897515; elegantresorts.co.uk) offers three nights in a Lario Suite from £1,480 per person, including breakfast, flights and transfers

MADLY, DEEPLY

STARCHITECT PATRICIA URQUIOLA'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE LAKE

'What I like best about Lake Como is the feeling that you are back in the 1950s. I adore the colours, the changing light throughout the day, the green and blue reflections in the water, the sharp lines of the mountains and sky. For those of us living and working in Milan, Como is our closest escape. It makes a nice break for lunch on a sunny day. I like to sit outside and just watch the lake, or take a small motor boat to get out on the water. Looking at its surface has such a calming effect on me. One of my favourite places on the lakeshore is the 16th-century Villa Pliniana where the Sereno hotel group holds special events. The waterfalls coming down the mountain behind it actually flow through the villa and into the lake. That cascading water has been written about for 2,000 years, by the likes of Pliny the Younger and Leonardo da Vinci. The guest list of those who have stayed at the villa is incredible and includes Byron, Shelley, Puccini, Bellini, Liszt and Rossini, who composed the opera *Tancredi* there. The history, the heritage: this is what makes Lake Como so very special.'