

Lake expectations: the five-star hotel causing ripples in Como

Patricia Urquiola's creation is piquing the interest of design aficionados and longstanding Como visitors



View of Lake Como from a suite in Il Sereno © Patricia Parinejad
September 28, 2016

On a hazy September afternoon on Lake Como, there is an unusual amount of speedboat activity. Unusual even for Como — the speedboat's spiritual home. Every couple of minutes, a wooden Riva boat swooshes by with a bronzed shirtless skipper at the helm and, more often than not, a couple of bikini-clad friends lounging behind on deck. As they approach the calm jade waters in front of Il Sereno, the motor dies slightly, giving the crew a few seconds to peer through their Ray-Bans at the guests sunbathing around the hotel's lakeside infinity pool. Some snap photos on their phones, before revving up and nonchalantly zooming out of sight.

The unveiling of Il Sereno, a sparkling new five-star hotel, at the end of August has caused ripples of excitement across Como. Not only is it the first contemporary design hotel to be built on the lake, but its opening night took the form of a very exclusive wedding party: the nuptials of Spotify co-founder Daniel Ek and partner Sofia Levander. Security was upped significantly for the weekend-long affair, not least to protect Ek's entourage, which included best man Mark Zuckerberg, master of ceremonies Chris Rock and the couple's appointed wedding singer, pop star Bruno Mars.

The lakeside setting was surely one selling point for the couple. Another is that Il Sereno, which comprises 30 suites, including two penthouses, has been entirely conceived by architect-designer du jour, Patricia Urquiola. Every element of the hotel, from the bronze taps in the bathroom, to the leather straps around the globe light-fittings, to the extraordinary, apparently weightless, wooden staircase in the lobby, has been designed or chosen by Urquiola herself. As a cohesive work of design, it is a staggering success.

Il Sereno's proprietor, Luis Contreras, whose Le Sereno hotel in the Caribbean was designed by the Parisian interior designer Christian Liaigre, had been looking to expand his luxurious Sereno brand for a while before he homed in on Como. A couple of Milanese architects who had stayed in his St Barths hotel alerted him to a potential spot on the south of the lake — Villa Flora, a dilapidated restaurant in Torno which once did a good trade in local weddings, only a 10-minute drive from the city of Como.

Como may be best known for its elaborate Renaissance palazzos, of which Villa d'Este still reigns supreme, but as Contreras points out, over a delicate *parmigiana* in Il Sereno's chic lake-level restaurant, "We are a few miles away from Milan — arguably the global capital of design!" Indeed, principal design manufacturers including B&B Italia, Cassina, Molteni and Olivari all have factories in the area. The plan to build something contemporary was therefore obvious to him. "We knew we would not do a fake old hotel," he says. When it came to choosing an architect and designer, Urquiola, who lives and works in Milan, and was named Wallpaper magazine's designer of the year in 2015, was the natural choice.

When Contreras first visited the site in 2011, however, it was its verdant potential that made the strongest impression. "I looked at the place from the water," he remembers dreamily, "and the first thing that struck me was that its topography is vertical and everything is green. So I decided to call my friend Patrick Blanc." The French botanist, known for his vertical gardens, in particular the extraordinary living façade of Paris's Musée du Quai Branly, loved the spot, and agreed to create the hotel's high-rise gardens.

After the lengthy process of convincing the local authorities that Como needed a 21st-century hotel, it was necessary to excavate deep into the stone hillside (to provide enough depth for a discreet service entrance), before construction began. Contreras, who wanted a building that was at once contemporary and timeless, dismisses any suggestion that it is a radical structure: "It is rationalist — and the architect of rationalism, Giuseppe Terragni, was from Como." Almost all of the old villa was razed, aside from the *darsena*, the stone archways where boats were kept, and which now provide a fabulous vista from the hotel's restaurant.

The use of natural materials, to blend with the shifting colours of the lake, but also to make the most of the local quarries and suppliers, was something Contreras and Urquiola felt strongly about. For the infinity pool, a marble called *verde karzai*, was chosen to match the colour of the lake in the afternoons. Patrick Blanc's two fragrant vertical gardens — "Le Miroir Vert Du Lac" and "The Canyon" — composed of more than 2,000 plant species, counter the smooth edges of the hotel's Rubik's cube façade, with an organic liveliness.

All this is catnip for design aficionados, and word has spread fast among those who know their Urquiola from their Isokon. The bar and restaurant is booked up with lunches and dinners for the Milan fashion and design set, and the hotel is already taking bookings for next year. A handful of guests have already made discreet inquiries as to whether any of Urquiola's pieces are for sale (answer: not for the moment).

But Il Sereno is also piquing the interest of longstanding Como visitors, particularly from the US, UK and France, who come to the lake to unwind, and are curious to try something different. This was definitely the case for one American couple in their sixties who we noticed at the reception desk, requesting, sotto voce, a “little tutorial” on the room’s high-tech lighting systems.



The hotel as seen from the lake © Rebecca Rose

In the wood-panelled sanctuary of our suite, we pretended it was our own minimalist lakeside apartment: sleek modernist sofas and smooth wood tables, perfectly positioned fruit bowls, the anglepoise lamp of your dreams. But for guests who still want a taste of palazzo life, Il Sereno has a 20-year lease on nearby Villa Pliniana, a fabulous waterside palace built in 1573, and named for none other than Plinys Elder and Younger, who discovered a spring there in the 1st century AD.

The villa, one of the finest on the lake, was visited by Byron, Shelley, Stendhal and Rossini, who composed “Tancredi” on the piano that still stands in the villa’s ornate salon today.

To provide a certain continuity with Il Sereno, Urquiola has designed select pieces of furniture — a startling injection of contemporaneity among all the gilt and frescoes. The 19 bedrooms have also been given the requisite high-tech luxury overhaul, and an infinity pool and spa installed.

Whizzing back to the hotel on one of Il Sereno’s three custom-made Riva speedboats, I wondered which of these two venues I would choose for my wedding if I were the co-founder of the largest music streaming service in the world. This was obviously a dilemma for Ek too — one he overcame by sensibly hiring out both: Villa Pliniana for the ceremony, and Il Sereno for partying until dawn.

by: Rebecca Rose

Rebecca Rose was a guest of Il Sereno. Suites from €800. Villa Pliniana is available for private hire also through ilsereno.com