

Living LA DOLCE VITA

We've sampled some of Italy's finest treasures, from sparkling seas and lakes, to cities bursting with history and culture



112 | MINDFUL TRAVEL





Clockwise from top: Bellagio town on Lake Como (also seen on previous spread); the Mandarin Oriental Lago di Como exterior; the hotel's stylish lakefront lawn

**PERFECT
FOR
Natural
beauty**

Unwind at LAKE COMO

Ultimate glamour meets fabulous scenery on the shores of Lake Como.

There's something irresistibly seductive about the power of music – and back in the 1820s, Italian opera star Giuditta Pasta (yes, Pasta) sat beneath a cypress tree in her villa's garden on the shore of Lake Como to rehearse a song.

Across the lake, the equally celebrated composer Vincenzo Bellini heard the thrilling voice echoing across the water and was enchanted. It was the start of a heady love affair that inspired his opera, *Norma*. The magical air of romance, scented with jasmine and mimosa, still lingers in the stunning surroundings of the villa, now lovingly restored to glory as a Mandarin Oriental hotel.

It has had a complete facelift over the past year, with blues and greens bringing the colours of the lake into the interiors. There's a Time Ritual spa and, best of all, an outdoor pool floating on the lake.

For anyone new to the Italian Lakes, the drive down to the shore of Como is simply breathtaking, with snow-capped

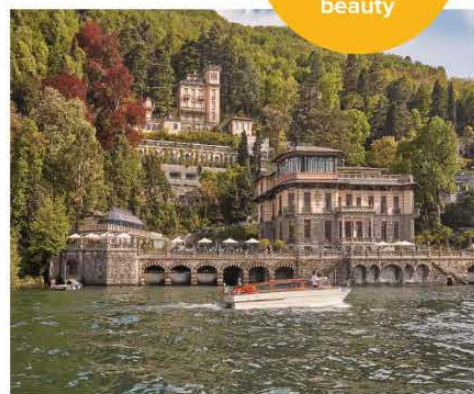
mountains in the distance and clear blue skies over the rippling water.

The lake's timeless appeal still attracts celebrities to this day. Boat taxis give a wide berth to the gorgeous lakeside home owned by George and Amal Clooney – there's a hefty fine for anyone who sails too close – but they all speak very highly of their world-famous resident who has brought even more glamour to the area.

A half-hour trip across the water takes you to Bellagio, and the must-see villa, with its magnificent lake views. It's also a hotspot for weddings, though guests have to be prepared for a steep climb.

For a gastronomic treat nearer to the Mandarin Oriental, take a five-minute boat transfer to restaurant Il Vapore, where the fabulous food, combined with a rosy sunset tinting the water, makes for a magical evening.

The town of Como has its own appeal, with waterside walks and fabulous shops



brimming with Italian silks. And back at the hotel, maybe try warbling your own tune as you wander through the lush botanical gardens and enjoy the verdant surroundings. Who knows who might be listening from across the lake...

🌟 **FIND OUT MORE** Visit the website at mandarinoriental.com

FLORENTINE *chic*

A luxurious designer hotel makes the perfect base for exploring Florence.

Florence is a city packed with treats, from the Uffizi Gallery to Giotto's Campanile, so if you're only there for a few days, how best to see the whole city? A Tuk Tuk tour ticks all the boxes, and takes you nipping around backstreets – if you're prepared for a few bumps on the cobbles.

Baking is at the heart of Italian food, and Roberto Buonamici, now in his 70s, has been making Cantucci Tuscan biscuits since he was 13. The almond biscuits, traditionally dipped in liqueur, are delicious. During a demonstration at Pasticceria Buonamici, he coaxes the ingredients into a dough on a cool marble table, to be rolled, cut and laid on trays ready for the oven. A new studio is due to open shortly if you'd like to create your own flavours of Italy.

Art, of course, is the soul of Florence – it's home to Michelangelo's David, Botticelli's Venus and Titian's Venus of

Urbino, among countless other treasures. For an exploration of Renaissance art, historian Alexandra Lawrence leads a variety of private tours around the city.

The fabulously stylish Portrait Firenze Hotel, overlooking the river Arno and the Ponte Vecchio bridge, has an impeccable fashion pedigree – it belongs to the world-famous luxury goods company Ferragamo. Stay in a suite and it's like having your own city-break flat, but with the benefit of top-notch housekeeping.

The hotel's cocktail bar mingles science and fabulous flavours, while the fusion restaurant offers an amazing selection of street food, scallops, sushi and main dishes – with a knockout salmon marinated in beetroot and sake.

After a hard day's culture, who could ask for more?

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PERFECT
FOR
Food and
culture

Clockwise from top: Dine at the hotel's Caffè dell'Oro with views of the Ponte Vecchio; the cathedral at sundown



Spa heaven in SARDINIA

Discover a feast for the senses on a visit to the idyllic Mediterranean island.

Surrounded by clear turquoise sea, Sardinia is a sensory paradise, famous for white sand beaches, crystal-clear waters and natural rugged beauty. The northern coast area in particular (Porto Cervo and Costa Smeralda) is famous for its summer visitors on superyachts – Beyoncé, Gwyneth Paltrow and European royalty are among the celebrities papped here.

The romantic Hotel Capo d'Orso is the perfect haven to take in the magnificent views of panoramic Palau. A boat will pick you up from its private jetty here for a three-hour sailing trip around the Archipelago La Maddalena, where the sea is so transparent that only its depth decides each shade of blue.

Famous for its healing waters, the true Sardinian Thalasso spa experience involves submerging yourself between

three pools of differing temperatures – from bath temperature to cool to cold. Each small pool is full of water jets that target your upper and lower back, all designed to relax, de-stress and strengthen your body.

Hotel Capo d'Orso is one of eight Delphina hotels in northern Sardinia, each with its own beaches and boasting several boats including a magnificent 1927 sailing boat. You can arrange a private dinner on the beach, go dolphin and whale watching or have a romantic night-time cruise. And a morning trip to the winery Ledda in the Cannigione hills overlooking Costa Smeralda is a must. It's a heady experience – even before you begin sampling the delicious local wines...

★ **FIND OUT MORE** Visit the website at delphinahotels.co.uk



Clockwise from top: Outdoor pools at Hotel Capo d'Orso; dine looking out at sea; the hotel sits between two fabulous beaches

PERFECT
FOR
Relaxing and
rejuvenation



Clockwise from top: Naples during sunrise; Hotel Romeo's rooftop plunge pool; Naples is the birthplace of pizza

PERFECT
FOR
Exploring
history



Uncovering NAPLES

Discover the city with a dramatic past and vibrant present.

Naples is sometimes thought of as a staging post en route to the Amalfi Coast or the island of Capri. But it has much to offer in its own right – as anyone gripped by the novels of Elena Ferrante will know – and it's the perfect city break to immerse yourself in culture and cuisine.

The first must-see is nearby Pompeii. In 79AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted to submerge the city and its inhabitants in clouds of volcanic ash. Today, the roads are left intact, flanked by the remains of lavish villas, more modest residences, theatres, public baths and more.

Underground Naples offers very different insights into the city's past. In the historic centre, 40 metres below the ground, is a labyrinth of tunnels begun by the ancient Greeks and Romans, who channelled water for the city. Back on ground level, the streets teem with life.

Vendors sell anything from bags to trinkets, handmade puppets and flowers. Linger at cake shops selling sfogliatelle, babas and delizia al limone, and visit shops selling pasta, almond-flour taralli biscuits and all flavours of ice cream.

Naples boasts over 500 churches. The church of Gesù Nuovo, with its black stone exterior, opens into a magnificent baroque interior rich in sculpture and painting. And don't miss the Duomo, the great cathedral of Naples.

Fittingly for the birthplace of the iconic Italian treat, there are pizza restaurants everywhere in Naples. Try Pizzeria Brandi, reputed inventor of the pizza margherita.

We stayed in the five-star Hotel Romeo. Designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, the luxurious 79-room accommodation faces the harbour and every comfort has been thought of, right



down to the Nespresso machine in the bedroom. There are two restaurants, one with a Michelin star, a heated rooftop plunge pool with views across Naples and a basement luxury spa.

So don't pass Naples by – the city is a vibrant, 21st-century box of delights.

★ **FIND OUT MORE** Visit the website at originaltravel.co.uk