

LA DOLCE VITA

“UNLIKE MY USUAL OUTING ON THE RIVER WYE, WE’VE JUST ROWED ACROSS LAKE COMO”



Holidaying on Lake Como with coaching in rowing and Italian cuisine – what could be better? **Patricia Carswell** takes a trip to Bellagio with a surprising twist →





I'm doubled up, helpless with laughter, and the crew banter is in full swing. As usual, I'm the butt of the jokes, and as usual it's my fault for wearing a ridiculous combination of colours that, according to my shipmates, make me look like an ice cream. My muscles are aching and my hands are sore. Just a typical outing, then.

Except that it isn't. Until yesterday I'd never met my crewmates – an unlikely composite crew from Wales, Switzerland, Canada and Australia. And unlike my usual outing up and down the river Wye, we've just rowed across Lake Como.

I'm in Bellagio, on a holiday with Rowing the World – a company that organises rowing tours around the globe, from the Maldives to Ireland. A far cry from the blistered rigours of a

training camp, these holidays live up to their name: the non-rowing activities are just as important as the time on the water, so much so that when there are non-rowing spouses or partners on the trip there is a separate programme designed just for them.

To ease us into the routine, our first foray onto the lake is on kayaks with our local guide, Michele Gandola, who rowed for Italy in his youth and now runs Bellagio Water Sports, offering kayak and stand-up paddleboard tours of Lake Como. When we arrive the wind is starting to whip up and we can see a few white horses.

"Are you feeling brave?" asks Mich. He knows the answer. We're rowers, after all, and determined to get out on the water. Before long the conditions defeat us – half an hour of vigorous paddling

gets us nowhere – but on a calmer day the trip would be idyllic.

Mercifully our first rowing day dawns bright and windless, and we spend a blissful three hours paddling across flat, glassy water to the pretty town of Varenna and back. Hosted by the local rowing club, Unione Sportiva Bellagina, we're in a coastal coxed quad – super-stable and endlessly forgiving.

Fully in the holiday spirit, the pace is gently steady and we're encouraged to enjoy the views. We row past elegant villas, marvelling at tiny churches perched on vertiginous hillsides and a funicular railway heading vertically up the cliff. Trees of the deepest green throw their reflections across the water and ducks fly overhead. It's quite perfect, and when the church bell tolls as we head back to shore we feel sure it

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Rowing across
Lake Como
towards Bellagio

Far left: The view
from Unione
Sportiva Bellagina

Below left: Villa del
Balbianello from
the water

Below: Cheese
plate at Baita
del Belvedere



NOT FOR YOU IF...

- You're a novice rower – you do need some experience and a decent level of fitness.
- You're exclusively a single sculler.
- You're afraid of deep water.
- You're only there for the rowing.

DEFINITELY FOR YOU IF...

- You want a trip that balances rowing with fun.
- You want to row in one of the most beautiful places in the world.
- You're flexible and easy-going.
- You love to eat!

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was arranged just for us.

The evening is all about food – we are to learn how to cook like an Italian mamma! We’re collected from our hotel by the redoubtable Daniela, who whisks us around local, family-run food shops, buying ingredients for our cookery class before handing us over to the equally indomitable Silvana.

Under Silvana’s tutelage we make pasta tubes (garganelli) from scratch – harder than it looks – alongside bruschetta and tiramisu. As with the rowing, the event is accompanied by much hilarity, helped along by lavish servings of prosecco and local red wines.

The following morning there’s snow on the hills and we brace ourselves for the cold, but once again we find ourselves rowing in sunshine. This time our first stop is Menaggio, with the imposing Villa Carlotta and Grand Hotel Tremezzo reminding us what a classy place Lake Como is – the church bells once again welcome us into the harbour.

Above: Bellagio

Top right: Making pasta – just like an Italian mamma!

Lower right: Prosecco on the beach

Our lunch stop is Lenno where we park the boats on a pebbly beach. One of the Australian guests is celebrating a birthday, and Mich surprises us with a bottle of prosecco. It’s not a bad way to spend a morning.

We take a tour around the terraced gardens of the spectacular Villa del Balbianello, built in the 18th century for a

(owned by a rower), with breathtaking views from high up the mountainside over the lake – all the more meaningful for having rowed it.

We part with promises to meet on another trip. We’ll need to save up – it isn’t cheap, coming in at €1,195 for three nights – but it is a brilliant way to combine rowing with holidaying.

“WHEN I GET HOME I DISCOVER THAT A LITTLE BIT OF MAGIC HAS OCCURRED”

cardinal and now better known as a film location (think Casino Royale and Star Wars: Episode II). After a lakeside lunch we see the villa from the water as we row past on our way back to Bellagio.

On our final evening we dine in the Baita del Belvedere

What’s more, when I get home I discover that a little bit of magic has occurred. I’m not sure what happened out there on Lake Como, but my technique has mysteriously improved. My catches are quicker and my strokes longer. Maybe it was all about the rowing, after all... 