

SOME ENCHANTED SHORE

Villa del Balbianello, on Lake Como, *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* and *Casino Royale* were both shot here. Opposite, George Clooney, who owns a villa on Lake Como, enjoying a stroll in the lakeside town of Argegno.

An aerial photograph of Villa del Balbianello, a grand 18th-century villa on the shores of Lake Como. The villa features a prominent red-tiled roof, two white bell towers, and a large central tower. The building is surrounded by lush greenery and a stone wall. In the background, the blue waters of the lake and the surrounding mountains are visible.

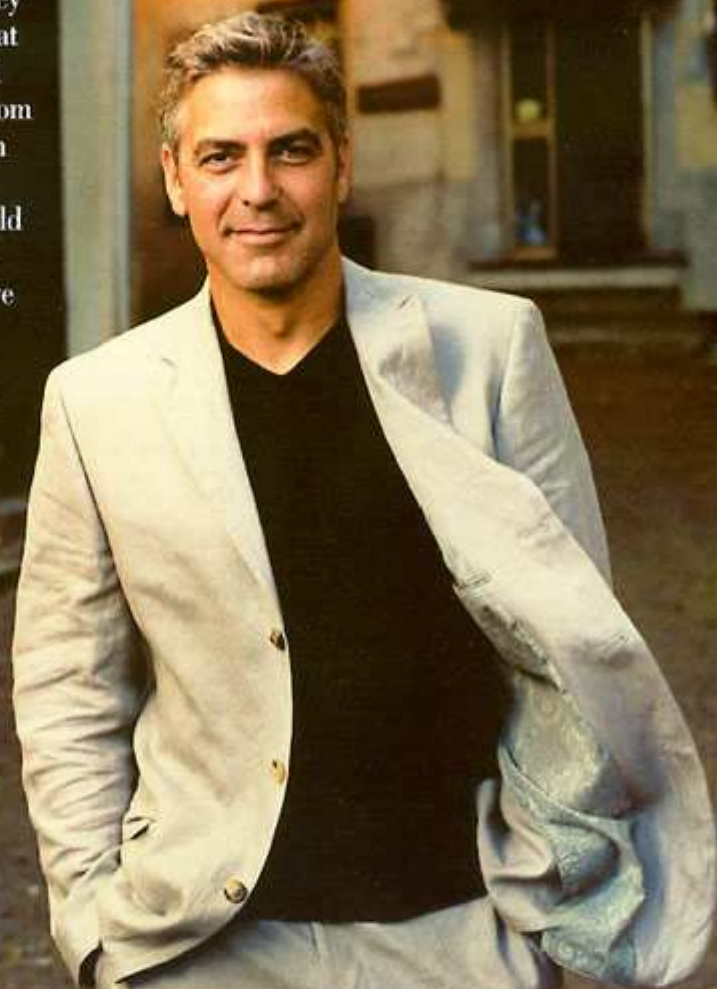
Crazy for L

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PHOTOGRAPH BY GIACOMO BRETZEL

SEPTEMBER 2007

Lake Como was the province of a few noble families, visited by artists, royalty, world leaders, and the cream of Old Hollywood. Then, in 2002, George Clooney put the tranquil Italian retreat squarely in the spotlight, and now reports have everyone from Bill Gates to Rupert Murdoch to Tom Cruise vacationing among its few magnificent Gold Coast villas. As BlackBerry-wielding Russian tycoons wave untold sums at the lake's aristocratic homeowners, JANINE DI GIOVANNI asks if Como's days are numbered



Lake Como

SEPTEMBER 2007

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNIE LEEBOVITZ

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Shortly after losing his prime-ministership in the July 1945 elections, Winston Churchill, stunned by the defeat and feeling a strain in his home life, left for an extended painting holiday on the shores of Lake Como. As summer waned, he flew to Italy with his entourage—his wife, daughter, physician, valet, secretary, and detective—in a Dakota belonging to Field Marshal Harold Alexander, the first Earl Alexander of Tunis. The party stayed as Alexander's guests at Villa Le Rose, in the tiny village of Moltrasio, a home Churchill described as a "small palace... the last word in modern millionairism."

That first morning, surrounded by local children, he sat quietly staring out at the lake and painting. His daughter Sarah described his work: "A luminous lake and boats, backed by a beetling crag, with a miniature toy village caught in the sunlight at its foot." Lord Moran, Churchill's doctor, wrote that the former prime minister was so entranced by the lake that "he sat solidly for five hours, brush in hand, only pausing from time to time to lift his sombrero and mop his brow."

Churchill wasn't the only World War II leader to find peace, of a sort, at Lake Como, 25 miles north of Milan, in Lombardy, near the Swiss border. Nearly five months earlier, on April 28, 1945, Benito Mussolini, the Italian Fascist, had died in Mezzegra, a tiny village 20 miles along the lake from the Villa Le Rose. The exact details of his death are not known, though it is widely thought that he and his mistress, Clara Petacci, were murdered by Italian partisans. (The bodies were later hung on meat hooks in a square in Milan.) Was Churchill's trip to the same area merely a historical coincidence? There have long been rumors that Churchill traveled to Como that summer not simply to paint but to retrieve secret letters in which he had supposedly tried to persuade Mussolini to make a separate peace with the Allies, subverting the Allies' stated demand

for an unconditional surrender of all the Axis countries. A recent Italian documentary even claims that Mussolini was shot by two British secret-service agents acting on Churchill's orders.

But whatever the "real" reason for Churchill's 1945 trip to Como, he found a retreat that seemed far removed from the brutal war that had broken Europe. "An air of complete tranquillity and good humour pervades these beautiful lakes and valleys, which are unravaged by war," Churchill wrote. "There is not a sign to be seen in the countryside, the dwellings or the demeanour or appearance of the inhabitants which would suggest that any violent events have been happening in the world."

That dreamy sense of unreality is exactly the reason that Como, a narrow, 30-mile-long lake that looks like an inverted Y, has always been a retreat for artists, writers, aristocrats, and, now, the very newly rich. Stendhal was inspired to set part of *The Charterhouse of Parma* on Como's shores. Verdi composed *La Traviata* here. Liszt wrote *Après une Lecture de Dante*; Bellini *Norma*; Wordsworth, Shelley, Puccini, and Rossini all found inspiration at Como. Leonardo da Vinci used the streams and waterfalls as the setting for *Madonna of the Rocks*. John F. Kennedy stayed here, as did Napoleon. Hitchcock made his first film, *The Pleasure Garden*, on the grounds of the Villa d'Este, the lake's premier hotel, in 1925.

Como is grounded by the weight of history, from the grand villas which string out along the lake like a rope of pearls to the noble families which go back to the Renaissance, to the ghosts of European aristocrats and Old Hollywood. It is that combination of glamour and exclusivity which is now drawing in moneyed Russians, American venture capitalists, billionaire publishers, Internet and airline moguls, and the latest generation of Hollywood stars.

"New money always wants to be with old money," commented one long-term Comasco I spoke to.

According to Francesco Ugoni, who runs Bene Habitare, the most exclusive real-estate agency in Como (with branches in Moscow and Saint-Moritz), his agency gets five or six new foreign clients a week during the peak season trying to buy villas. "Como is now in the 20 top places in the world to live, thanks to George Clooney," Ugoni smiles. "Clooney did not invent hot water, but he's made a new name for Lake Como." Clooney bought his 18th-century pale-cream green-shuttered Villa Oleandra from the Heinz family in 2002 for



GRAND HOTEL

Jean-Marc Droulers, C.E.O. and president of Villa d'Este, Lake Como's most celebrated hotel, in his office.

Verdi, Wordsworth, Shelley,
and Puccini all found inspiration
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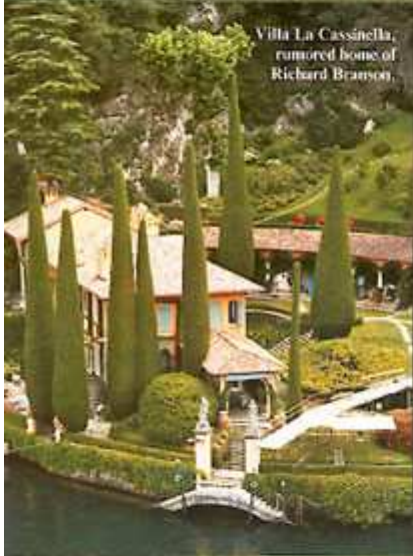
Villa Pliniana.



Silvio Berlusconi, flanked by bodyguards, arriving in Cernobbio.



Gianni Agnelli at Villa d'Este in 1997.



Villa La Cassinella, rumored home of Richard Branson.



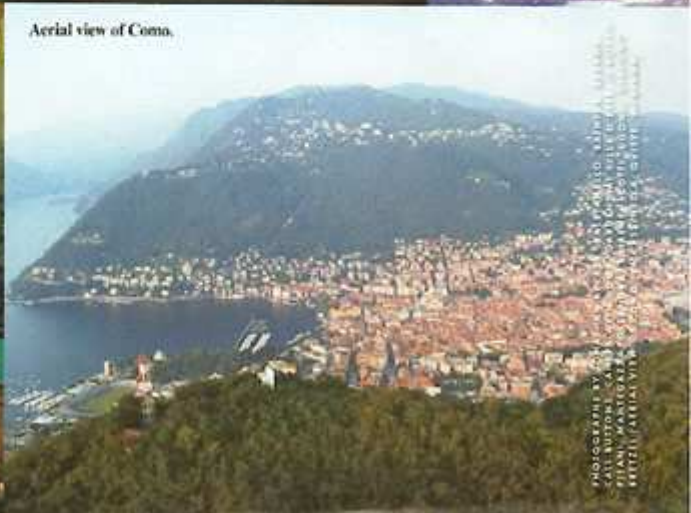
Michele Canepa with his dogs at Villa Il Balbiano.



One of Winston Churchill's Como paintings.



Prince Gallarati Scotti at Villa Metzi d'Eril.



Aerial view of Como.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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PIZZANI, MARIO
MANTOVANI, AND
FRITZ KATZEL
STYLING BY
SUSANNE
MANTOVANI



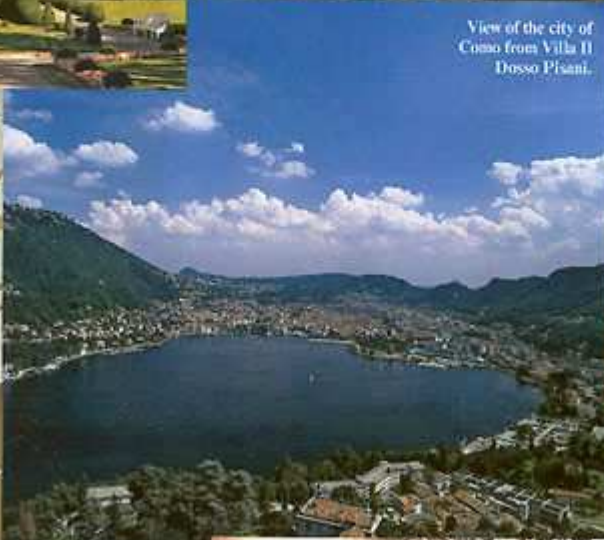
The gardens at Villa d'Este.



Real-estate agent Francesco Ugoni and American villa owner Robert Eves.



Giacomo Mantegazza at his home in Como.



View of the city of Como from Villa Il Dosso Pisani.



Call buttons for waiters at Villa Erba.



A bathroom at Villa Erba, where Luciano Visconti once lived.



George Clooney's home Villa Oleandra.



Villa la Quiete.



The gardens at Villa del Balbianello.



Gianni Versace in the garden of his Villa Fontanelle in 1982.



Athena Besana Ctani at Villa Besana.

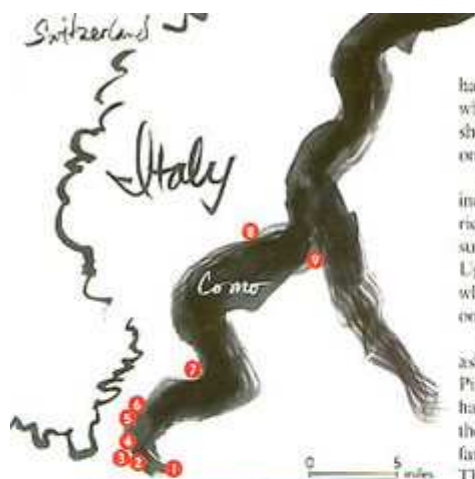


Rupert Murdoch on the lake.



Maximilian Gneiting, son of Michele Canepa, and colorist Carlotta Sabbene at Villa Il Balbianello.





A LAKE LESS ORDINARY

- 1 **City of Como**
- 2 **Villa Erba**
Farmer home of Luciano Vaccari, in the town of Cernobbio—southern end of the “Riva Romantica”
- 3 **Gatto Nero**
Restaurant popular with celebrities, in the hills of Cernobbio.
- 4 **Villa I Tassi**
Como’s premier hotel, in Cernobbio.
- 5 **Villa Le Rose**
Home where Winston Churchill vacationed after World War II, in the village of Maltruso.
- 6 **Villa Fontanelle**
Former home of Gianni Versace; still owned by his family, in Maltruso.
- 7 **Villa Oleandra**
George Clooney’s home, formerly owned by the Heinz family, in the village of Leggio—northern end of the Riva Romantica.
- 8 **Villa La Cassinella**
Rumored to be owned by Richard Branson, in Lenno.
- 9 **Village of Bellagio**

about \$10 million, which seemed astronomical in those days but which is peanuts now, when villas can sell for nearly 10 times as much.

“There is no logic in this market,” says Giacomo Mantegazza, a fifth-generation Comasco. “The prices here now are crazy. If Silvio Berlusconi looks at a place, the price goes up. If Clooney sells tomorrow, the price will drop.” Mantegazza, now in his 70s, is an engineer who has restored many of the lakeside villas, including Villa Oleandra, when it still belonged to the Heinz family. He is also the former owner of Villa La Cassinella, in Lenno, which his father, Carlo, built in 1926. Many locals believe it is now owned by Richard Branson, or “Mr. Virgin,” as he is called here. But Branson’s office denies that he owns the property, and Mantegazza refuses to name his buyer. (Whoever owns it is currently

having a pool built in full view of the lake, which angers many locals who feel that it should be built in a more discreet location on the grounds.)

Driving prices even more than Western industrialists and Hollywood stars are newly rich Russians, who, Ugoni says, arrive with suitcases full of cash. “They think it’s great,” Ugoni says. “But this is not the Wild West, where you go to the saloon and lay dollars on the bar to do business.”

“They started buying properties without asking how much they were,” says Enzo Pifferi, a photographer and publisher who has photographed nearly all the villas along the lake and has also documented Como’s famous silk industry. “They had no limits. They bought what they liked.”

You can hardly blame them, Como is a spectacular place, with the glacier lake running beneath the Italian Alps, ringed by small towns and villages and the city of Como. The air is clean. The people are friendly. The food is extraordinary. It’s less than one hour from Milan.

A map of Lake Como published in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* showed purported recent acquisitions by, among others, Branson, American private-equity investor Jim Cantwell, and the Kazakh oil magnate Nurlan Kapparov. Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister, has been searching for a property for months—for his daughter, it is said. *La Repubblica* also reported that Tom Cruise owns property in Como and that Bill Gates is actively hunting for a villa.

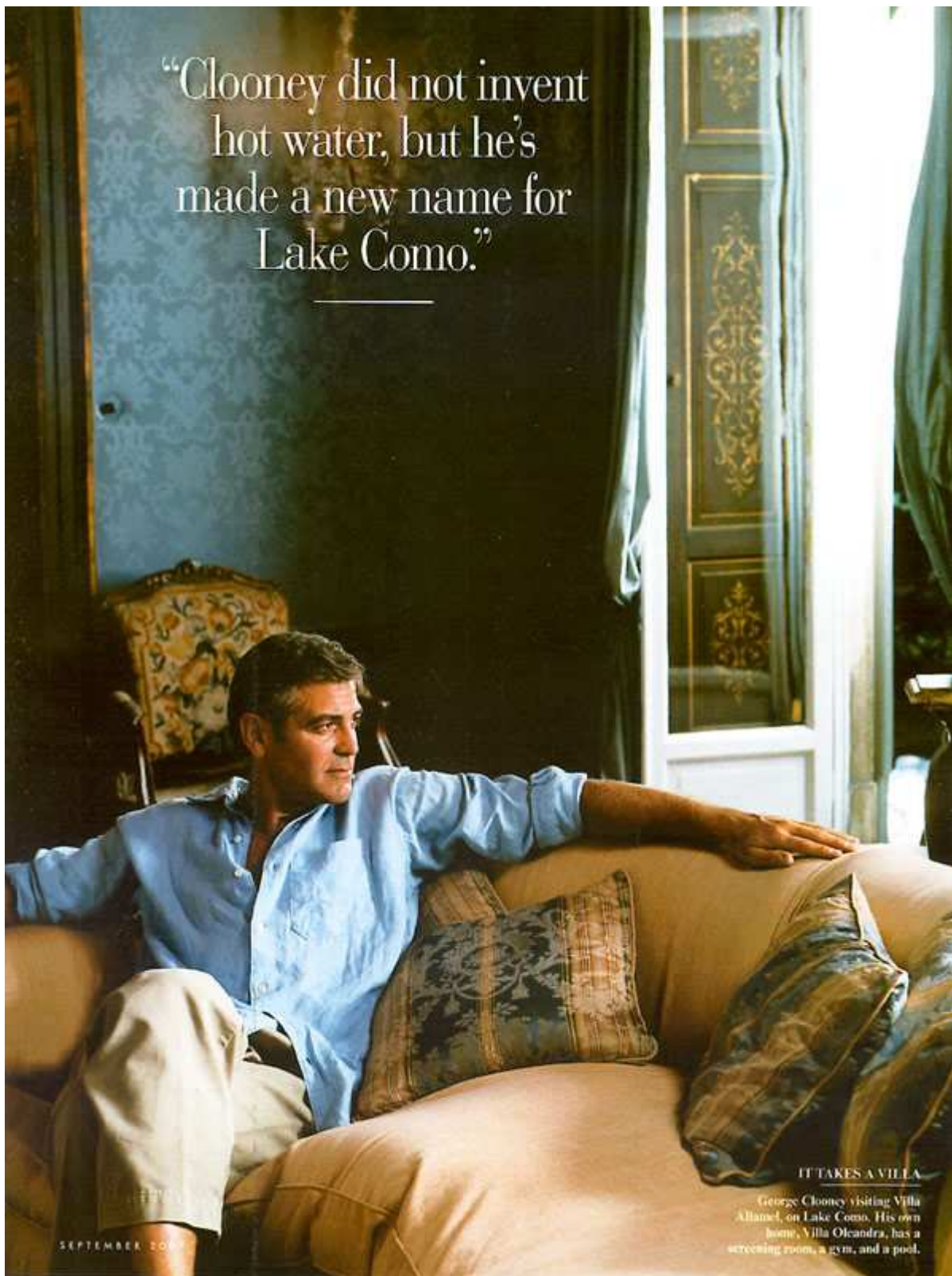
Before Clooney’s purchase, Lake Como was a somewhat forgotten destination. Now Comaschi complain about how noisy it is on weekends when the newly rich race their speedboats. “There was a time,” says one, “when all you heard on the lake was the sound of sailboats, or tennis balls bouncing on clay courts.” Now there are also absurd traffic jams of SUVs and pickups of expensive sports cars in the small villages and on the narrow road that links them.

But while all of the recent real-estate activity is ultimately good for the local economy, which is dependent to a large degree on tourism, the noble families who have lived here for generations are not necessarily thrilled with the changes. And they have ways of putting on the brakes. For one thing, to prevent drastic alterations to the villas, the area has very strict building requirements. Even if Billionaire X could get a parcel of lakeside property, he would have to go before a committee that must



ILLUSTRATION BY TIM SHREVEY; PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNE L. PROVITA

“Clooney did not invent
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Lake Como.”



IT TAKES A VILLA

George Clooney visiting Villa
Allamè, on Lake Como. His own
home, Villa Oleandra, has a
screening room, a gym, and a pool.

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examine and approve all new projects. If they did O.K. his plans, another office would have to second them. "It's impossible even to alter a window," says one villa owner.

There is also an Alice Through the Looking Glass dimension to buying property on Lake Como. First, even though there are more than a hundred villas in the region, there are a limited number around the lake, perhaps a few dozen truly magnificent properties, many of which are never for sale. Homes are usually passed down through the generations, according to Robert Eves, an investor from Marin County, California, who spent six years finding his home in Como, Villa Calla.

"A man and his family live in the home that was formerly and is perhaps still occupied by his parents," Eves says, speaking generally. "Why would one sell his or her home when it is assumed that it will later become the home of the next generation of children?"

Much like other wealthy enclaves in Italy, there are no multiple-listing services in Como, and no Web sites on which sellers can post listings or potential buyers enter housing requirements. There are no FOR SALE signs. "This is the antithesis of American 'shotgun' marketing," says Eves. "Here it's all a big secret and it's a wonder that anything ever sells." So people are forever guessing what might be on the market. Villa Fontanelle, owned by the Versace family, for instance, "is always for sale and always not for sale," says Ugoni.

The route to buy is discreet, says Eves. If someone wants to sell his home, he casually mentions it to a friend or favored agent, who agrees to keep it secret until the most propitious moment. Then the agent casually mentions the availability of the property to another agent, or to people who have expressed interest in buying. Then a call is discreetly placed. Then a "visit" arranged.

When there is the matter of price. How much, for instance, would Villa Fontanelle sell for? Ugoni shrugs. "A pen costs one euro, but when it's a famous pen, everyone wants it." Villa Passalacqua, reportedly owned by Cantwell, which is not technically for sale but would go for the right price, could fetch around \$87 million.

Another reason for high prices is that there is only one part of the lake where everyone wants to buy: the "Riva Romantica," or Gold Coast of Como, a five-mile stretch on the western side between the towns of Carnobbio and Laglio, which gets the sun in the morning—"The gold in the mouth," says Ugoni. So the same gang CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

Lake Como



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 114 of super-rich are competing for the same limited properties.

Berlusconi, perhaps more discriminating than most newcomers, has looked at "a lot" of properties, according to Ugoni, but he wants only two or three, none of which are for sale. "Berlusconi came one Saturday with his wife to see the house even though they know well it was not for sale," says Michele Canepa, an elegant silk industrialist whose family has been in the business for generations, and who produces fabric for haute couture houses such as Oscar de la Renta, Chanel, and Lanvin. Canepa owns Villa Il Balbiano, in Ossuccio, which dates back to the Renaissance and is considered one of the most beautiful villas on the lake.

You can reach Villa Il Balbiano by boat, but if you drive along Via Regina, the narrow lakeshore road, you enter through an ancient walled garden with bursting roses, jasmine, hydrangeas, and calycanthus plants. There is a row of tall, regal cypress trees leading to the stone doors of the house.

Cardinals and counts once lived here. Canepa has modernized the interior, leaving the original trompe l'oeil and pictorial sequences painted by the Recchi brothers

in 1630, but adding abstract German paintings from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. There are modern fabrics that come from Canepa's factory and a magnificent ball gown mounted on the wall, made by his wife in the 80s for a museum competition with a Fortuny theme.

In the dining room, which still has the original 18th-century frescoes and a heavy Venetian crystal chandelier, Sri Lankan waiters serve risotto seasoned with fresh herbs from the garden, and homemade fruit sorbet. Canepa—who is one of the silk manufacturers in Como who still do very well despite globalization—admits his life on the lake is rarefied. Would he ever sell Villa Il Balbiano? He shakes his head firmly no.

"Some things are beyond cash," he says, smiling slightly.

Construction on the Liberty-style Villa Il Dosso Pisani began in 1897 and was completed in 1910. The villa sits high on a hilltop looking out onto the lake. Carlo Dossi, a writer, built the portico as a place to entertain his friends and inscribed many of their names, in poems and epitaphs, on the white marble columns inside the courtyard.

His granddaughter, Giosetta Reverdini Pisani Dossi, has poignant memories of growing up in the villa. She remembers the war years in Como: her mother packing away the precious leather-bound books from the library in wooden crates, food coming from the neighboring farms, bombs dropping in the spring of 1944, all the windows in the villa shattering. She also remembers an after-war party, peeking through the big doors of the ballroom and seeing her mother in a long gown, a hundred people dancing and eating.

But those were different times. "My moth-

er had five servants," she says. "Now I have only one servant. The stairs are hard for me to climb. We used to have deliveries to the house. Now we go to the supermarket."

When did life change? There were stirrings in the late 1980s. "Villa d'Este started doing promotions, bringing actresses like Bette Davis or soap stars," Pifféri recalls. That these were noteworthy events says something, perhaps, about the sleepy Como of that era.

Some recall the first wave of arrivistes in the early 1990s, when the fashion crowd followed Gianni Versace—whose ashes are reportedly now enshrined in a private chapel on the grounds of the family's 18th-century Villa Fontanelle. "Versace opened the gates," says Enzo Pifféri. "Before that, it had only been the old, moneyed Milanese families."

Versace, who had acquired his crumbling villa in 1977, introduced Elton John and Madonna to the lake. Later came Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. They told their friends. Designers such as Bill Blass, Donna Karan, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, and Oscar de la Renta began vacationing in Como. In 2000, *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones* was filmed in part at the Villa del Balbianello, which juts out dramatically into the lake. (More recently, *Casino Royale* was shot there as well.) Jennifer Lopez came on her honeymoon in 2001 with her second husband, Cris Judd. Britney Spears visited; Tori Spelling honeymooned. But the biggest change was Clooney's 2002 purchase of Villa Oleandra, in the tiny village of Laglio. According to Robert Eves, "The prices, especially around the Gold Coast, shot up."

Tom Cruise asked to close down the Villa d'Este for his wedding to Katie Holmes, in 2006 (request refused). Then came Ange-

Lake Como

lina Jolie and Brad Pitt, visiting Clooney; the couple reportedly expressed an interest in getting married at Como. This rumor sparked such a media uproar that Reuters and other news agencies sent reporters.

And now come the Russians and the billionaires with lots of cash and nowhere to buy.

"It took me six years to find my property," says Robert Eves. He eventually bought Villa Calla, as he renamed it, but the process was arduous, more courtship than real-estate transaction. Eves had met the owner of the villa through Francesco Ugoni in 2000. The owner had no interest in selling. Eves continued searching. He estimates that he looked at maybe 30 villas.

"The first villas I toured were not like the typical offering in America," he says. "One villa on the lakeshore had not been occupied in 70 years. It had no electricity, heating, or water systems remaining." Another, a Liberty-style villa, on a hill overlooking the lake, had been vacant for 20 years; thieves had removed all the windows, the carved wood paneling, even the flooring.

In the meantime, Eves had continued to meet with the Villa Calla family, and over the years they grew to be friends. "The future availability of the home was not even discussed," Eves recalls. Then, one evening, "the owner of the villa announced at a dinner that he decided to sell his beautiful home to his friend Robert Eves." Eves says, "I was proud and honored." But still there was no mention of price. Another year went by and finally a price—he declines to say what—was agreed upon. ("I told George Clooney at dinner one night that he cost me

well over a million dollars" extra, says Eves, who met the actor in Milan after the "courtship.") In January 2006 the deal was at last concluded.

But Eves's story is exceptional. Partly it was his patience, but also his respect and love for Como, which won over the owner. Other old families refuse to sell, no matter how much money is laid on the table.

Athena Besana Ciani lives alone in Cernobbio, in the beautifully fading Villa Besana, which once housed her husband's family. Among their number were explorers, members of Parliament, patriots who fought with Garibaldi—the family history is long. Besana Ciani herself resembles a character from an Edith Wharton novel, with her rope of pearls, her refined manners, her Queen's English accent. (Wharton loved Como and featured it in her 1904 book, *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*.) She serves pre-lunch aperitifs, tiny salted pastries, and cold white wine on her shaded veranda overlooking the long, green garden leading to the lake. She talks about the past.

"There was an air of joy in the house. My daughter and seven nephews played in the garden," she says in a melancholic voice. She recalls life in Como from the time she was a little girl. But now, she says, she is worried about how the young generation of Comaschi, such as her surgeon daughter, who lives in England, are leaving for other countries.

Inside, the villa—built in the 17th century—is tiled and cool. Besana Ciani points out precious objects: the portraits of Enrico Besana, who traversed America and New Zealand on horseback in the 1800s; his map; his exquisite traveling bar with crystal decanters, tiny golden liqueur glasses; a por-

celain collection from China. She tells stories of how her husband's ancestor Baron Ippolito Ciani bought the Villa d'Este in 1834, during the Austrian occupation (the period of the Risorgimento, which culminated in the 1870 unification of Italy). The legend is that the baron used the Villa d'Este as the center of the anti-Austrian movement and sent fireworks into the sky with the colors of the Italian flag. "These men were patriots of Italy and Lake Como, great men," she says. "But now the modern patriots of the lake are rich people who want to destroy it. If they buy my villa, they will divide it up into apartments."

She has had countless offers to sell—from Russians and others—but always refused. "My house is like an old lady who speaks to me of all the people who loved her," she says quietly.

There are many people around the lake who have the same sense of history as Besana Ciani. But huge sums of money are hard to resist, and she ticks off on her fingers the noble families who were forced to sell or rent. "It's very difficult to fight against money," she admits. "I am sorry not to be an optimist. My life is here. My childhood was here. But it has changed. It once was so intimate."

Lake Como has always been a magnet for the elite. Nineteen hundred years ago, the orator and writer Pliny the Younger, who was born in Como, wrote to his friend Romanus, "I have several villas upon the borders of this lake, but there are two particularly in which I take most delight. . . . One of them stands upon a rock, and overlooks the lake; the other actually touches it. The first . . . I call my tragic; the other . . . my comic villa. . . . The former does not feel the force of the waves; the latter breaks them;

from that you see the fishing-vessels; from this you may fish yourself."

If you close your eyes to the construction of the new swimming pool being built too close to the water's edge at the mysterious Villa La Cassinella (does Branson own it or not?), you can imagine Pliny's Lake Como. Or even further back.

The Romans arrived here in the second century B.C., and the cove near Bellagio, where the lake forks, was turned into an important military and trading point. In the first century, the wealthy families from Milan and other parts of Italy began to build villas to escape the city's stifling summer heat. The Viscontis arrived as early as the 14th century. (Their descendant Luchino Visconti, the film director, once lived at Villa Erba, in Cernobbio.) After the Viscontis came the Sforzas. Their Como guests were illustrious. At the December 1493 wedding of Bianca Maria Sforza to Emperor Maximilian, one attendee, Leonardo da Vinci, was apparently disappointed by the lake in winter. "These trips should be made in the month of May," he wrote in a message left behind after the ceremony.

It was in the 1700s that Lombardy came under Austrian rule. This was the beginning of Como's economic expansion and the domination of the silk industry. Silkworms had been imported to Como, and for a time the region produced the most beautiful silk in the world. Como prospered. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the new moneyed families in Lombardy began building ever more elaborate villas. Some of these families still have them.

English lords and Russian princes arrived in the 1800s. The villas, through the coming years, housed tremendous parties full of

royalty and heads of state—Kaiser William, Franz Joseph I, the King of Albania, the Queens of Spain, Sweden, and Romania, the Grand Duchess Catherine of Russia, Lady Chamberlain, the Sheikh of Kuwait, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. King Farouk of Egypt spent his honeymoon in 1951 at the Grand Hotel in Bellagio.

You can spend your entire time in Como on a Riva speedboat zipping around the lake. But you only get a true sense of the weight of history and the importance of preserving it when you enter the villas. On an overcast late-spring morning, I take a boat—most people travel across the lake by boat—to see Prince Fulco Gallarati Scotti at Villa Melzi d'Eril, one of the most illustrious villas on the lake. Before we reach the landing, I spot the neoclassical and imperial villa through the cypress trees that partially hide it from the lake. The house was built from 1808 to 1810 for Francesco Melzi d'Eril, an ancestor of the prince's and a vice president of the short-lived Italian Republic when it was constituted under Napoleon's rule.

The prince pulls a heavy key from his vest and leads me inside the dark quiet. His grandfather Duke Tommaso Gallarati Scotti, a diplomat, entertained Churchill here in the 1950s. Another ancestor, the first Duke of Melzi, is thought to have been one of da Vinci's lovers. The rooms are dusty and smell of leather. There are two portraits of Napoleon, one in which he holds a map with his hands all over Italy. There are bronze tables by Manfredini. There is a locked cupboard from which the prince pulls an ornate blue cashmere coat with gold trim that at one time belonged to Francesco Melzi d'Eril. There is a heavy guest book with aristocratic signatures going back hundreds of years. From a

window, you can see Villa Carlotta, across the lake, once owned by the Sommariva family, rivals of the Melzis.

"Families competed. Alliances were made," the prince says. "Deals were brokered."

But now the noble families are "extinguishing." He adds, "Before, Como was Italian."

Like other residents, he says he has been offered large sums of money to sell the villa, but has always refused. He has also refused to rent it for parties or weddings. "If you open something up commercially," he says, "you lose your property. This villa is priceless. You cannot put monetary value on it." He has, however, opened the gardens—with their Egyptian sculptures and exotic flowers—to the public. That is as far as he will let modern life reach into his fiefdom, and requests by V.I.P.'s for private viewings have been refused.

"New money does not understand the history or the culture of these villas," he says, walking with me through the tiny village of Loppia, most of which is still owned by his family, to the dock where our boat is waiting.

On the way home from Villa Melzi, Sergio, the boatman, points out Villa Oleandra. It's the first place Lyudmila Putin, the Russian president's wife, asked to be taken when she visited Como two summers ago, or so a local will tell me later. "She did not ask, 'Where is the cathedral?' She asked, 'Where is the house of George Clooney?' So she took a boat and went to see the house of George Clooney."

There is indeed plenty of stargazing at Lake Como, but part of the reason that celebrities love the area is that locals tend to protect them. At Gatto Nero, the most star-

Lake Como

ry restaurant in the area, the owner, Fausto Fontana, guards clients such as Britney Spears, Daniel Craig, and Kylie Minogue like a mama lion, and says the privacy of everyone, tourists or celebrities, is respected. But when boats slow so that tourists can gape at Clooney's property or Branson's supposed home or other landmark villas, there is little the homeowners can do. The lake is public property.

Clooney, to his great credit, is beloved by locals. Recently he joined a campaign to stop construction of a large parking complex and floating bridge in Laglio near his villa, convening a meeting of local activists at Villa Oleandra. "I don't want my presence here to be a pain to the other citizens," he told the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, "but if you ask me, these proposals are in every probability just to exploit the fact that I live here." The actor even said he'd sell the villa and move if the bulldozers arrived. (The mayor of the village eventually decided to scrap the plans and told *Us Weekly*: "To Mr. Clooney we gave the honorary citizenship. We all are proud of his choice to live here on Lake Como.")

The locals see Clooney as *un bravo ragazzo*, a good guy. He tries to speak Italian. He plays basketball with the children. He rides his bicycle down the winding roads without his bodyguards. In return, the locals, who understand the value he has added by putting the little village of Laglio on the map, protect him. Some locals have been known to point tourists who ask for George Clooney's villa in the wrong direction, says one Comasco.

Como's social hub is Villa d'Este. It was built in 1568 by a prince and was later a royal residence of a future Queen of England, Caroline of Brunswick, before becoming, in 1873, one of the most famous hotels in the world. Located in the town of Cernobbio, on the southern end of the Gold Coast, it is a magical place. The scented gardens stretch out, a blending of Baroque and Romantic landscaping. There is a pool, which floats out onto the lake, where Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Springsteen have played with their children.

Many of the rooms are full of antiques and priceless paintings, and the guests have included King Leopold, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Rita Hayworth, Clark Gable, and Vladimir Nabokov. There are wonderful stories, such as how Marlene Dietrich visited in 1949 but would appear on the lake only incognito, in a big hat. Elton John had his personal chef take cooking classes here, and Hitchcock used to come

in and question the hotel's chef about which cooking machines he used. The restaurant is famous for its risotto, but Gianni Agnelli's favorite dish was simply the bean salad with tomatoes.

The hotel is now partly owned by the Droulers, a French family who arrived in Como in the 1930s to work in the linen industry. The eldest son, Jean-Marc Droulers, the current C.E.O. and president of the hotel, is often credited with spicing up the image of Villa d'Este in the 1980s. Today, while the old legions of American and French tourists are still coming, sitting on the terrace drinking champagne are a new breed of guests: Russians barking into cell phones or picking away at BlackBerry.

They don't smile, they don't say "*Buon giorno*" in the elevators, the way polite guests do. In the evening, tall, slender women wearing four-inch gold heels and dressed in leopard-print Cavalli dresses prowl the hallways on their way to dinner. At breakfast, burly men signal waiters by snapping their fingers or commanding them in tones one would use with a dog. They wear their dressing gowns and smoke cigars in the lobby.

"Russians are tough," says one employee who can't be named. "Because they arrived at money so quickly, they never learned manners or culture. They look at a menu and scan it for what is the most expensive. To them, that is class. They have no idea of what good taste is."

At Navedano, a restaurant in the city of Como favored by Hollywood people, the proprietor, Giuliano Casartelli, whose family has run the restaurant for generations and has seen it all, tells me about a Russian millionaire who arrived the night before me with a beautiful young woman. He phoned ahead to order a tableful of expensive, rare flowers. He drank two bottles of Cristal. Then he had the flowers sent to Moscow by private jet the next day.

Gauche extravagance is one thing. Some Russians arouse darker suspicions, as they do in other parts of Europe they have colonized, such as the Riviera. "Every single time X arrives," says the Villa d'Este employee, referencing a Russian steel magnate, "the Italian secret service arrive immediately after and question everyone about his movements."

"Frankly, I check the Russians out before they come," says one businessman in the area, who sometimes hosts visitors and relies on an Italian visa agency for intelligence. "It's not hard to do. You make a few phone calls and you know who you are having as a guest."

Though local gossip has it that some Comaschi homeowners refuse to sell to Russians, one real-estate agent says, "I think that, even if someone tells you this, if a Russian arrives and offers the asked price, everyone

will say, Yes, thanks." Many Russians prefer to pay in cash, this agent adds, even when prices are in the millions, though, he says, an Italian anti-Mafia law makes it illegal to accept more than 12,500 euros in cash.

Robert Eves says another way of protecting the villas is to buy them not for investment but for preservation. "I am putting my villa into a trust for the benefit of my children with strict rules that they cannot sell for a profit. It is for their children and their children's children," he writes in an e-mail. "A villa on the west shore of Lake Como is an extraordinary *tesoro*, and it should be protected and carried through the generations in the traditional Italian way."

So what will happen to Como?

I first came to the northern lakes from London as a young student, more than two decades ago, and then returned about 10 years ago with my Italian-born father. It was a strange, Thomas Mann-like voyage. My father was terminally ill but did not yet know it. He would be dead within a year, and it was the last time he would see Italy.

It was he who told me the history of the area, of Mussolini's grisly end, of Churchill's paintings, and of the nearby northern front in World War I, where my great-uncle and grandfather fought in trenches (and my great-uncle died). He told me about the silk industry and the invaders from the north who came to conquer Italy in 218 B.C.

My father took me to the train station when I was returning to London. We had tea first. In the café, an odd man with a comic-book Iron Curtain accent and imitation-crocodile shoes was sitting with a sexy young woman. They began to chat with us. They were visitors from Russia on a holiday. But the girl kept winking at my elderly father, and the man kept offering me a lift to Milan. It was rather odd, and eventually they left.

"Russians in the Italian lakes, how strange," my father remarked. Then he added, "Did you see his shoes? Never trust a man with cheap shoes."

Visiting this spring, I kept thinking that the Russians are certainly present in the lakes now. But they don't wear cheap shoes anymore.

The day I left Como, it was drizzling slightly. From the elaborate terrace of Villa Il Dosso Pisani, in the mountains above the lake, I took a final look at the grand villas curving toward the water and the unspoiled parcels of hilltop land. I could see small boats and smell jasmine. Everything looked probably the way Churchill painted it, more than 60 years ago. But I wonder what it will look like in 15 years and remember what Longfellow once wrote of Lake Como: "I ask myself, Is this a dream? / Will it vanish into air?" □