



Gardens & Villas of the Italian Lakes

Como and Maggiore



Lake Como, mezzotint by J. Alphege Brewer, c. 1910.

24–30 April 2025 (ML 670)

7 days

Lecturer: Colin Crosbie

2–8 October 2025 (ML 807)

7 days

Lecturer: Amanda Patton

Among the loveliest and most romantic spots on earth – the summer retreat of the wealthy, aristocratic and intellectual since the time of Pliny.

Some of the finest gardens in Europe, glorious in their design and range.

Sublime mountain scenery, the inspiration of Bellini and Stendhal.

The gardens of the Italian lakes fall into two categories: the formal, terraced, parterred, allegoried and enclosed summer residences of native landowners; and the expansive, landscaped villa grounds of the rich and splendid. Some are small, others huge; some ostentatious, others retiring; some immaculate, others picturesquely mouldering. Many are the former homes of Austrian aristocrats, Napoleonic grandees, bel canto composers

or British seasonal emigrants. All respond to the setting, gazing out across bays and peninsulas, or up to mountain scenery of heroic dimensions.

The tour is divided between Lake Como and Lake Maggiore. Lake Como, the home of Pliny, is intensely romantic: Shelley, Bellini and Stendhal found inspiration here on the shores of a long and slender lake divided in three parts. The little town of Bellagio surveys all three from its glittering headland, and provides a convenient (and luxurious) base for visiting the lakeside villa gardens.

Lake Maggiore is altogether broader and more open, extending northwards into Switzerland, with the air of an inland sea. The great western bay includes the famous Borromean Islands, among them the contrasting garden retreats of Isola Bella and Isola Madre. As early as 1686 Bishop Burnet gushed that these were ‘certainly the loveliest spots of ground in the World, there is nothing in all Italy that can be compared to them’.

Our tour is scheduled at a time of the year when there is the possibility of clear, brilliant sunshine. Each lake, each shore, each promontory and island, has its own character, but everywhere is pervaded by the abundance of light, perfume and natural beauty.

Itinerary

Day 1: Bellagio. Fly at c. 10.30am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Milan. Drive to Bellagio on Lake Como. First of three nights in Bellagio.

Day 2: Bellagio. The neoclassical Villa Melzi at Bellagio was built in 1810 for Francesco Melzi d’Eril, vice-president of Napoleon’s Italian Republic. It overlooks the lake in an undulating English landscape park, richly planted and decorated with ornamental buildings. The Villa Serbelloni, probably built on the site of one of Pliny the Younger’s two villas on Lake Como, occupies the high ground above Bellagio. The woods offer magnificent views to all parts of the lake. The medieval remnants, 16th-century villa and later terraces are the setting for planting schemes in a backdrop described by Stendhal as ‘a sublime and enchanting spectacle’.

Day 3: Lake Como. Villa Carlotta on the western shore of Lake Como, built as a summer residence for a Milanese aristocrat, combines dramatic terracing, parterre and grottoes with an extensive landscape park and arboretum. The house contains notable collections from the Napoleonic period. The Villa Balbianello occupies its own headland projecting into the middle of Lake Como. This glorious site is terraced to provide sites for lawns, trees, shrubs and a chorus of statuary. The villa stands among groves of oak and pine.

Day 4: Renaissance villa gardens. At the Villa Cicogna Mozzoni at Bisuschio, north of Varese, the 16th-century house and garden are thoroughly intertwined; the courtyard of pools and parterres leads to a water staircase, grottoes and *giochi d’acqua*. Lunch is served at the villa. The Villa della Porta Bozzolo, tucked away in a mountain valley near Lake Maggiore, is a hidden treasure of a garden, shooting straight up a dramatic hillside from the village street of Casalzuigno. The beautiful 17th-century villa is unexpectedly set to one side to increase the visual drama. First of three nights in Pallanza.

Day 5: The Borromean Islands. Isola Bella is one of the world’s great gardens (and correspondingly popular), a wedding cake of terraces and greenery floating improbably in Lake Maggiore. The sense of surrealism is enhanced by the symbolic statuary and the flock of white peacocks. Isola Madre is the ideal dessert to follow Isola Bella: a relaxed, informal landscape garden around a charmingly domestic villa. Visual entertainments include

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the marvellous plant collection, revitalized by Henry Cocker in the 1950s, the chapel garden, puppet theatre and ambulant aviary.

Day 6: Pallanza, Brissago. The Villa Taranto at Pallanza is an extravagant piece of 20th-century kitsch created by Henry Cocker for his patron, the enigmatic Neil McEacharn. The alarmingly gauche design is superbly planted and maintained with loving zeal by the present staff. In the afternoon cross to the Swiss part of Lake Maggiore to visit the extensive botanical gardens on the island of San Pancrazio, home to c. 1700 different plant species.

Day 7. Fly from Milan to London Heathrow, arriving at c. 3.15pm.

Lecturers

Colin Crosbie. A widely travelled plantsman with a keen interest in garden design, Colin studied horticulture at the West of Scotland Agricultural College and worked in the Savill and Valley gardens in Windsor Great Park. He was then appointed head gardener to the Queen Mother at Royal Lodge before moving to the Royal Horticultural Society at Wisley where he became curator of the gardens. Colin returned to Dumfries and Galloway in 2015 to run his own horticultural consultancy. He also leads garden tours in the UK and internationally and has appeared on radio and television.

Amanda Patton. Award-winning garden designer, writer, broadcaster and artist. A member of the Society of Garden Designers and the Garden Media Guild, she has created Show Gardens at Chelsea and Hampton Court, and has designed over 200 private and public gardens. She lectures widely including at the London College of Garden Design, the RAC and the Lurie Garden in Chicago. Her particular interest is in 20th-century and contemporary garden design.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach, boat and public ferry; hotel accommodation; breakfasts; 1 lunch and 4 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Hotel Belvedere, Bellagio (belvederebellagio.com): a historic family-run four-star hotel with a large garden and newly opened spa. **Grand Hotel Majestic, Pallanza** (grandhotelmajestic.it): recently renovated, four-star Belle Epoque hotel with lakeside gardens. *Bedrooms in both hotels vary in size and outlook; lake views are not guaranteed.*

How strenuous? A good level of fitness is essential. There is quite a lot of walking as streets are steep and uneven and most of the gardens are extensive, and all have uneven ground. You will be on your feet for lengthy stretches of time, and need to be able to cope with stairs, as many of the gardens are tiered, and there are steps throughout the towns. Average distance by coach per day: 23 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.