

## A New Favorite - Lake Como, Italy

My favorite lakes:

- New Hampshire's Winnepesaukee, mainly for family-nostalgia reasons (nearly 30 years a visitor to my in-laws' vacation home), though it is a lovely piece of northern New England real estate. However, the golf, with a couple of exceptions (Bald Peak, Lake Winnepesaukee Country Club), could be described as mostly mediocre.

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*Golf Club Villa D'Este*

- Lake Tahoe is magnificent, the snow-capped Sierras in the distance, dozens of fabulous tracks from Truckee to Edgewood-Tahoe and even more in the surrounding area.

- Lake Taupo in New Zealand scores points, mainly because it's in New Zealand (the world's most delightful country) and the name is strikingly similar to Tahoe. High-quality golf tracks like Kinloch and Wairekei are also close at hand.

And then there's the magnificence, the grandeur of Lake Como in the north of Italy, not far from the Swiss border. Never before have I been privileged to see such steep mountain slopes looming directly above the shoreline, the hillsides dotted with ancient towns and villages, built ever more vertically above the lake itself.

Just in the small township of Laglio where we stayed there are dozens of winding staircases, 300 steps and more, climbing to hidden villas seemingly built directly into the hillside. Why are Italians so narrow-waisted despite the cappuccino and vino, the pasta, the veal, the gelato? Try climbing up and down 500 or more stairs a day. See what it does for your fitness level.



*Menaggio is One of Italy's Oldest Courses*

The roads around Lake Como, to the delightful villages of Bellagio, Cernobbio, Menaggio, etc., are comfortably wide for one-way traffic. Unfortunately, it's all two-way traffic, and with ancient stone walls hemming drivers in at every turn there is literally no way to bail out. The Italians drive with a practiced insouciance. The whole region is seemingly engaged in a high-speed game of "chicken" - at intersections, roundabouts, at yield or merge signs. I don't know if texting-while-driving has become an issue yet, but if and when it does watch out. The whole country will become a boot-shaped demolition derby.

Word to the wise: As you make your way to any of the seven golf courses that make up the Como Consortium, build in plenty of time prior to teeing off, and not only for the inevitable wrong turns that will make getting to the facilities an adventure. Because anyone not making a living on the NASCAR circuit will need ample time for relaxing and massaging the ligaments, joints and tendons in one's hands, which will be stiff - perhaps frozen - from the white-knuckle driving caused by that steering-wheel death grip.

Menaggio, one of the oldest golf courses in Italy, is also one of the most charming in Europe. It fits the peculiar geography of the region hand-in-glove: truncated in nature, designed like a staircase, descending and then ascending narrow ribbons of fairway to and from the elegant clubhouse. The clubhouse is the essence of La Dolce Vita, "the sweet life," with its zillion-dollar views of the lake, fine cuisine and a library with an unprecedented collection of thousands of golf books, many of which hail from previous centuries.



*A Fall Golf Scene at Carimate*

Sadly, there's no shimmering lake view from the course itself, which is sunken just below a modest ridgeline west of the clubhouse. The dominant geographic feature is a massive, near-vertical rock face looming to the west. A golfer's eye and craning neck can't help but be drawn repeatedly to the summit; it seems as if at any moment a hang glider will launch from far above.

Throughout the grounds there are ancient stone or wood buildings of indeterminate nature - farm sheds, storage bins, animal pens and the like. They add immeasurably to the ineffable charm of the place, with its rustic teeing grounds, abundance of steeply uphill par-3s, drive-and-flip-wedge par-4s, and greens as slow as grandma's shag carpeting. The 13th hole alone, a single-file par-5 tumbling downhill with a smattering of Dr. Seuss-style trees reminiscent of San Francisco's Olympic Club, is worth the price of admission alone.

In two-plus weeks throughout Italy I never found any evidence of grape-stomping winemakers. But the curious sight of barefoot maintenance crews were in evidence, both shoeless and clueless, riding atop fairway mowers with their feet precariously perched a hand's-width from the whirring blades.



*A Water-Guarded Green at Carimate*

Both Menaggio and Golf Club Villa D'Este have a similar sensibility in terms of overall land footprint. Topping out at about 6,000 or maybe 6,200 yards, they offer similar challenges to the much-admired recent U.S. Open venue, Merion. Like Philadelphia's finest, which boasts a unique mixture of very short and very long tests, these Italian iterations - shrunken by numerous tiny holes and the aforementioned par-3s, also have half-a-dozen holes per course that are all any golfer could want. Banging driver to fairways far below, spying the ball hanging - for a moment motionless in the ether, framed against the forested landscape in the near distance before dropping earthward - is one of the game's most elemental pleasures.

Carimate Golf Club is some miles farther inland from the lake, and therefore not as pinched in as other courses. Unlike the "4/5ths" sensibility seen elsewhere, Carimate is a full-bodied layout, not particularly long, but broad-shouldered in a way that is far more reminiscent of a typical American golf course. It is perfectly lovely, but lacking a smidgen of the charm and novelty of the courses closer to the lake.

Named after the neighboring eponymous town, one cannot help but think the "car" in Carimate is the vehicle of choice needed to negotiate the significant stretch of real estate between the second green and third tee, and then again from the seventh green to the eighth tee.



*Golf Club Lecco in the Lake Como Region*

In 820-plus courses played in more than 40 states and a dozen countries, this correspondent has crossed many roadways, byways, parkways, even the occasional bridge-over-the-interstate. But never before had I encountered an actual roundabout, made for vehicular traffic, smack in the middle of the playing fields. My first thought was wishing for the Garmin attached to the windshield back in my rental car, the better to negotiate to the next teeing ground. By the time I covered the quarter-or-so mile distance, in both directions, enough time had passed that I felt like I needed to warm up again.

The long commutes are worth the effort, as the five-hole stretch (a pair of par-4s and par-5s and a one-shotter) are strong and straightforward. Carimate doesn't have the garish elevation changes of the other Lake Como-area courses. Much of the up-and-down comes courtesy of the walk from the parking lot to the clubhouse and from the ninth green to 10th tee.

The facility most reminiscent of home is undoubtedly Golf Club Monticello, 36 holes of championship golf, with the Red Course serving as the host venue for the Italian Open on seven occasions. This is full-bodied golf: long and straightaway corridors, encroaching trees, daunting par-3s, slight elevation changes. It's easy to see why it has been the site of so many notable competitions, with the likes of Billy Casper, Sam Torrance, Sandy Lyle, Greg Norman and homegrown hero Constantino Rocca emerging victorious through the years.



*Golf Club Monticello*

The Blue Course has many of the same challenges as its older sibling, but the inward nine is a horse (course?) of a different color. Corkscrew fairways, wasp-waist landing areas and hairpin turns (reminiscent of all the nearby roadways) make it a gauntlet for all but the most precise ball-strikers. Put it this way: If the Italian Open was ever to be played on the Blue Course, the London bookmakers would install Fred Funk as the even-money favorite.

Of course the odds of "Fairway" Funk winning an Italian Open are just slightly longer than getting paired up Stateside with a gent who speaks seven languages. But that was exactly my good fortune at Monticello Golf Club when I met up with club member Roberto, a technician for the Swiss Ski Team, fluent in Italian, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic in addition to English. Also in our group: world-renowned skier and World Cup stalwart Fabienne Suter (you can look her up), who thankfully hits far more trees in summer (with her golf ball) than she does in winter on her skis.

"We love our golf here," enthuses Roberto, who spent years as a scuba-diving instructor in Cairo, explaining his proficiency in Arabic in addition to all of his romance language skills. "The game is delightful, despite our middling skill level. We Italians love the good life, whether it's fine wine, a delicious meal, a beautiful sunset, a sexy woman or a sleek sports car. Golf is just another of the pleasant diversions we enjoy, and golf in this part of the country, in close proximity to beautiful Lake Como, is even better."

For more information about golf in the Lake Como area, visit [www.golflakecomo.com](http://www.golflakecomo.com).