

(both pages) Sited by the lake, directly facing the commune of Bellagio, Grand Hotel Tremezzo flies the flag for family-run hospitality while oozing glamour in spades

ANTHOLOGY

TRAVEL

Before George Clooney bought Villa Oleandra and invited Harry and Meghan to stay, Lake Como's Grand Hotel Tremezzo, in Tremezzina, was the summer lakeside address most frequented by European royals, czars and film stars like Greta Garbo, who referred to it as a "happy, sunny place" in *Grand Hotel*.

It's still one of the most romantic places to stay in Lombardy in Northern Italy, largely because third-generation hotelier Valentina de Santis has kept it that way.

Rooms and suites are lavishly dressed in local silks as a tribute to the region's heritage of production. Even turndown gifts left on pillows have a unique sense of place — turning in for the night, I delighted in nibbling kiss-shaped baci del lago biscuits and reading reproductions of old love letters found in the hotel before drifting off.

"My grandmother told me romantic stories about finding the letters in secret places," says de Santis, Grand Hotel Tremezzo's co-owner and CEO. "I thought it would make a sweet gift to say goodnight."

Built by Bellagio couple Maria Orsolini and Enea Gandola in 1910, Tremezzo was inspired by the couple's whirlwind tour of the world's best hotels after they were married, but the property fell into disrepair as it changed hands over the years.

When Como native Giovanni Battista Mallone, grandfather of de Santis, acquired the property in the 1970s, he set about restoring it based on his vision of luxurious,

Italian family hospitality, with the help of his son Paolo de Santis and granddaughter — de Santis spent her childhood summers at Tremezzo, making coffee and running errands for guests.

Watching her favourite hotels like Hotel de Crillon in Paris (now owned by Rosewood Hotels & Resorts) get snapped up by hotel conglomerates made de Santis determined to retain Tremezzo's glamorous, family-run charm.

"More and more, we are seeing chains

and big hotel groups taking over. We are very proud of being an independent, family-run hotel in Italy, offering our hospitality to support our lake and our heritage is one of the most amazing things we can do," she explains.

Her family's long history in the region means the hotel is a treasure trove of historical and cultural delights. Most of the Liberty-style light fixtures and Belle Epoque chandeliers, along with the mirrors and 18th-century billiard table, are period and original.



LAKE COMO'S NEW GUARD

Third-generation hotelier Valentina de Santis is forging her own brand of Italian family-run hospitality.

BY GEMMA ZOE PRICE



Before the arrival of cheaper imports, Lake Como was the international centre of silk production, and where entire collections were crafted for Chanel and Louis Vuitton. Among the most special at Tremezzo are those from the archives of the silk-producing Ratti family, displayed on the walls of the opulent-looking Sala Musica (left), a reading room and bar area. The effect is inspired by the property's vibrant lime, fuchsia and orange sofas cast



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— VALENTINA DE SANTIS



(clockwise, from left) At Tremezzo, rooms offer views that stretch from Bellagio to Punta Balbianello; an ode to Greta Garbo, its Suite Greta comes with an ample terrace; Valentina de Santis

other notable Italians to manage their legacies, which she in turn shares with her guests. Tremezzo’s restaurants, for instance, have exclusive permission to use recipes developed by the late Gualtiero Marchesi, considered the founder of modern Italian cuisine. Every gold leaf-festooned risotto, plated to his design, is served to tables in fine dining room La Terrazza, together with a numbered certificate.

Nearby, the six-suite 16th-century former ducal residence Villa Sola Cabiati — owned by the Serbelloni family, who also own the neoclassical Palazzo Serbelloni in Milan — is managed by de Santis and available to Tremezzo guests for exclusive-use bookings.

To stay at Villa Sola Cabiati is to be immersed in an Italian aristocratic residence of a bygone era. Ceiling frescoes above the all-white Sala Degli Stucchi were inspired by Virgil’s *Aeneid*; behind a secret door, I’m shown a bedroom made up of furnishings used by Napoleon, including a trunk filled with antique silk fabrics embroidered with

as the colourful “flowers”, spilling over from the silk into the room.

“It’s a room that gives a lot of joy. It allows you to enjoy the little details that are historical — the lighting, the original doors, decorated with flower designs, the round windows that overlook the terrace... It’s an amazing history box,” adds de Santis.

De Santis has also been entrusted by



(this page) Hotel Grand Tremezzo guests may book neighbouring 16th-century Villa Sola Cabiati, which boasts six suites, a heated outdoor pool and an Italian garden — for their exclusive use

real gold and platinum threads.

When you're ready to explore Como's other villages and classical ancestral villas, Tremezzo offers tailored cruises aboard its sail and motorboats, including a 1961 Venetian motor launch and Ruggero Venelli-designed motorboat Batt, named after de Santis' grandfather.

De Santis recommends that guests visit neighbouring 17th-century Villa Carlotta, gifted by Princess Marianna of Nassau to her daughter Carlotta on the occasion of

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her wedding in 1847. It was subsequently renamed in her honour, although sadly Princess Carlotta died a few years later from childbirth complications. Now, the villa is a botanical garden and museum that displays artworks by Thorvaldsen, Canova, Migliara and Hayez.

Another house of fabulous art and mystery is the 1787 Villa del Balbianello, built by Cardinal Angelo Durini and last occupied by Milan-born explorer, entrepreneur and art collector Guido Monzino before it was converted into a museum following his death in 1988. Rooms are networked by hidden passages and filled with elaborate treasure chests and trophies from Monzino's expeditions to places including Africa, South America,



the North Pole and the world's tallest mountains. Beneath the sloping eaves of the attic, you'll find an Inuit sled and mountaineering gear from his trip to Everest. The villa is also a popular location for filmmakers: its wisteria-framed terraced gardens doubled as a set for *Casino Royale* and *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones* (the cast and crew of the 2002 film stayed at Tremezzo during the shoot).

Constantly working on expanding their portfolio of guest experiences, the de Santis family acquired the 17th-century neoclassical Villa Passalacqua in 2018 at auction; de Santis says it will reopen for stays and events in 2021 following restoration works. Like many villas on

the lake, it has its own romantic history: renowned Italian opera composer Vincenzo Bellini fell in love with soprano Giuditta Pasta here after hearing her singing from across the lake.

"But I don't know if that's true. Villa Passalacqua just fits with our dream of having a house on Lake Como," says de Santis, smiling. "My aim is to keep this place as one of the top destinations for luxury travellers by supporting our heritage, our lake and — more and more rare every year — family hospitality."

In the meantime, Tremezzo opens for the season in April and will host a grand party in July reminiscent of the opening gala the Gandolas threw in 1910. **A**



(this page) Stepping into Villa Sola Cabiati means stepping back into an era filled with glorious art, architecture and balls