

Lurking the Largo or de stressing in Stresa

To exit the Garfagnana in Toscana, lay some tracks past Lucca and head to the Lakes area is a journey of six hours, E20 in tolls and minimal views along the valleys due to the continental drift haze obscuring the hills. The vehicle was deviated off the toll road onto the SS33 digressing through towns such as Nirvana and a village that sounds like bustayerarse which soon brings home the realities of a few lousy toll dollars as a foil to traffic dribble in the outer environs of Milano.

The route to Lake Maggiore is a visual tease to the eventual destination as Italian urban construction is the domain of the visually impaired as it seems "doing modern" is architectural anathema. Once Girate is reached the view has changed, the Lake emerges and now it is a search for the latter day Gina Lollobrigida possibly still strutting on Corso Italia around Maggiore.

Accommodation is the first quest and a fortuitous enquiry at Albergo Luina a two star, own bathroom, breakfast, E55 a double hotel with dinky balconies above the tight shopping alleys one street from the lake on Via Garibaldi. Renata was born here and with her Chef husband are the archetypical hostelry people so rare in today's bustle, perhaps the missing link in today's packaged travel, running an operation with charm and grace.



An offer of free car space has complications lost in of the pervasive mass of people walking the nearby area which is finally sorted in the buzz and palaver through a series of directions. The doctrinaire rite on arrival in any new town is instant reconnoitring which in Stresa is a pleasant task of alley hooping or piazza poncing starting in the bustling Piazza IL Cadorna.

Observation soon reveals that the German invasion a la twenty first century had begun with hirsuit, calorie enhanced food shovelers gathering for the final gustatory assault. The menus reveal the results of prior invasions with Tyrolean and Piedmontese flavours dominant ensuring the need to do due diligence before settling down to an evenings dining. A full circle soon reveals no reason to go much further afield than home as the food in the Via Garibaldi laneway attached to the Albergo is as good as the upmarket palaces. Mutual agreement and the evening dining of vege zuppa, striatecella, taglieterri, gnocci, blu cheese and walnut spaghetti tossed down with beer and wine was reminiscent of the best in catering.

Stresa on the Lake is a time warp circa 1920 Italywood with large hotels ringing the shore as a continual passage of both private and business boats come and go across the lake. A latter day pastiche of the ages of decadence pervades as tanned, gold dripping Versacci-enti tourists and locals mince around the parapets of opulence. Hotels such as Regina and Astron set a scene of yesteryear as the modern day glitterati play with the notion that they have inherited the earth but in reality the poor people can now come out to play.

Lakeside the vista sucks the soul into its persona and it is hard to stay away from purveying the passing people as the dowagers of European society trot the pathways on evening strolls. The atmosphere is seemingly very holiday and the sports of eating, drinking and shopping overshadow the sightseeing as the adherents loll about unaware that in 1948 Ernest Hemmingway set parts of Farewell To Arms in the Grand Hotel Des Iles Borromees.

The area has the draw of good press, creating an urge to travel to the many places by boat that feature in every synopsis of the Lakes district, so limited time is a catalyst to prompt breakfasting of jams, crusty bread and local crudo. The best local advice from the proprietor for directions to the legendry walk above the town is to take the path past what seem tired but aesthetically pleasant buildings around the lake to the funiva or aerial cable car for a forty minute return trip to Mottarone at only E8.



The trip up is directly up the mountainside to the Alpino stop to change cars and allow the disgorgement of the pedalists or bikenfrats ,packing the cabin with their exotic mountain bikes ,to venture forth decimate the trails and any who dare walk upon them.

The ubiquitous haze has struck and only the earliest trips will get a clear view so it's downhill to the Giardino Botanico Alpina Parco for a nature ramble suitable for the horticulturally infused. Great views only interrupted by signage of all known commands, including a no picnic sign which is a great place to open a bottle of red to sit and contemplate the lake views whilst planning the now looming lunch.

The major theme behind lurking the lakes area is to consider where and what to eat as the variety, lassitude and sheer indolence of maxing out the vapours of calorie overkill are there for the taking.

The Albergo Liuna street café is ready for a repeat as chef Marco is now going to use the Sargol saffron sourced via the Dubai stopover gifted in return for use in a risotto creation. The wait of 40 minutes to create this love affair allowed the cold birra moretti and a litre or so of rossi to bathe the masticatory nerves into position for this treat whilst a "rettich" or gratinised radish cream was served with thin slices of blood red bresola.

The steaming golden glazed grains of risotto glistened, a touch al dente but a bursting taste treat of gargantuan flavours. The two other dishes of a piquant pomadora tagliatelle and gnocchi paled into insignificance alongside the aromatic pile of mellow yellow but certainly leading to siesta withdrawal to rest the olfactory system let alone the burgeoning waistline.



But no rest for the wicked as the Lago beckons to be used and a visit for bookings at the lakeside tourist bureau proves it to be efficiency plus as most major services start at the rear of the office. Tickets are arranged for the next days foray onto boats of an eon past ,resisting the exhortations to use the highly priced and polished launches of private operators dressed as latter day admirals.

The lake boats are slender long and sleek, like well dressed two storied dancing queens, plying an ancient Borromean Island trade forever rippling back and forth to the visible Castle and buildings on nearby pinnacles of rock dotted on small isles. The Corso Italia is vibrantly alive around the lakes edge as it verges onto Corso Umberto I into a moving morass of Mercedes Benz, Porches and mono maniacal motor bikers on private mille miglias hurtling at 100 kms an hour along the boulevard.

The movements of after siesta Stresa now bubble as the night moves come into perspective and the jockeying for the fiesta of the fat people takes place in every piazza as café life splutters into action.

A search and rescue mission is in action to find a space in a place that had reasonable fare at a price suitable to all and the Osteria Degli Amici on Via Bolongaro at the rear of town had a crowded courtyard covered in vines with a low babble of interested diners. The Tables were joined and seating with some Americans broadened their image of Australians on safari and food foibles became good dialogue.

It was a calzone and pizza fare with the Sangennaro suitably bounced with good regianno, Quattro Stagioni cured but tasty and the calzone carciofi stuffed with artichokes providing good value camaraderie and vino at E45. The mission from here in is to find the well touted Cremeria Fantasy gelato the possible Kilimanjaro of killer cones on Via Principessa Margherita.

This seemed to be the busiest place in Italy and the Riso (rice) and lime were sensational, coconut the best of its variety and the cinnamon only bested in Rome gaining overall an Oscar for the best full length flavours tour de Italia. Day has risen without the sun which has again limited the photo ops so the attack by breakfast crodo continued as participants were extolled the virtues of life giving properties of Bundaberg rum in a doppio espresso whilst tales of lake travel were passed about.

The Borromean Islands are the major lake landmarks but the capacity or willpower to view more Villas had by this time died a natural death and the E10 return to Verbania is cheap entertainment in comparison to the ticketteria trying to foist Island tours.



To stop off with the touring classes at Isola Bella and Madre e Rocca require a fee as entry to the Islands is still held by the Borromeo Family since the fourteenth century. The boat is a pleasant smooth journey across the lake where with the help of the Tourist Information Office all directions for a stroll on the peninsular of the 4 towns that make Verbania, Sunna, Pallianza, Intra around the lakeside destination.

A map directs a walk past the San Giovanni private island to the Conte Luigi Cadorna memorial and mansion which was having a sale of a few trinkets of petty purchasing. Seemed a prime time for a bargain as the icons of the Ethiopian Black Christians circa C15th a paltry E3,000 agin the sculptured coffee pots of Europe at E50,000.....definitely bargain bin purchasing.

The walk continues around the spur along a very wide cycle path that was epic in the sheer number of dilapidated and unused Villas, on vast tracts of lakefront land covered in a weed like foliage. The hotel sized palaces had encrusted windows, collapsing framework, and mottled roofs starkly waiting for love whilst all about the sparkling water provided tantric scenery.

The roadway continued around the urbane oasis to the botanical gardens of Villa Taranto, a 25 hectare expanse donated to the state by its Scottish owner, promises a mature nature ramble.

This is a pleasant interlude leading into the rear sectors of the rather mundane village of Verbania and onto the wharf and the chance to drop off at the Pescatori Islands on the way back.

Two of the islands are tariff free courtesy of the Count Borromeo proving the equation free is best as they were chockers with cherubic charybdisers chomping on menus prominent of lasagne and fish. The island is a ten minute walk around nondescript souvenir shops and the major sport is lakeside dining with views of the passing menagerie or even glimpses across the lake, haze permitting.

The thought of fare-ordinaire drove the mission back to Stresa to attack the panino maestro at Piazza Matteotti the legendary king of the meanest breads ever to grace a wood fired forno. The master panino was somewhat put out that yellow pepperoni could be inserted into the crudo and piquant salumi and genuflections were in place that he did not charge by weight as the crisp and crunchy pietas of panino were cheerfully wrapped and ported.



Monday could be national cemetery day as the town sleeps out on the wealth of weekend trade and only limited venues open to service the omnipresent tourists forever haunting the eating and drinking establishments.

The enoteca on Via Garibaldi opposite the Luina hotel became a victualling stop as an enormous selection of wines per glass plus every known spirit is available as the cream of the wine crop competed with liveried labelled bottles bespoke of Il Duce / Mussolini.

The selection of oils and balsamico from nearby Modena and other areas provide the supreme taste test selection and the twenty five year old balsamic at E200 was king of the upmarket stakes. Samples of the three, five and ten year old vinegars allowed comparison for the true worth of the E25 ten year old dessert balsamico to slip into the overweight baggage as another cannot live without staple.

Olive oils dredged with bruscetta spices pull the tastebuds into shape and the urge to smuggle yet more near death culinary contraband emerges as the need to top at a nearby banco forced action. A wander along Umberto I to the banco past an austere, grim church as dank and dark as any encountered revealed a spleen rupturing heavy organ sound rumbling through the doors.

The equivalent of a V8 engine in a mini Fiat Topolino was the size of the giant pipes in the small church suitably adorned with the prerequisite frescos and religious paintings as the pumped up action of organic nirvana decalcified any game to stay inside.

Evacuation Stresa meant we could not escape the hearty goodbyes and the night's infusion of bon voyage blueberry grappa did not help the Methode extractionaire to Malpensa Airport the next morning. The whole hotel turned out to watch the car on an Atkins diet trim its "ears" on the tight walls as the nuances of ancient buildings impacted on the curse of modern conveyancing.

The largos give the European flavour to Italy and the pace is of a more mature, decadent lifestyle in antithesis to the walled village simplicity throughout the southern sectors.