



THE GROUP TOUR

London to Lake Garda

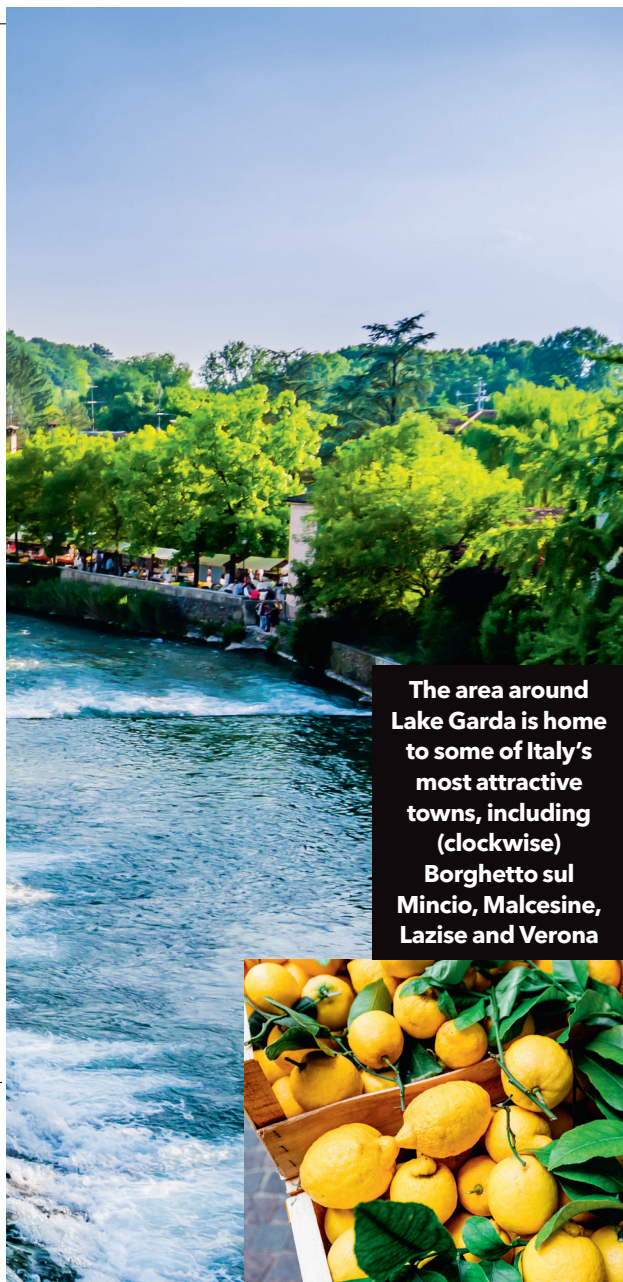
Romantic and serene, Lake Garda runs from the foot of the Alps into the Po Valley. Its mountain-framed shores are laced with Roman ruins, frescoed churches, storybook castles and the promise of la dolce vita: an energising dip in the silky shallows followed by an aperitivo on a lakeside terrace.

Flying into Verona or Milan is the conventional way to reach Italy's largest lake, but I joined a group of 30 travellers on an organised trip heading there overland by rail. Juggling our cases and coffees, we

board an early Eurostar at London's St Pancras station before switching to a high-speed TGV in Paris. Rushing through France at 185mph, the scenery outside the window becomes progressively wilder as we cross the snow-slicked Alps into Italy.

After an overnight stay in Turin, we then make the final hop by rail south to the station at Desenzano del Garda. Our base for the remainder of the trip is the small town of Garda, on the eastern side of the lake. Once a centre for fishing, wine-making and silkworm weaving, its old quarter is a charming web of dusky alleyways and colourful buildings, while the





The area around Lake Garda is home to some of Italy's most attractive towns, including (clockwise) Borghetto sul Mincio, Malcesine, Lazise and Verona

restaurant-fringed waterfront features a busy port and slender pebbled beach.

On the riviera

The relaxed arrival by train is the perfect introduction to the rest of my week-long tour, which skims off the cream of attractions. On a cruise to bijou Malcesine in the north, the lake squeezes between mountains that leap vertically from the water. Cobbled lanes wiggle up from the harbour, and a 13th-century castle, built by Verona's powerful Scaliger family, towers over it all.

I take the cable car halfway up Monte Baldo, a 2,000m giant sat behind town, and pick up a woodland trail dotted with dog

violets and ringing with birdsong. Tracking downhill, I skirt swish villas, tiny farms and grassy olive groves. I make it back to town with time to wolf down a bowl of gelato and strawberries, then swing by the castle and climb its tower. From the top, the lake is a vision of calm.

In between organised excursions – a guided tour of Verona, lunch in one of Italy's prettiest villages, Borghetto sul Mincio, and an afternoon in Sirmione, a place Maria Callas called 'heaven on earth' – there are free days to explore. I catch a ferry to the Gardone Riviera where, in the late 1980s, Austrian artist André Heller embellished a verdant botanist's garden with sculptures. Quirky and playful, every corner unleashes something unexpected, like a cartoonish scarlet dog (by Keith Haring) posing on a trim lawn, and a pair of heads that squirt water at each other across a wooden bridge.

New discoveries

Another day I hire a bike in an effort to combat the four-course meals (with wine) that are served every evening at our hotel. I freewheel under resin-scented pine trees, past boatyards and ducks pootling among the reeds. At Lazise, I stop by the tiny harbour crowded with fishing boats, and sip a latte macchiato while locals finish their espressos with grappa shots. The town is dominated by a romantic ruined castle and castellated walls, built in the 10th century to guard against Hungarian invaders.

After a week of unhurried days and balmy evenings, it's time to head back. This time, leaving from Milan station, our group overnights in France, at

rail adventures

'The relaxed arrival by train is the perfect introduction'



château-crested Chambéry, before the now-familiar routine of changing trains in Paris for the Eurostar home. In just over a week, we have travelled over 2,000km of track, crossed two borders and, along the way, turned from strangers into friends. Proof that the journey can be just as rewarding as the destination.

BOOK IT

✦ A 10-day all-inclusive Lake Garda group trip costs from £1,299 per person, including meals, rail travel and transfers, with Great Rail Journeys; greatrail.com

