

ITALY'S *star attraction*

It's long been a favourite of the Hollywood A-list, but author Erica James explains why Lake Como makes for both an affordable and memorable break



Author Erica enjoying her favourite place

Yes there are beautiful villas, chic hotels and famous visitors such as George Clooney - rumoured to be planning to marry fiancée Amal Alamuddin at his villa there. But there's also a more down-to-earth side to Lake Como, which is why I've kept returning to this area for the past decade.

When asked why I love the lake - a Y-shaped expanse of water a 90-minute drive north of Milan - it comes down to so much more than the good weather and delicious food. It's really about the people, their zest for life and the way I've always been made to feel so welcome. A trip to the shops or a wander round the weekly market rarely passes without a conversation. It captured my heart, and now I own an apartment there.

EAT LIKE A LOCAL

So what about the food for which Italians are so famous? Well, their pride is justifiable and there's an amazing selection of places to choose from. One of my favourite haunts is Pizzeria Balognett in Tremezzo (pizzeriabalognett.com). Run by Carmelo and Franca, it's plain and simple in appearance but I've never eaten a better pizza. I am such a frequent visitor for Sunday lunch, Franca doesn't need to give me a menu, it's always the quattro stagione pizza. They grow all their own vegetables and for a gardener

like me it's a delight to peer over the fence to see how well everything's doing.

If I'm in the mood to get dressed up and go for something with a bit of razzle-dazzle, I'll go for a pre-dinner tippale at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo (grandhotel-tremezzo.com) and enjoy the wonderful panoramic view of the lake. Then I head up the hill for dinner at Al Veluu Ristorante (+39 0344 40510/alveluu.com/inglese.html) where the view from the terrace is even more spectacular. I always have a side order of zucchini fritti - courgettes sliced into matchsticks and coated in flour, or sometimes a light batter, and then fried in olive oil and sprinkled with salt. Delicious!