

CLASSIC DRIVER

Villa d'Este, Lago di Como: 'More than a hotel, it's a destination'

Lead

I just knew I had something in common with the 17th Century Sultan of Morocco. I, too, have stayed at Villa d'Este, and have now seen and enjoyed its out-of-this-world "reported splendours".

While many of us in the motoring world associate the luxury lakeside hotel with the annual Concorso d'Eleganza, that long weekend in May apart, from the beginning of March to mid-November guests come from all over the world to be "treasured in the old-fashioned way".

And, over the years, those guests have included honeymooners (Elizabeth Taylor and Nick Hilton, Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner), politicians (Winston Churchill) and film stars (Charlton Heston, Donald Sutherland and Sharon Stone).

It is, more than anything, 'a destination'; one that centres on the sparkling deep waters of Lake Como and the view of the surrounding mountains.





Enjoying drinks or a light meal on the terrace — the hotel's massive awning extended, with just the buzz of quiet conversation, the distant 'tink' of powerboats bobbing in the marina and the gentle waft of jasmine on the breeze — is one of life's most sublime pleasures. I defy anyone not to wriggle their toes, relax those shoulders and hunker down a little in the wicker chair on a sunny afternoon at the hotel, with a house Martini or stiff gin and tonic at hand.

For further relaxation there is the choice of two swimming pools: the amazing 'floating' pool in the lake with adjacent sundeck and pool bar, and the indoor facilities at the Villa d'Este Sporting Club. Guests can also play tennis (on any one of eight courts, six of which are clay), squash and golf, or be pampered royally in the Beauty Centre – something sadly not available to Princess Caroline of Brunswick, the future Queen of England, when she took up residence in the Villa in 1815.





It was Caroline, in fact, who changed the name of the exquisite house and gardens from 'Villa Garovo' to 'Villa d'Este', when she adopted the name of a distant relative while estranged from her husband, King George IV.

And it was in 1873 that a group of businessmen bought the villa and so began the history of Villa d'Este as a luxurious holiday destination like few others. The terrace dates from this time, as the house originally rose directly out of the waters of Lake Como.





It proved to be an inspired decision, as the terrace *is* Villa d'Este; the focal point of events, chance meetings and the best vantage point for the most stunning views of Lake Como. That said, the blue lake has such a presence that you are never far from its pull - whether you are fortunate enough to have a clear view from your suite, or balmy weather has permitted the great windows of the formal Veranda Restaurant to be opened wide.

For those looking for even more privacy and flexibility, there are two private villas set inside the 23-acre estate. Available with the use of as many amenities of the hotel as you want, Villa Malakoff and Villa Cima can be rented on a short-term basis.

All manner of excursions and activities (shopping trips, visits to Milan, boat cruises on the lake and their ilk) can be arranged by the hotel's ever-helpful staff.

But that would be getting away from Villa d'Este and back to the real world - the reverse of why I would stay at one of the best hotels in the world.

Photos: Villa d'Este / Classic Driver

Gallery

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