

Beth Habian
Features Editor



View of beautiful Lago di Como from the gardens around Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio.

Enjoying the beauty of the lakes and lagoons of northern Italy on a 12-night escorted tour

Many travelers seek out new destinations and new experiences in an attempt to satisfy the wanderlust that, for some, begins building the day they recover from the jet lag of their latest overseas adventure. But sometimes a particular area of the world keeps calling you back. Whether by design or happenstance, you find yourself returning to surroundings at once familiar and foreign. That place, for me, is Italy.

I'm not sure what it is, exactly, but when I'm in Italy I feel at home. So when George Nevin of Intimate France asked if I'd like to join his April 28-May 10, 2013, "Italian Lakes & Venice" tour, there was no question what my answer would be.

I had traveled with George to the Dordogne region of France in 2009

(Sept. '09, pg. 6), and that tour still sits at the top of my list of all-time-favorite trips. But, as the company's name suggests, France is a country with which George is intimately familiar. I wondered how the experience of traveling through northern Italy with him would compare.

The tour

Departing from Milan, our small group of nine would travel by van, with George at the wheel, to the Lake District, visiting Lago d'Orta, Lago Maggiore, Lago di Como and Lago di Garda before ending with three nights in glorious Venice.

Some of the elements that I really enjoyed about my first

trip with Intimate France remained. We spent several nights in each location, which kept our unpacking and packing to a minimum and allowed



us a chance to get to know each city a bit. Group meals were wonderful; each restaurant was well chosen and offered excellent food. The itinerary included lovely towns to explore, and George's quick wit continued to amuse me.

But there was one major difference in the structure of this tour. My previous trip with George featured a healthy number of site visits and activities, allowing me to sit back and enjoy the sensational surprises that each day revealed. However, this Italian itinerary had us spending much more time on our own.

Sometimes this was because we were on the road. When we were traveling from one lodging to another and there was luggage in the van, George stayed with the group's belongings while we were set free to explore a town for an hour or two.

At other times, the scheduled sightseeing for the day lasted only three or four hours, so the remainder of the day's activities, outside of the scheduled group meal, was left up to each individual.

While this is ideal for those who don't necessarily enjoy being on a "tour" — who want some structure (hotels and transportation arranged) but like to branch out on their own — it requires a bit of extra planning on the traveler's part to make the most of the time available in each location, especially for someone unfamiliar with the area being visited.

The Lake District

Our first base for exploring the Lake District was the town of Stresa, located on the southwest shore of Lago Maggiore. Unfortunately, the weather was not on our side here, and plans to tour the botanical gardens on Isola Madre and the ornate Palazzo Borromeo on Isola Bella had to be adjusted to accommodate the steady rain.

In the end, the decision was made to brave the elements, and, though exploring the outdoor attractions might have been more enjoyable on a warm, sunny day, I was happy to have had the chance to visit these lovely islands.

We got a bit of a reprieve from the



The picturesque lakeside town of Orta San Giulio was our first stop after departing Milan.

rain during our 3-night stay in the lakeside town of Bellagio. A highlight of our time on beautiful Lake Como was a guided tour of the gardens around Villa Serbelloni. More properly known as the Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center, this 50-acre property overlooking the lake

offers a residency program for artists, writers, scientists and policymakers, providing them with peaceful surroundings in which to be inspired.

Our jovial local guide led us on an interesting and informative walk. Though the uphill climb in the warming temperatures might have been a bit strenuous for some, the pace was slow. Note: there are no restroom facilities in the gardens, and the tour runs about 1½-2 hours.

For the rest of our time in Bellagio, George purchased a ferry pass for each of us, enabling us to explore the other towns that rim the lake as we wished. The staff at our family-run

The Essential Driving Guides

Trim, portable volumes with everything you need to know to create your ideal European driving holiday. **Rules of the road, deciphering signs, navigating roundabouts, emergency telephone numbers, point-to-point routings & itineraries** — it's all here along with concise area maps so your "navigator" will never get lost.

Buy Online!

www.EuropeDriveGuide.com
408 N. 35th St., Ste. B
Seattle, WA 98103

2013...ITALY AWAITS...with TOURS TO BOOT INC

"Italy on Your Own" 13-nt Independent **May - Oct
"A Gourmet Road Trip - Visiting Lesser-known Gems" **Oct 23 - Nov 3
"Village Christmas Markets" Dec 2-14
Germany, Austria & Italy **Munich to Munich
OPERA - Celebrate 200 yrs of VERDI & WAGNER
Verona & Milano La Scala **June 13-24
*Small Friendly Groups **Lots of Local Food/Wine
*Charming Hotels **No-worry Owner Escorted
*Choose our itineraries or will build to your wishes

5321 Aquamarine • Alta Loma, CA 91701
909-297-3391 • 714-307-0521 • 760-485-2123
www.tourstoboot.com CST #2071436-40

hotel, **Hotel Bellagio**, were most helpful in suggesting sites to visit as well as area restaurants for any meals not included, as indicated, in the itinerary.

Like that of nearby Varenna (a pretty little town worth a visit), the layout of Bellagio is quite vertical. Exploring is done on foot, and the large streets paved with cobblestones are quite steep, so good walking shoes are a must.

On to the Veneto

Our time at the lakes over, we moved southeast into the Veneto region and our next base, Verona. On the way, we spent some time exploring the town of Vicenza, dotted with beautiful buildings designed by the influential Italian architect Palladio.

We then wound our way along the narrow roads of Verona to our hotel for the next two nights. (I must give kudos to George for his expertise on this trip in maneuvering the not-so-small van through the many skinny streets, filled with scooters and sight-seers, upon which we traveled!)

Hotel Torcolo was modest, but its location, just around the corner from the Arena, was superb. I had visited Verona briefly more than 25 years before, but the only things I remembered were its Roman amphitheater and “Juliet’s” balcony,

both of which, in my opinion, could be skipped. But what I found on *this* trip was a resplendent medieval city that was a joy to discover on foot.

Strolling through the Piazza della Erbe at night — surrounded by a melange of architectural styles and frescoed facades, gently lit — was magical.

There was time for one more highlight before moving on to the final stop on the tour, Venice. In Padova, we had reservations (required) at Scrovegni Chapel to see the incredibly well-preserved cycle of frescoes completed by Giotto in 1305.

Visitors are allowed only 15 minutes to view the frescoes, following 15 minutes in a temperature-controlled waiting room designed to



Even in the rain, the gardens on Isola Madre, complete with perching peacocks, were lovely.

stabilize the interior climate, but the chapel isn’t large, so I felt the time allowed was adequate. The vividness of the paintings, which depict the lives of Christ and the Virgin Mary, was astounding.

A Venetian finale

Our trip was nearing its end, but what a way to end, with four nights in Venice! I had spent my very first night in Venice just seven months before (*April '13, pg. 36*), which gave me a tiny taste of life in this intriguing city, but, with several days to wander the winding, maddeningly convoluted streets, I began to feel more comfortable, more a part of the ebb and flow.

Understand that, more likely than not, you *will* get lost. However, if you recognize that Venice is not one big city but a collection of small neighborhoods, each designed around a central *campo*, or square, it starts to make a bit more sense.

We were staying at **Locanda Fiorita**, a small but charming one-star hotel in the San Marco district. Our neighborhood was clustered

Intimate France Tours

OUR TOURS IN 2014

- Burgundy & Alsace, May 4-16
Beaune • Wines & Vines • Colmar
- Normandy & Loire, May 18-30
Monet • Honfleur • Châteaux
- Romantic Germany, Sept. 7-19
Castles • Villages • Rhine & Mosel
- Italian Lakes & Venice, Sept. 21-Oct. 3 • Bellagio • Gardens • Stresa
Lake Cruises • Verona • Padua

Did You Know?

All of our 2013 tours sold out, many well in advance. Don't be disappointed!

WHY WE ARE SPECIAL

- ♣ **Small groups** – Most are limited to eight travelers
- ♣ **Personalized service** – All tours escorted by founder-owner George Nevin
- ♣ **Fabulous food and wine** – Focus on regional cuisine
- ♣ **Charming hotels & inns** – All rooms with private bath
- ♣ **And much, much more** – Art, villages, unusual sights, festivals, markets, walking tours

OUR
21ST
YEAR!

INTIMATE FRANCE TOURS • www.intimatefrance.com
(800) 676-1247 • 1826 Woodhaven Way • Oakland CA 94611

AVOID THE
BIG BUS
BLUES!

around Campo Santo Stefano, and the nearest major landmark was the Ponte dell'Accademia.

Keeping that in mind, wherever I wandered in the city, I could follow the signs posted here and there on the walls that pointed in the direction of the Accademia bridge. (Sometimes there were two signs with arrows pointing in opposite directions. No worries; there's often more than one way to get where you want to go!) Once I found my landmark, I knew my "home" campo was close by.

Also, if I ventured a little too far out, I could always use the 3-day pass that George provided for each of us that allowed transport on any of the *vaporettos* that frequently ferry passengers to and from the many spots of interest in the historical city and the surrounding islands.

The highlight of my time here was the two hours the group spent with Luisella Romeo, an absolutely delightful guide whose passion for Venice was infectious. In the limited



This winged lion, a symbol of the Venetian Republic and, today, of Venice and the Veneto region, stands in Verona's Piazza della Erbe.

time she was with us, Luisella, through her engaging explanation of the history and customs of this complicated and once-incredibly-powerful republic, provided an entirely new perspective on this fascinating city. She was one of the best city guides I have ever encountered.

The food

Of course, I cannot recount a trip to Italy without mentioning the food. George has a special talent for seeking out exceptional restaurants, and on this trip there were several that were standouts.

In Bellagio, our included meal at *La Punta* (www.ristorantelapunta.it),

situated on a promontory that juts into the lake, was made all the more enjoyable by the enthusiastic service provided by our waiter, "Kiko." Following his recommendations from the menu, I had a delicious starter of tortellini with radicchio and speck (a smoked, cured ham) followed by lavarello, a whitefish found in abundance in Lake Como, sautéed in butter and sage. (In fact, all nine of our group members ordered the fish, which was caught by one of the three brothers who own the restaurant.)

In Verona we dined at *La Cantina del 15* (www.lacantinadel15.ristoranteverona.it [Italian only]), a cozy restaurant featuring a chic mix of modern and rustic design, with an incredibly creative menu. The food was fabulous, but the menu was in Italian only and featured a few local specialties that many might not be familiar with.

On this trip, George helped a great deal with translation, when needed, but, unlike in France, where he had been spot on when describing the available dishes, here he sometimes needed additional help. Luckily, the staff was able to more clearly explain to him, albeit in Italian, some of the more confusing items, saving me from ordering a main dish of colt (*puledro*).

AMBER ROAD TOURS
Small group tours Italy & Spain

Madrid?

Discover it on our
Central Spain trip

Puglia • Sicily • Amalfi
Cinque Terre • Tuscany
Friuli & Slovenia

www.AmberRoadTours.com
7 Radcliffe Street Suite 201
Charleston, SC 29403
843-579-2828

Essential Travel & Tours
Unbeatable price with quality & service

Italy . . . Uncorked	
September 2-10, 2013	\$2,988+tax
New Year's in Paris	
Dec 26, 2013-Jan 3, 2014	\$2,450+tax
The Best of China	
March 21-29, 2014	\$2,475+tax
The Treasure Land of the Incas	
April 12-22, 2014	\$4,630+tax
Essential Balkans Tour (Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Montenegro)	
June 3-16, 2014	TBA
London & Paris	
August 26-September 4, 2014	TBA

All tours include airfare from Los Angeles,
Travel protection, Deluxe Hotels
www.EssentialToursOnLine.Com
EssentialTours@aol.com
1-310-544-9596
6565 Monero Dr. • Rancho Palos Verdes, CA 90275

(Note: horsemeat is a not-so-uncommon item to find on an Italian menu, so keep an eye out for other incarnations, such as *sfilacci* and *straéca* as well as the more easily recognizable *cavallo*!)

In Venice, my favorite meal was found at **La Bitta** (*Calle Lunga de San Barnaba, 2753a; phone 041 523 05 31*), a charming, casual place with a menu that offered a break from the usual seafood-heavy offerings of the island. For my starter, I had a pear-and-cheese salad with dried figs, followed by a main dish of gnocchi with pumpkin — delectable!

The service was friendly and the portions were perfect. (I've noticed that portions in Italy seem to be growing, making it difficult to follow the custom of ordering at least two plates, usually a *primo* and a *secondo*, without feeling like you are going to burst.) The prices were really reasonable for Venice, with main dishes averaging €18 (\$24), but this *osteria* does not accept credit cards.

Though this was not a meal that



Stopping for drinks at Villa d'Este in Cernobbio was a wonderful way to enjoy this super-luxury hotel while avoiding the exorbitant price tag (rooms average about \$1,000 per night).

was included on the tour, it was a restaurant selected by George. Seating is limited, so reservations are recommended.

The details

Intimate France (*Oakland, CA; phone 800/676-1247, www.intimatefrance.com*) will be offering the



Don't just travel

EXPLORE!

Culture, wildlife & active adventures

Be inspired by ancient civilizations, witness spectacular wildlife or immerse yourself in local life. Travel with a small international group of like-minded travelers, with affordable prices and no compulsory single supplements for solo travelers.

Wine, Walks and Tapas - New
10 days from \$1650 (CWW)

- Wine tasting in Rioja, Priorat, Montsant & Cava

Burma Highlights
14 days from \$2450 (BUH)

- Explore the big four: Rangon, Inle Lake, Mandalay and Bagan

To choose from over 500 trips in more than 100 countries or request your free copy of the ultimate adventure travel catalog go to

www.exploreworldwide.com/itn or call 1 800 715 1746

EXPLORE!

The Adventure Travel Experts

Prices do not include international flights. CST 2102544-40 Explore! - North America, 1853 Embarcadero, Ste.2C, Oakland, CA 94606



We used our *vaporetto* passes to take the ferry out to the island of Burano, lined with brightly colored buildings.

12-day "Italian Lakes & Venice" tour again in 2014 (Sept. 21-Oct. 3). Priced at \$3,995 per person, double (single supplement, \$550), the tour will include accommodations, transportation by van, local guide services, entry fees, all breakfasts and at least one major meal (lunch or dinner) on most days. International airfare is excluded.

Payment for meals and wine not included on the itinerary is made easier by George's policy of keeping a log for items ordered when with the group on such occasions. He takes care of the bill, noting the

charges incurred for each traveler, and presents a grand total for these expenses at the end of the tour. Payment can be made with leftover

euros at the end of the trip or he will bill you when you return home, if you choose.

Intimate France runs most tours with up to eight guests traveling in one van, but, as this 2014 itinerary already has eight travelers booked, George plans to operate the tour using two vehicles, with the help of Connie Barney, with whom he has worked for 20 years, allowing a maximum of 16 passengers.

One final highlight

When our scheduled tour had ended and our group had said their good-byes, I joined George and a couple of other travelers, who would be joining his next tour departing in a few day's time, for an overnight in Pieve d'Alpago. Located about 50 miles north of Venice, this mountain village offers views of the snow-capped Dolomites, which I enjoyed seeing briefly before the clouds rolled in.

However, we had not traveled there so much for the view as for an overnight stay at **Ristorante Albergo Dolada** (phone +39 0437 479141, www.dolada.it), a simply furnished 7-room hotel and restaurant run by the same family since 1923. More specifically, we were there for the food.

We were greeted upon arrival by Riccardo de Prà, the latest of this family's four generations of chefs to run the kitchen. An extremely talented, innovative chef, he was unpretentiously charismatic, helping us to check in, carrying bags and, later, coming to the dining room to explain the menu and make recommendations.

The food was beautifully presented and was, by far, the best of the trip. I chose his modern twist on spaghetti carbonara (about €22): perfectly cooked fresh pasta served with finely grated pecorino and ample amounts of house-made pancetta, topped with a slowly poached egg covered in black pepper that, when mixed into the dish, made a wonderfully creamy sauce.

The peaceful location and fantastic food made this the perfect end to our time in Italy!

ITN

visit us at www.intltravelnews.com

David McGuffin's
ITALY
 Sept 13-21 ~ Sept 28-Oct 6 ~ Oct 12-20

TOUR ITINERARY
 Day 1: ANCIENT ROME
 Day 2: VATICAN CITY
 Day 3: ORVIETO & 5 TERRE
 Day 4: CINQUE TERRE
 Day 5: LUCCA & VOLTERRA
 Day 6: VOLTERRA
 Day 7/8 FLORENCE
 Day 9: TOUR ENDS IN FLORENCE

\$2689 + air

1-800-570-1351 - davidmcguffin.com/itn
 4036 Hidden Acres Rd. - Middleburg, FL 32068
 A+ Rating with Better Business Bureau - Florida Seller of Travel ST-35037

**Small Group
 Gourmet Tours**

**Rome, Amalfi Coast
 and Sicily**
 \$6,599 ppdo Oct. 12-25

Explore the fascinating ancient culture of Italy, dine on fabulous local cuisine, visit the most beautiful, special places in these 3 areas with local guides and a small friendly group.

Fall 2013 Tours — Our 19th year!
 Spaces are still available on the following fall tours:
Bordeaux, Dordogne & Languedoc
 September 14-27 \$6,499
Autumn in New England Villages
 October 3-16 \$4,399
Rome, Amalfi Coast & Sicily
 October 12-25 \$6,599

Spring 2014 Tours
 Borneo, Singapore & West Sumatra
 Back Roads & Wines of Portugal
 Amalfi Coast Food & Wine
 Corsica, French Riviera & Tuscan Coast
 Prague, Krakow & Budapest
 Normandy & Brittany

OLDE IPSWICH TOURS
 8 Herrick Dr., Ipswich, MA 01938
 877-356-5163 • info@ipswichtours.com
www.ipswichtours.com