

This picture: cycling makes a great way to take in views of Garda, Italy's largest lake



JOY RIDING

Gorgeous views, fabulous food and new friendships – a bike tour around the Italian lakes delivers all three, says **Rebecca Denne**

Growing up, my childhood home backed onto huge playing fields, where my sister and I would ride our bikes until we got called for dinner. I'd pedal my little purple Raleigh bike so fast that I thought my legs would drop off – it was my first taste of freedom, at the grand age of 10. So, when I'm invited to get back in the saddle for a Luxury Lakes and Vineyards trip with family-run operator Italy Bike Tours, I jump at the chance. It promises six days of leisurely cycling around three of Italy's most famous lakes – Garda, Iseo and Como – punctuated with pasta-laden pit stops and sensational hotels with shimmering views.

Day one is confession time: I tell my fellow cyclists and the tour team that I haven't been on a bike for 30-odd years. 'No problem – it's like riding a bike,' quips lead guide Savi. Here's hoping... As a regular solo traveller, I feel that meeting new people is part of the experience. You never know who's going to be coming along for the ride, so to speak. Italy Bike Tours puts on more than 120 trips a year (ranging from three to 10 nights), with itineraries designed to appeal to everyone from casual riders to more adventurous folk who feel at home powering their

way through the Dolomites. My co-riders include a couple from Tasmania, two fellow solo travellers and a retired couple from Manchester. I can just tell we're set for memories galore, with some laughs along the way.

So, bicycles tested and helmets fastened, we head to the small fishing town of San Felice – a short ride to help us set our pace as we try out our bikes. Savi shares that Italian drivers are extremely accommodating to cyclists, which helps put my mind at ease as we hit the road. That said, most of the tour is on beautiful (and often quiet) cycle paths that kiss the edge of the three lakes. We have a quick gelato break before we head back for dinner – a meal overlooking Lake Garda, which sets the tone for the trip. Glasses of local lugana wine are clinked as we tuck into lovingly made pasta dishes and master the Italian ritual of scooping up every last morsel using a piece of bread known as *scarpetta* (meaning 'little shoe'). I love this place.

The second part of our tour is in Italy Bike Tours' home: Lake Iseo. Known for its tranquility, it has ►



one of the world's best cycling paths. With flat roads and blue skies, an air of serenity is palpable as we ride, stopping for photos along the way. We visit Michael and his team at Trismoka – an impressive coffee-roasting company, and one of the first in Italy to have its own on-site school for baristas. As it's before 10am, the *cappuccini* are flowing – any later and locals would opt for a punchy espresso or *macchiato* for their caffeine hit, Michael explains. With rain looming, some of us head back to the van, while others brave the elements on two wheels. The joy of this trip is that you can dip in and out of the rides, while Savi and his team manage the logistics of routes and timings.

WINE AND WHEELS

Unlike some other cycling trips, this isn't just about the rides. On day four, we visit the wine region of Franciacorta, where we sample some of Bersi Serlini's elegant sparkling wines. Sommelier Riccardo shows us around the 15-hectare winery, on a site established by monks in the Middle Ages. Today it produces about 160,000 bottles of wine a year following the Franciacorta method and using chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot blanc – a varietal you'll spot on most menus in this part of Italy.

The final morning at Iseo warrants a farewell dip in the lake before breakfast – apparently it's too cold for many Italians at this time of year, but my British blood finds it refreshing (that's my story and I'm sticking to it).

For the final part of our trip, we head north to Lake Como. There's an air of chicness as we arrive at our lodging, Casa Sull'Albero – a boutique hotel with floor-to-ceiling windows for optimal



From top to bottom: the terrace of the Hotel Araba Fenice on Lake Iseo; the 'dinky' Madonna del Ghisallo church, high above Lake Como; the town of Mandello del Lario on the eastern shores of Como

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lake views. Group drinks flow, as we opt for every variety of spritz you can imagine. The limoncello is also a big hit before we head to bed.

THE ONLY WAY IS UP

Saving the best until last, keen cyclists have one last challenge on this tour: to tackle the renowned 500m-plus climb up to Madonna di Ghisallo. The brave Aussie couple pedal their way up around the twists and turns of the road, while the rest of us opt to take in the views from the van and cheer on the cyclists. At the top, as well as postcard-worthy views, there's time to potter around the Santuario della Madonna del Ghisallo – a dinky little church that's dedicated to the patron saint

of cycling – and squeeze in a visit to the Cycling Museum, for a small fee.

For our last supper, it's *scarpetta* at the ready as we relish one more dish of pasta, this time at a traditional trattoria in Mandello. I ask everyone to share their highlights of the tour. The food? The rides? The scenery? For me, it was gliding into the town of San Pellegrino, feeling the same sense of freedom I felt when I was 10 – only on a slightly bigger, less purple bike. ■

THE DETAILS

The five-night Luxury Lakes and Vineyards tour costs from £2,740 per person and includes hotel stays, bike hire, guided rides, all breakfasts and three dinners. Visit italybike.com

