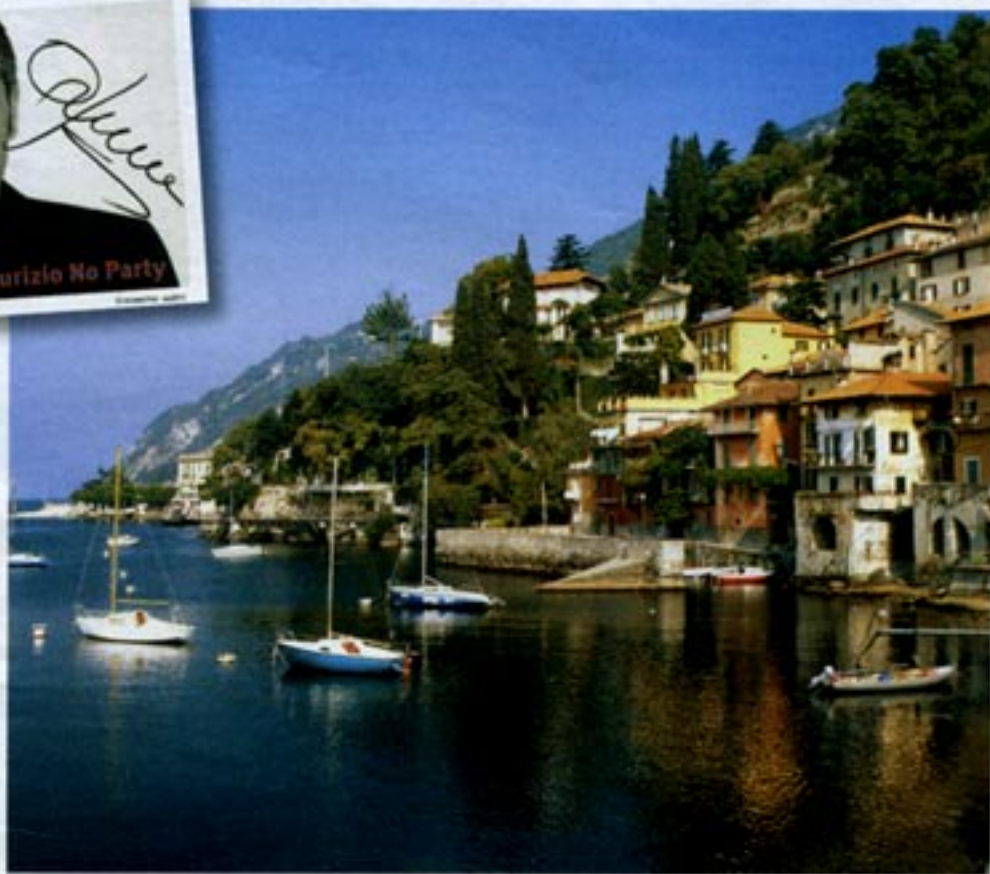


Attack of the Cloons

The new adopted home of George Clooney (and of his local doppelgänger), Lake Como is a true superstar in the property market

RATHER LIKE THE QUEEN AND HER BUCKINGHAM PALACE FLAGS, when George Clooney drops by his villa on Lake Como, the parasols go up. George may simply be after a shady spot in his garden to work on some film scripts, but once word gets around that Hollywood royalty is back in residence, the Clooney



LIVE THE CLOONEY LIFE ON COMO



industry on the north Italian lake goes into overdrive.

Hoping for a glimpse of Hollywood glamour, holidaymakers hover outside the walls of the 19th-century Villa Oleandra, in the unprepossessing village of Laglio, that Clooney bought five years ago for a reported €6.95m.

He could now sell it for at least double that amount, exclaimed a local paper recently, such has been the star's effect on local property prices.

Meanwhile, staff at his favourite haunts such as Harry's Bar or Il Gatto Nero restaurant are prepped for an impromptu appearance. Whether he is zooming around on his Harley Davidson, taking a dip in the lake or getting into hot water over his local beach—it was said he wanted to buy it, but he claims he merely offered to clean it up—Clooney's every move is tracked.

And when he's safely ensconced back in LA, there's Maurizio Gerosa to take his place. Gerosa, the 44-year-old restaurant manager of Como's elegant Hotel Terminus, is slighter in build than the film star, but with his dark Spaniel eyes and salt-and-pepper hair coiffed Clooney-style, he passes as a convincing doppelgänger. And he is ever willing to strike a Clooney pose for a photo.

"When some American tourists told me 10 years ago that I looked like George Clooney, I said 'who?' He wasn't well known back then," laughs Gerosa, who is single and something of a local hero, with adverts on Italian and German TV and a photoshoot in Italian *Vanity Fair* in which he languishes Clooney-like in speedboats and opulent villas.

"I haven't met George. Actually, he's rather angry with me for being spotted near his house. I think he might be jealous," Gerosa suggests. "But when I take my couple of months' holiday this year, I'll carry on with more lookalike work."

Gerosa is far from the only person to be capitalising on the Clooney effect along the 30-mile-long lake an hour from Milan. While international property

- **Harry's Bar** (Piazza Risorgimento 1, Cernobbio) The lake's famous cocktail bar that might just afford you a glimpse of George.
- **Lido di Lenno** (Via Comoedia 1, Lenno, www.lidodilenno.com) A beach bar, restaurant and club that George occasionally frequents. Sup a candlelit cocktail beneath the beachfront gazebo.
- **Il Gatto Nero** (Via Montesanto 69, Cernobbio) A traditional wood-pannelled restaurant in the hills above Cernobbio, introduced to George by Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones while they were by the lake.
- **Locanda dell' Isola Comacina** (Comacina Island, www.comacina.it) Another traditional restaurant, reached by boat from Tremezzo. George says it's romantic. We'll be there.
- **Menaggio and Cadenabbia Golf Club** (www.menaggio.it) One of the oldest golf courses in Europe, it celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2007. A slice of old England set in the hills behind Menaggio. George regularly pops in for dinner and social events there.
- **Hotel Terminus** (Lungo Lario Trieste, www.hotelterminus-como.com) A classically decorated hotel overlooking Como's waterfront. You may not see George, but sit back and be served a chilled aperitif on the terrace by his lookalike, Maurizio Gerosa.



markets struggle with the slowdown, such is Como's prestige—further boosted by an appearance in *Casino Royale*, a double whammy with Daniel Craig outside Clooney's villa—that estate agents are rubbing their hands. Once it was closeness to Como, the lake's main town, that bumped up a property's value. Now it's all about being near George.

Among the usual raft of wealthy home owners, including Sting and Michael Schumacher, there is new-found interest from American buyers and asking prices for waterfront villas are reaching €15m.

"Lake Como is special as it has a mix of both sophistication and rural charm. It has the best designer shops on one hand and great local markets on the other. And the way the mountains rise up from the lake make the views spectacular," comments Linda Travella of Casa Travella, the first property consultant to launch Como to the British market 20 years ago. "In 1994, I won the tourist office's prize for promoting relations between Lake Como and the UK. Versace came second," she recalls.

"Como has always been easily accessible via Milan's three airports, Malpensa, Linate and Bergamo, but it

has been made more so by budget airline routes opening up from all over the UK, bringing it within the reach of a far wider range of visitors," says Travella, who says property prices have risen by 20% in the past 18 months.

"People are only now starting to realise that you can buy a property on Lake Como, as long as it is in the right area, and go skiing easily, so you can use your home for both summer water-bound activities and winter sports."

All buyers on Como want a lake view—and a large terrace from which to soak it up—but it doesn't have to cost a fortune. On the Western shore, the glitzier side with more bars, restaurants and sunshine, Knight Frank are selling a five-bedroom villa in sought-after Menaggio for €4.2m, but they also have newly refurbished apartments in a period house in Faggeto, from €598,000.

In Tremezzo, a semi-detached two-bedroom house with private garden costs €320,000 or apartments in renovated houses in Menaggio from €117,000, both through Casa Travella. You can even join George and Laglio's 800 other residents as Casa Travella are selling houses in the village from €570,000-€3.2m.

Better value is the eastern shore, where towns such as medieval Varenna benefit from being on the train line from Milan. There, Pure International are marketing new hillside apartments from €274,000, with a management company to oversee rentals. Five minutes away, in Bellano, Italy Development is working on geothermically heated and cooled apartments, approached by a glass and steel funicular, with prices starting at just under €300,000.

"Three years ago, only the chic set could afford to buy on the lake, but we have built something finally at a reasonable price for British buyers," comments Italy Development's director Sam Cleps.

"Buyers don't always want big old houses that require a lot of upkeep and expense. They want good-quality, contemporary lock up-and-leave apartments that they can use as a weekend bolthole to explore the region, visit Milan, go skiing in Lugano or St Moritz. And they want to rent it out when they are not there."

Not there? That might mean missing George Clooney. Ridiculous thought.