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TRAVEL FACTFILE

ALAN travelled to Lake Garda with Topflight, Ireland's Italian specialist, staying at the four-star Hotel Savoy Palace in Riva.

Topflight offers holidays to Lake Garda all summer season, with a choice of flights from Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Alongside Riva, it also offers Limone, Torbole, Sirmione and much more — there's a resort to suit everyone!

Prices for the Hotel Savoy Palace start from £884 pp sharing (September) and include return flights, seven nights' half-board accommodation, 20kg baggage allowance, taxes and the services of a Topflight representative.

The hotel offers a welcome drink on arrival, complimentary afternoon tea/coffee, wine and water with dinner, a weekly gala dinner, complimentary bicycle hire, honeymoon/anniversary surprise and a complimentary yoga class and trekking excursion.

Your Topflight representative will be on hand in the resort and can organise a selection of excursions to ensure you see the very best of what the region has to offer.

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BEAUTY: Alan Kelly (below) was blown away by Lake Garda's breathtaking views and laid-back pace

ITALY IS GARD TO BEAT

Stunning scenery and fantastic food makes the lake a perfect destination

By Alan Kelly

IN TWILIGHT in Italy, DH Lawrence describes his first impressions of Lake Garda: "Everything was clear and sun-coloured up there, clear-grey rocks partaking of the sky, tawny grass and scrub, browny-green spires of cypresses, and then the mist of grey-green olives fuming down to the lake-side."

My own first impressions were far more prosaic — something along the lines of: "Wow, talk about gorgeous!"

It's little wonder the lake has been so popular with writers down the years, with those craggy summits changing colour by the hour.

We were lodged in the Savoy Palace Hotel, from where every morning a majestic view of the dizzying peaks imparted a sense of healing.

Fortunately, the hotel was just a short stroll from the lakeside and the lure of relaxation and unhurried days of strolling along the pebbly shore.

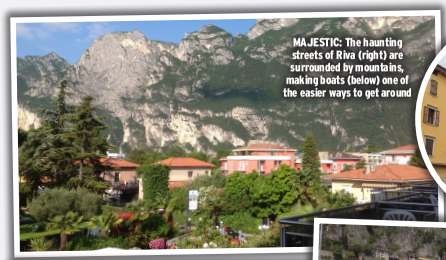
A hearty breakfast from a superbly stocked warm buffet is always a welcome aid to laid-back exertions, and nobody does it better than hotel proprietor Mr Tonelli and his welcoming staff.

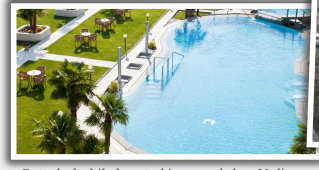
What a welcome we got there. There was a host of extras to make us smile, including 'benvenuto' drink on arrival, complimentary afternoon tea/coffee, wine and water with dinner, a weekly gala dinner, complimentary bicycle hire and honeymoon/anniversary surprises.

One could imagine checking in and never wanting to venture any further, but we, of course, did. Fuelled up on breakfast, we made for the exciting beach culture of the Great Lake.

One way of making the most out of Lake Garda is to select a good hotel and use it as a headquarters. With a 50-mile shoreline festooned with jewel-like destinations, you may well require a day or two to do some exploring.

Town-hopping from an open deck taxi boat is by far the best way. It's also a more enjoyable (and cheaper) experience than sweating in a hired car. The cost of pottering over to lovely Limone, for instance, is just €5 a head.





MAJESTIC: The haunting streets of Riva (right) are surrounded by mountains, making boats (below) one of the easier ways to get around

Faster hydrofoils do cost a bit more, but it's definitely worth it for the thrill of criss-crossing of the lake at speed.

Off the boat, we dawdled through the haunting streets that look like something from a 1950s movie. And isn't that why people love to come here? To dawdle, rediscover their mojo and leave their troubles behind.

July is the start of the high season, when the entire lake area is engulfed by snow-white tourists, just like ourselves, desperate for a bit of sun.

The heat can be oppressive for the uninitiated — 36°C is not a level of warmth I normally associate with comfort. But I'm forgetting another wonderful attraction of the area — the great north-south winds called The Ora and The Peler that swirl across the lake almost every day, acting as giant fans and attracting windsurfers, kiters and sporty types by the bucket-load.

May, June and September, when the temperature is just the right side of balmy Mediterranean perfection, are the best times to visit, but it's a hospitable destination for a break at any time of the year as the temperatures are always pleasant, thanks to the lake doing its job as a super-sized solar panel and the mountains acting as insulators, keeping the heat in the area.

It quickly becomes deliciously cool and a delight for everybody, with the exquisite after-effects often lasting into the evening. And it's in the evening, when the light begins to leave the sky, that people wander and explore again, only this time it's food they're after.

And boy is Riva an excellent port of call for food lovers. Crammed with a smorgasbord of trattorias, cafes, pizzerias and gelaterias, the town will suit every budget.

Each street brings a culinary discovery. On Via Fiume, we find jam-packed Leon d'Oro, a restaurant since 1929 and in the same family since 1939. Loud and chatty, it's full of long tables groaning with noisy Italian families enjoying unimpeachable ingredients cooked with traditional skill and generosity.

Leon d'Oro serves up great food and genuine Italian hospitality to its own community, as well as to hungry tourists. I especially enjoyed its strangolapreti (priest stranglers), a local Trentino gnocchi specialty made from spinach and stale bread, rather than potatoes.

Everything is a pleasure here, including the wine. We try a local Bardolino from down the road. It is delicious and an absolute steal at €18 a bottle.

Although borderline cheesy in the decor department, nearby Al Volt serves out-of-this-world homemade spaghetti with Castelmagno cheese and black truffle shavings. I never understood the truffle hype before, but now I do — and I'm a believer. In fact, I'd call it an unforgettable pasta experience. And while €13 might sound expensive for spaghetti, it isn't, not when you taste this amazing dish. Accompanied by a magnificent syrah at a mere €23, I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Because The Boss and I try nearly everything on the menu and do our best to scoff the lot, most evenings a dessert is a course too far.

A stretch of the legs was required, and there's nowhere better for that than along the azure waters of the lake. By the night, the crowds have usually dwindled to arm-in-arm couples taking the evening air before sipping a well-earned nightcap or chancing a gravity-defying fancy ice cream.

And when it comes to fancy ice-cream, Flora's Gelateria on Viale Rovereto is where it's at. We sampled their delightful concoctions with a delicious glass of white wine at €2 and an equally delicious Prosecco at €2.80 — truly amazing value with equally amazing quaffability.

While touching on the subject of value, it is worth noting some cost differences between Riva and big city Verona. Following a comfortable two-hour coach ride to Verona (€48 each), we thoroughly enjoyed checking out the sights, especially the Roman Arena, before retreating to the clusters of cafe tables in the ancient Piazza Erbe.

We adore Italian coffee (especially Omkaffee), but were blown away by the cost difference between Verona (€3.50), and Garda (€1.50) for the exact same cup. If nothing else, it was pleasing to realise that Dublin isn't quite the rip-off coffee capital I once thought it was.

Anyhow, back to wonderful Riva. There are some people out there who take the view that holidays are all about getting involved, being super-active, and seeing every possible sight within a 100-mile radius.

I take the view that if a holiday location is already a haven of tranquillity with lorry-loads of dazzling scenery interspersed with restaurants to die for, then there's no reason whatsoever to go traipsing around exhausting yourself.

For us, what made Garda and Riva, in particular, so attractive was how absurdly laid-back it was. A local proverb pretty much says it all: Mangia bene, ridi spesso, ama molto, which means, eat well, laugh often, love much.

Listen up and you won't go too far wrong.

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