

Carry on up the Como: Milan and the Italian Lakes

Over the bank holiday weekend 25th-28th May, Geoff and I decided to blow our meagre wages on a jet-set weekend to visit Matthew. Skipping off work early on the Friday, we flew from Heathrow to the cultural oasis that is Milan. Our fluent host Matthew, aka Robert de Niro (speaking Italian - apologies to Bananarama) met us at the airport, thereby rescuing us from showing our talentless grasp of the local lingo.

After such a long and tiring journey, one's thoughts turn to beer. Despite Robert's (alleged) lack of knowledge regarding local drinking holes, we managed to find a popular place just down from the main train station. After some beers and some reflection, we decided that the clientele was overwhelmingly male. Needless to say, we left Il Bar Gay sharpish, only to end up in Il Bar Bondage (and whatever he says, it was Geoff's idea) drinking Elephant Beer until they started sweeping up around us.

The next morning was a comedy of errors, missed rendezvous and train journeys, culminating in serendipitously bumping into Robert in Como, some 30 miles north of Milan. Reunited, we braved the bus system along the shore of Lake Como until we reached Menaggio. Our first thoughts when stepping off the bus were "Why the hell do we put up with the weather in England?" The weather and the locale were just right for lounging outside a bar in the shade. So we did. Some time later, after we had dragged Robert away from drooling over the very helpful lady in the Tourist office, we were able to start walking. The heat dictated our pace to start with, i.e. slow. When we eventually gained some height it cooled off and we were able to enjoy the surroundings and the views a bit more.



Arrival in Menaggio, knotted hankies optional.



The author, posing on top of the hill.

sheep, plodding over snowfields and running (for some of us) down grassy slopes. Unfortunately time was progressing and we were eventually forced to descend. A real shame, for the continuation of the ridge looked very enticing.

Descending into a small village to the west of Menaggio, we lucked upon a bar for those all-important post walk beers while our knees cooled off. After some frantic phoning round amidst amused encouragement from the locals, we eventually secured a taxi ride back to Menaggio driven by an ardent Formula 1 fan.

We checked into the luxury that is the Menaggio youth hostel, age not proving to be a barrier, before removing two days of detritus in a very welcome shower. Yet again, after dinner we managed to earn the bemused disapproval of the youth hostel wardens by consuming many quality carafes of their red wine, even if it did make our teeth ache.

Next morning things happened slowly. We mooched around Menaggio, keeping Robert away from the Tourist office, until we bumped into a film set. A big hairy bloke in a Trans Am and some smaller, less hairy blokes in a much smaller car were tearing round the streets, endlessly repeating the same take. Sipping our orange juice whilst watching the melee, we soon lost interest.

Sadly, the time to return to Milan was swiftly upon us. A hot and tiring bus journey later we were back at Como, followed by a hot and tiring train journey to Milan. You guessed it, time for a beer.

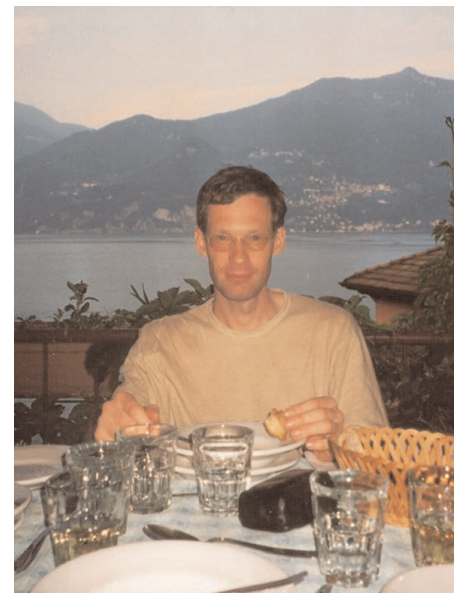
That evening, deciding to take in some culture, Robert showed us round the centre of Milan, including la Duomo, la Scala and various other historic buildings allegedly of note. It was all very nice. Next morning, rather reluctantly and very tiredly, we got into the taxi at 5am in order to catch our flight back in time to get into work before anyone noticed us missing. I think we got away with it.

Richard Bailey

The Refugio we stayed in was 1400 metres up, providing a gorgeous view over Lake Como. After a meal of sausages and fried polenta (an acquired taste), we managed to earn the bemused disapproval of the hut wardens by consuming many quality carafes of their red wine, even if it did make our teeth ache.

Next morning dawned sunny, if a bit hazy. Nursing our fuzzy tongues, we plodded on up the hill. A stiff climb later we reached the top of Monta Bregagno, at 2107 metres. The view extended over most of the immediate Lake District, over to Piz Bernina to the northeast and (allegedly) the Monta Rosa massif to the west. The moment was however slightly marred by the ubiquitous statue of the Madonna.

Despite some confusion over the existence of paths on the maps (marked "For experienced mountaineers only") compared with their existence on the ground, we chanced a route along the ridge west of the hill. The next few hours were the best walking: scrambling over rocky outcrops, scaring herds of shaggy (Merino?)



Robert enjoying a spot of dinner in the Menaggio youth hostel.