

O hole mio

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It is impossible to understand why we have only recently started to appreciate the appeal of golf around the Italian Lakes. The region is full of hidden gems that are not mentioned in the British and American guides. For instance, during an argument about Benito Mussolini in the bar at Sunningdale last autumn, I discovered the existence of the Bogliaco Golf Club in Lombardy. Like most British golfers, I'd never heard of it, so at the first opportunity I nipped down to Verona to have a look.

Bogliaco is situated on the western slopes of Lake Garda and is laid out on a plateau 300ft above the lake. In the early days – it opened in 1912 – it attracted the aristocracy, including the British Royal family, but in 1928, Mussolini returned it to farmland. “Golf is not fit for Italians,” he said, possibly because the British had already irritated Il Duce by opening a cricket club in Genoa. Further indignities were forced on the course when the Luftwaffe turned it into an airfield in 1942 and the British bombed it. Worse, it was used for baseball by the Americans after the war.

Thankfully, it was saved and reopened in 1953. It is short; a 5,140yd course with a par of 67. Pretty and beautifully kept, it is rich in oleander, cypress, olive trees and laurel and laid out in an L-shape with several small lakes. Key holes are 11, a 350yd dogleg right with water scattered down the left side, and 18, a par five twister to the left with a lake on the elbow. I loved this place with its comfortable clubhouse and swimming pool.

It wasn't until the 1930s that the Italians began to play the game seriously and started to open clubs in Lombardy and the hills around the lakes of Maggiore, Como, Garda and Iseo. Most of the courses built in the north in those days – Monza, Monticello and Villa d'Este, for example – have evolved over the years and are mature and Italian in character; some, like Bogliaco, closed during the war and have reopened; others stayed open, hidden away in the

hills.

I had worked out a route for half a dozen courses starting at Bogliaco and progressing to the northern tip of Lake Maggiore. After the brief stop at Garda, I drove west to the village of Corte Franca, a sleepy, rural community in the valley of the River Oglio. From the square I could see Lake D'Iseo in the distance with little ferries moving slowly about between the shore and the island of Monte Isola. Behind the lake, the peaks of the Alps were tipped with snow, and the valley below me was green and fragrant with pine and clusters of roses at the ends of the rows of vines and in the hedgerows.

There was a sign for Franciacorta Golf Club by the church. It is one of only three courses in Europe designed by Pete Dye, a man I know and respect. Along with Tom Fazio, AW Tillinghast and Harry Colt, he's a god of golf for many of us. Born in Ohio in 1925, he is still working his magic. Although Dye incorporated many of his "tricks" into the design, Franciacorta is Italian in style and character. I wandered into the clubhouse, which was deserted except for Jennifer Allmark, the Swedish director of golf. Jennifer is a class player and I had seen her playing for Sweden in the 1990s. She told me that Dye had worked with the Italian Marco Croze and that the course has the hallmarks of both men's work. Then she gave me a "planner" and took me out onto the first tee.

Franciacorta is extraordinarily beautiful; strolling onto it one autumn evening when the trees have turned to gold is like walking into a Macchiaioli landscape. Laid before you are broad sweeps of fairway, greens as big as tennis courts sown with velvety A1-A4 grass, and a layout through the trees and water that forces you to think hard about your next shot and the best way to play each hole. Before the course opened in 1986, 20,000 trees were planted, which have matured rapidly in the benign climate of the valley. I could see the glint of water between the trees and the Alps reflected in Lake D'Iseo. In fact, there were dramatic views in every direction.

It seemed, at first glance, that the course was not as much of a character-builder as you might expect from Dye; no extravagant carries from the tee or impenetrable rough. Rather, it has wide sweeps of rolling fairway, well-protected greens with subtle undulations and run-offs, several surrounded with water, and ribbons of lateral bunkers filled with soft white sand. There are three sets of nine holes: the shorter Rosé (2,843yd, par 34) for "executives" to potter about on, and the Brut and Saten, which, played together, give you a testing, well-laid-out 18-hole par 73 at 6,560 yards from the back tees.

As you progress into this joint course you begin to notice trademark holes; the dogleg alongside the lake at the first and the island greens, particularly at the 11th and the testing 12th (the 2nd and 3rd on Saten respectively). I really like the 12th; a tight drive to get you far enough down the fairway and give you an eight iron at a green set a couple of yards above the lake on the right and almost surrounded by water. I liked the eighth too, a double-dogleg par five, and the 18th (ninth on Saten), a sharp 440yd left-turner up to the clubhouse.

It is because of exciting courses like Franciacorta that Lombardy will become a popular golf venue for Britain and the US. A major bonus is that you can stay at L'Albereta, an old manor house in the middle of vineyards on the hillside above the course. This is a peaceful, elegant little hotel with 57 comfortable rooms, a maestro called Gualtiero Marchese to cook sublime food for you, and a lovely bar with a terrace facing down the valley. It's run by friendly staff and owned by Vittorio Moretti, who also owns the golf club.

In the morning, I drove west to play the Red course at Monticello near Lake Como. You'll find it up in the hills past the Villa d'Este, just above the late Versace's lakeside palace. The Red, one of two courses, is a fine test of golf on which the prolific Billy Casper won the Italian Open in 1975 and Seve Ballesteros set out on his professional career. Neither the Red nor the Blue at Monticello are to be taken lightly. The Red is testing with flat, narrow fairways lined with spinneys of birch and pine that force you constantly to play for position. There are memorable holes, such as the short seventh across the lake and the 18th, a lengthy par four which shares a double green with the ninth. It was not surprising to find the name Fazio among the list of designers who have worked on the course but, having been completely defeated by the 6,500 yards of tree-lined alleyways, I left in a sulk after lunch and drove through the hills to Villa d'Este, tucked away above Lake Montorfano.

This course is one of the oldest in Europe and, although it was built by Peter Gannon in 1926, it is essentially Italian in style. It is a 6,331yd charmer with a par of 69, including six par threes and only three par fives. Short, hilly and heavily bunkered, it reminded me of St George's Hills. Only one par three, the fifth, is less than 150 yards, so straight hitting is vital. I found the greens a little small, but it is a peach of a course, rich in pine, chestnut and birch, very intimate and well kept. The 15th is a 465yd par four where I can only describe the second as fiendish. Villa d'Este is too short to attract professional competitions but is still a serious test; a real hidden gem. It also has one of Europe's finest clubhouses, with a beautiful oak-panelled bar and a terrace with views along the valley. Villa d'Este should be one of the world's most sought-after courses. I've already booked myself another round.

After a plate of pasta in the clubhouse, I drove across the Swiss border for the Golf Club Patriziale and the little town of Ascona on the northern tip of Maggiore. I love Patriziale. In 1926 it was being licked into shape by Harry Shapland Colt, a spindly, autocratic Englishman and architectural genius who, during a few years in the first half of the 20th century, was responsible for redesigning over 0.5m acres of planet Earth, as well as the course at Ascona. In his spare time he was secretary at Sunningdale. He was steeped in golf, as were his two associates at Patriziale, Ken Cotton and Hugh Alison.

But first, The Eden Roc, one of those grand art-deco hotels where, when you arrive, the staff appear by magic, take your cases, guide you past reception, give you a drink, serve you food and make you relax on a sun lounger on the jetty, taking in the view along the lake. When you're ready, they drive you in a cream-coloured Mercedes along to the old clubhouse at Patriziale. The course is on a peninsula with several holes running along the lake shore.

It's a serious challenge. I found the start remorseless; the par three second, for instance, ringed with trees, is a devilish 220yd hit with a touch of draw; the fourth is a sharp-left-turning dogleg, and the fifth, similar but turning in the other direction. Mature trees line the holes and, as well as providing shade, ensure that Patriziale constantly torments you with risk and reward. You don't reach the lakeside until the 15th, but the finish is unrelenting, particularly the par four 18th – not a hole you'll want to face when you're all square. Only 252 yards, you have to hit the ball high and right over the trees and make sure it's straight. I say this in all due modesty, having driven the green and holed the putt for an eagle – an achievement that amounts to miraculous in the Gibb pantheon of golf.

As well as the courses I've mentioned, there are 18 others within an hour's drive south of Ascona. But before deciding where to play, relax on the terrace at the Eden Roc, order a Negroni and watch the eagles soaring above the lake as the sun goes down over the mountains.