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ESCAPE

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Lake Como

O'ER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

A road trip to remember, taking in the mountains, coasts and lakes of Italy and France.
Plus: glamorous weekend stays in Greece; and an insider's guide to Paris

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

As Europe takes tentative steps to reopen, Alex Preston drives from Provence to Portofino and beyond, calling in at his cherished childhood haunts and rediscovering the continent's enduring spirit



The hilltop village of Gordes, France



We will never have another holiday like it. For a long time, it was unclear if we'd even be able to set off on this road trip, as our whole family came down with Covid-19 in April. Three weeks in bed and a lot of Lemsip later, we were better, but our departure for Europe in early July – amid swirling rumours of localised lockdowns, empty hotels and abandoned restaurants – felt, for the first time since I was a child, like an adventure.

Some of the central chapters in my life have been written in Italy and France, so we thought carefully about our itinerary. I had clear memories of a family road trip we'd taken in the early 1990s, when I was 12 – the age my son is now. I remember plane-trees beside Provençal roads, wide Italian piazzas and long meals in violet evening light, as well as bickering with my siblings and listening to endless books on tape. Perhaps, therefore, I was setting out to recapture something of that long, peripatetic summer. I wanted my children – 12-year-old Alastair and Aurelia, who is 10 – to discover Provence and the Côte d'Azur, Florence and Venice, Como and Portofino. I wanted to see these places I knew and loved in a new light, without having to elbow my way through tourists, without the bus tours and cruise ships. And finally, I wanted this trip – this article – to send a message of solidarity, of fellow-feeling, of love to a Europe that felt more distant than it had for a long time.

We loaded the car, plugged the kids into their iPads and made our way across the Channel via a near-empty Eurotunnel to our first stop, the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. Built on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Marne Valley, with serried rows of vines striping the hills, it looks out over Epernay and the village of Hautvillers, where the original Dom Pérignon, a French Benedictine monk, lived and is buried. Arriving in time to enjoy supper on the terrace of Le Bellevue restaurant, we found the hotel busy and the staff clearly delighted to be back after its reopening in mid-June. Though all of them wore masks, guests were only obliged to do so when moving around inside (and besides, why would you want to eat indoors when you could be outdoors enjoying that view?). It was the

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Top left, top right and below: the Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa. Above left: the pool at Airelles Gordes, La Bastide. Above right: the bar at La Bastide



PHOTOGRAPHS: MAILYS FORTUNE PHOTOGRAPHY, © JOANN PAI, JÉRÉMY FERRERO

ESCAPE



most wonderful launch pad for our odyssey, a place of relaxation, great food and, naturally, excellent champagne.

Our onward drive to Provence was, frankly, hellish, with long queues around Lyon, the children squabbling and a sense that we might never leave the Autoroute du Soleil. But then we arrived at our next base – Airelles Gordes, La Bastide – just as the sun sank beneath the Luberon massif, and everything was suddenly wonderful. The hotel, like the ancient town around it, clings to the edge of the rock face overlooking a cypress-fringed gorge, the blue-tinged Provençal hills beyond. Inside, as you make your way from one velvet-draped salon to the next, or up and down the cool stone stairs, you could believe yourself in a mediaeval romance, about to be serenaded by troubadours or to run into a member of the Avignon papacy. Officially accorded ‘palace’ status, La Bastide offers countless delicate touches and clever innovations, from the brilliant kids’ club to the jolly 2CV that takes guests to the many local tourist sites. We spent a happy day lolling by the astonishing pool, where we watched swifts turn arabesques in the air over the gorge.

Leaving behind Gordes (and making a note to ourselves to return), we headed towards the coast, in the direction of the Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc. ‘Iconic’ is an overused term for hotels, but when you step through the revolving doors of this serene château and take in that much-photographed promenade before you, you really do sense you are walking in legendary footsteps – those of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin. The cicadas are loud in the trees, the whump of a tennis ball audible from the clay courts off

to the left, the high, sharp scent of the pines all about you.

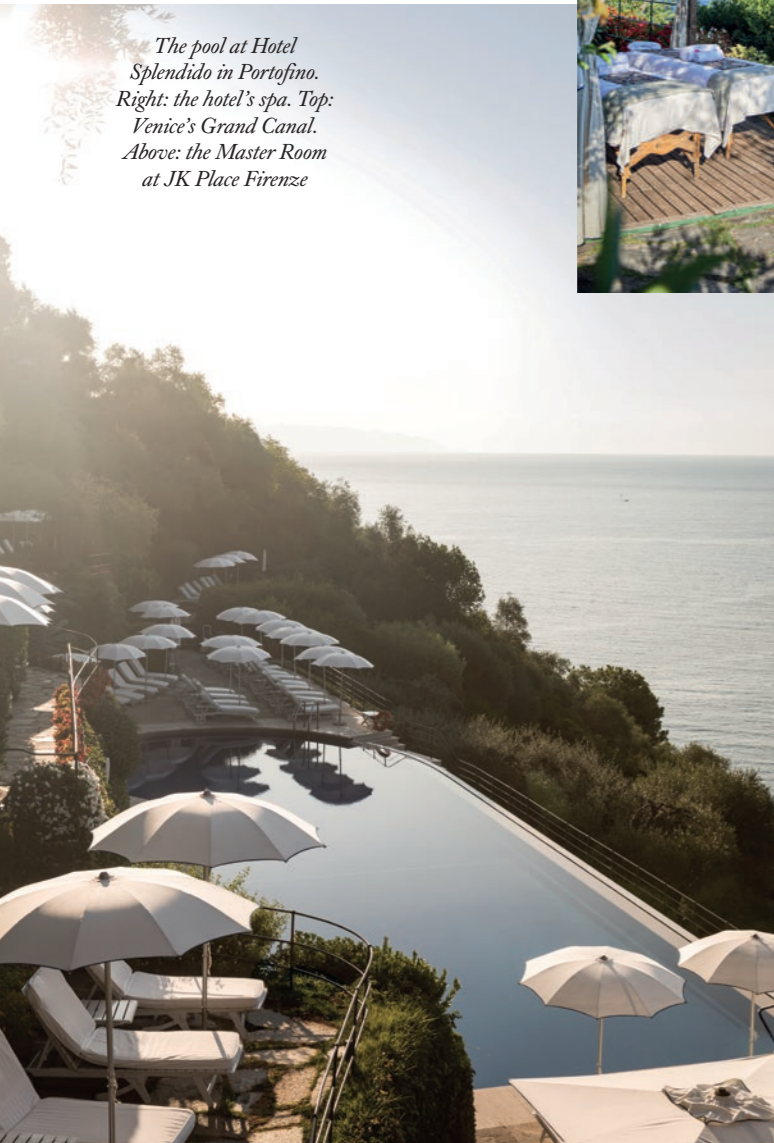
The thing to do at Eden-Roc is to lie on the terrace and pretend you’re in a Slim Aarons photograph, before striding down to the turquoise pool or throwing yourself off the diving board into the calm, crystalline sea. The pool seems constantly to be surrounded by unfeasibly beautiful people watching Hollywood stars swim laps, while the newly refurbished Eden-Roc Grill gives you the impression of being on the deck of a 1920s luxury liner. The hotel is 150 years old, and yet it feels neither historical nor snooty – this is a place that gives you licence to relax, to kick back, to have fun, and the air of relieved celebration that rippled on the sea breeze from pool to grill to terrace was palpable. The kids were a little wide-eyed at the celebrities, the models, the starriness of it all; it felt a long way from our home in Kent.

The journey from Antibes across the border to Portofino was painless enough, but when we stepped out at the fabled Belmond Hotel Splendido and were greeted by a waft of sweet, dense air, we knew we were somewhere else altogether. Italy felt like a different place when it came to Covid, too: people were slightly more on edge, and masks more ubiquitous. You could tell this was a country that had been badly scarred – but not beaten – by the virus, which made the hospitality we received at the Splendido seem even more generous. Our room had the kind of view that you want to sear onto your

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The pool at Hotel Splendido in Portofino. Right: the hotel’s spa. Top: Venice’s Grand Canal. Above: the Master Room at JK Place Firenze



mind’s eye, to save for long winter nights when such light, such beauty seems a distant thing: we looked over to the Castello Brown, a crenellated relic of the long-intermingled history of Britain and this part of the world, and it felt like a message of hope for the Anglo-Italian relationship. It was as if we were experiencing what it must have been like for the first English visitors centuries ago, or for those who voyaged here just after the war.

Florence is empty at the moment, and while this is bad news for a city that survives on tourism, it’s wonderful for those of us who are able to visit. Staying in one of the 20 sumptuous rooms at JK Place Firenze, whose charming and well-informed staff can tailor your visit according to your interests, is like having a luxurious private apartment. We spent two days wandering blissfully around: visiting the Uffizi and the Accademia without queuing, taking pictures of the Duomo with a deserted square in front of it. Everywhere we went, we saw only locals, and could tell that they, too, had mixed feelings about the quiet streets, as if they recognised how important it was that the tourists come back, but also how extraordinary it was to reclaim the city, if only for a few months.

Equally poignant was our trip to the Venetian island of Giudecca, whose history seems to offer up a mirror to our current crisis. In 1576, Venice was hit by a terrible plague that killed thousands; in an attempt to lift the blight, the city’s Patriarch oversaw the construction of a huge church on Giudecca. The plague abated, and the



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Above: a view of Florence from Piazzale Michelangelo. Right: the Master Room at JK Place Firenze. Below and far left: Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc



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Above: Lake Como.
Below: the entrance hall at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo



Patriarch insisted that, henceforth, the third Sunday of every July should be spent in celebration of Christ the Redeemer, to whom the church was consecrated. As such, for the past 423 years, a display of seamanship and pyrotechnics known as the Redentore has taken place annually – until this summer, when a new disease caused the event to be cancelled.

Just along from the Church of the Redeemer on Giudecca is the Belmond Hotel Cipriani, whose black and white striped mooring posts have become a symbol of elegant refinement. The hotel is home to a magnificent – and vast – swimming pool (legend has it that the architect mistook feet for metres in his designs) and a series of superb restaurants. What the Cipriani does best, though, is to deliver you Venice in a manner that is more authentic and elevated than any tourist has the right to expect, while keeping you at a dignified distance from the seething hordes.

Our stay coincided with what should have been the Festa del Redentore, so we had expected a sombre mood. But having taken the Cipriani's beautiful motor-launch over to the main island to dine at the Hotel Londra Palace, one of the grandest addresses on the waterfront, we saw the extent to which Venetians take setbacks in their stride. The terrace was full, and while the celebrated Do Leoni restaurant had not yet reopened, we were able to enjoy a delectable meal of shrimp pasta and perfect fish at the pop-up bistro. We floated back to the Cipriani happy and sated, and toasted Italy and Europe with a Select Spritz – the true Venetian cocktail in the greatest Venetian hotel.

Arriving at the Lake Como retreat of Villa d'Este on a Sunday afternoon felt like being transported back to a simpler time. The pandemic hotspots of Bergamo and Milan were not far away, and only a few days had passed since the lifting of a mandatory face-mask order. Yet the famous terrace and deck around the floating pool were thronged with (socially distanced) sunbathers, and we were among plenty of guests strolling about the blissful gardens, past the nymphaeum and through the avenue of cypress- and magnolia-trees.

As we set out for an evening cruise in the hotel's motor-yacht, we were captivated by the otherworldliness of the Villa, which has long been a retreat for the high society of Milan, Turin and further afield,

the cool sweet waters of the lake full of salutary connotations, memories of spa resorts and sanatoriums. Not only are you physically distant from the grit and grime of the cities up here, but you also find yourself in a new state of mind, as if stepping out of the everyday into a space that is purer, cleaner, freer.

The Grand Hotel Tremezzo is scarcely a half-hour drive up the lake from the Villa. It boasts another glorious floating pool and the same Wes Anderson-esque façade, but the atmosphere is more rakish and hedonistic, and it draws a younger, edgier crowd. Thanks to its livery of bright orange and white, its beach of imported sand, its sundecks and parasols, it would look beautiful on the Italian Riviera; set as it is where the two branches of Lake Como meet, with Bellagio opposite and the hills rising to treeless heights all around, it is elevated to something like heaven.

Great dining is an art form, but no one made the link



Clockwise from above:
the grounds at Villa d'Este. The Oro restaurant at Belmond Hotel Cipriani. The Cipriani's gardens. The spa lounge at Grand Hotel Tremezzo

between food and painting quite so directly as the late Gualtiero Marchesi, considered the founding father of modern Italian cuisine. Named in his honour, the hotel's restaurant serves a tasting menu that includes Marchesi's signature dish, risotto, oro e zafferano – the finest risotto you've ever tasted, topped by a sheet of 24-carat gold leaf. This alone was enough to justify the journey.

On the final day of our great adventure, we took to the waters with Captain Carlo Tettamanzi, who previously sailed the Italian presidential yacht, for a short trip over to Bellagio. Carlo is a brilliant

captain, a local who has returned to the lake he loves and now speaks of it with deep knowledge and great affection. We took a rather less graceful means of transportation back to Bellagio that evening – the ferry – but it was worth it to walk the cobbled streets of the town, pausing in its boutiques and then having a memorable final meal at Bilacus, where the owner Aurelio came to our table to chat to us, and the kids asked mournfully what we would do when we no longer had Italians to cook for us. We left the Grand Hotel Tremezzo knowing that we would come back to Como, to Italy, to Europe in happier times, when face masks and hand sanitiser, bumping elbows and breakfast-buffet anxieties, would all be a thing of the dim and distant past. □

Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa (www.royalchampagne.com), from about £380 a room a night B&B. Aïrelles Gordes, La Bastide (www.gordesaïrelles.com), from about £465 a room a night B&B, including e-bike rental. Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc (www.oetkercollection.com), from about £580 a room a night B&B. Belmond Hotel Splendido (www.belmond.com), from about £865 a room a night B&B. JK Place Firenze (www.jkplace.com), from about £375 a room a night B&B. Belmond Hotel Cipriani (www.belmond.com), from about £795 a room a night B&B. Villa d'Este (www.villadeste.com), from about £545 a room a night B&B. Grand Hotel Tremezzo (www.grandhoteltremezzo.com), from about £660 a room a night.

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