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Seaplane Heaven

Italy's beautiful Lake Como is the home of the longest continually operating seaplane base in Europe.

Heather Parker hitches a ride aloft whilst visiting the playground of the rich and famous.

"Guarda! There is George Clooney tying up his boat. We will say ciao to him with our little seaplane".

Sergio's Italian-accented English whispered through my headset as we flew lower and circled over the villa on the edge of Lake Como, wagging the wings.

"Am I the heroine in a romance novel?" I wondered, snapping off photographs as George looked up and waved. Certainly I was in the right setting as everything about Lake Como is romantic: the villas with ochre tiled roofs climbing crookedly up the mountainside, the opulent mansions, the magnificent sunsets over the lake.

Lake Como, Italy: visited over centuries by poets, writers, royals, fashion gurus, stars of stage and screen and politicians from Pliny the Younger in the

1st century A.D. and Julius Caesar to the Kennedys. Wordsworth described Lake Como as "a treasure which the earth keeps to itself". Name-dropping and celebrity spotting are unabashedly enjoyed by locals: Bob Dylan, Richard Gere, Sylvester Stallone, Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones have all found reasons for extended stays at this magical lake. *Oceans Twelve* was filmed there with George Clooney (who owns three villas on the lake), Elliott Gould, Brad Pitt and Matt Damon on location.

In Italy on vacation I was determined to visit Aero Club Como, the longest continuously operating seaplane operation in Europe. It was founded in 1930 with a gala inaugural dinner at the Villa Olmo, but the history of water flying began in this region in 1913 when the city

of Como hosted a seaplane competition of international importance: the Gran Premio dei Laghi, a race meeting for idrovolanti (seaplanes).

The current president, Cesare Baj has published several books, one of which details the wonderful history of seaplane operations around his beloved lake. Cesare took his ab initio training at Aero Club Como directly on seaplanes and did not fly an aircraft with landing gear for another ten years. He has logged 3500 hours and has flown in USA and Canada. In 2002 he had the chance to fly a Turbine Mallard over the Great Barrier Reef departing from Cairns.

Arriving at the station Como San Guiliano on the Eurostar I took the five minute taxi ride to the Aero Club and found Cesare just about to take a tourist for a flight. I was shown to the adjacent dormitory that usually houses student pilots. It was spotlessly clean, had a TV lounge, small kitchen, three bathrooms and several bedrooms with bunk beds and study tables.



BOVE: A short tow across the road and the seaplanes are in the water ready to taxi.

A small al fresco café *Piatti Veloce* overlooking the lake was my stop for lunch. From here I could watch the seaplanes taxi or be towed the 20 metres across a busy street to the hangar to be ashed; a process during which they temporarily stopped the traffic! Since I was able to take a flight until 6 pm, Paolo from the Aero Club kindly gave me

tickets and a catalogue for the Picasso exhibition in the Villa Olmo.

It was a short walk around the lake and Villa Olmo itself was absolutely magnificent – the grounds with fountains, statues and sculpted garden beds and hedges. Besides the traditional paintings and portraits there were drawings, tapestries, engravings, lithographs,



ABOVE: Your chariot awaits you maam. *Café Piatti Veloce*.

pottery, wood carvings and masks. The centrepiece was the *Deposition of the Minotaur* a 100 square metre curtain on loan from a museum in Toulouse where it is exhibited six months a year.

In the extended twilight of an Italian summer, seaplanes can fly until 10pm. Sergio was to be my pilot; he had been flying for five years and had logged about 550 hours on seaplanes. This was my first seaplane flight and I was surprised that the cockpit looked just like any Cessna I have flown and once off the water it seemed to handle just like an aircraft with gear. The scenery was simply stunning, villas piled up on the cliff face overlooking the lake, many with manicured gardens and swimming pools, some accessible only by boat – truly the playground of the rich and famous. This region is one of the most famous tourist areas in the world. The beautiful villas of Lake Como have hosted prominent historical figures such as Napoleon and Churchill and poets from England, France and Germany who found inspiration in the incredible scenery.

It is situated at the foot of the Alps only 10 minutes flight time from Lugano, Switzerland, and 40 minutes from the Mediterranean: Liguria, Corsica, Sardinia, Venice and the French Riviera are all easily reached by the seaplanes of Como.

Sergio told me that people with a fear of flying are often reassured when flying in seaplanes because unlike aircraft with gear they can "land anywhere" and have been used to conquer anxiety about flight using a psychologist in the back. He also explained that children with chronic cough are taken up with a swift ascent



The breathtaking scenery makes Lake Como an ideal seaplane base.

and slow descent and find when they return their cough is gone!

Aero Club Como is a non-profit organization with four main functions: pilots already holding a PPL can obtain a seaplane rating or even a flying boat conversion course. The basic rules are simple: all flying is VFR and the rules are to keep to the right at a height of not lower than 500 feet. Formal flight plans do not need to be filed but the Aero Club needs to be advised of destination and likely time of return (much the same as a "flight note" in Australia). A listening watch is held on 121.0 Como radio.

Gerry Mussen from Maroochy Aero Club took a seaplane endorsement at Lake Como in 1998. He recorded 4.1 hours in a Cessna 172 floatplane and received an endorsement for solo flight. He said: "The wonderful mountain scenery around Como and the lakeside villages of Moltrasio, Torno and Menaggio competed for my attention while flying. The basic endorsement

allowed me to explore the arms of Lake Como with judicious landings and moorings as desired, and the opportunity to transit Swiss airspace to Lugarno with a simple airborne clearance. The delight of doing so, meandering along the shoreline villages at 500 feet, then returning to Como using the town's church spire as a 400 foot base turning point remain indelibly impressed in my memory."

The Aero Club is very proud of its excellent safety record. There are three full time workshop staff who carry out most of the servicing; major engine servicing being sent out to specialist facilities. There are over 80 local flying members and some 350 foreign associate members from Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, the Netherlands and USA.

The Aero Club offers ab initio training and this is about half its activity, teaching around 45 hours in an intensive eight week course. The best time to learn is

between September and March and instructors speak good English. There is a Club bicycle used by students and even a Club boat to get to different restaurants or for a swim.

The third major activity of the Club is pleasure/tourist flying. All pilots carrying tourists have at least 500 hours on seaplanes and the club responds to requests from lakeside communities and hotels to visit with aircraft (sometimes two or three flying and landing in formation) to take people flying. They do St. Valentine's day flights for lovers and last Christmas flew 835 children from the entire Lombardy region for panoramic flights over the city.

The club is a registered entity in the regional volunteer group of the *Protezione Civile* for civil protection or patrol and takes part in different tasks in this field.

Aero Club Como has recently purchased its fifth Lake Renegade amphibian, one of the few flying boats in production. It has been operating Lake



amphibians for 30 years and Cesare has written I Lake alla A alla Z, the history, characteristics and operating techniques of Lake models LA-4-200 and 250.

The present fleet is comprised of nine aircraft: four Cessna-172s, two PA-18 amphibian floatplanes, a Lake LA-250 flying boat, a Maule M7-235 amphibian floatplane and a Cessna L10 floatplane. The only historical European seaplane

still flying and in its perfect original condition is based in Como. It is the Caproni CA 100, completely restored by Geralamo Gavazzi. Whenever Gavazzi starts the engine, taxis and takes off, a small crowd gathers to enjoy the wonderful performance. For seaplane pilots and enthusiasts, the Lake and its wonderful atmosphere is food for the soul.

Seaplane Endorsement at Como Aero Club

Nearest commercial airport: Milan
A pilot holding an Australian PPL needs an Italian validation to fly in Italy. It confirms everything written on your licence and is valid for one year or until the validity of your licence.

To obtain the Italian validation, send the following to Aero Club Como by fax: 0039.031.570333 (3 week wait):

- Copy of licence
- Copy of medical certificate
- Copy of identity document (passport)
- Payment of 85 Euro (\$AUD138)

Membership fee to Aero Club Como 150 Euro (\$AUD243)

C172 dual instruction: 320 Euro/hour
Minimum 8 hours training required = approx \$AU4150.

Pilots must have 120 hours to start their seaplane rating, and an Australian licence and medical is sufficient. Accommodation at the Aero Club is usually 20-25 Euro/night but for foreign pilots this may be waived. Avoid mid-Summer, too hot.

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