

Rain reigns on Lake Maggiore

I do not know if you remember integration from higher maths at school but one of the applications was finding areas under curves and the theory behind this is due to a schoolmaster who later became a famous mathematics professor and who also posed one of the great unsolved problems in mathematics, Riemann. His health was poor so he moved to Lake Maggiore in Northern Italy where he died at the age of 39. I have been meaning to visit his grave for some time. (Though, as one friend put it – if he had died in Scunthorpe would I have bothered?) When I spotted that Preferred Travel Services, who advertise in the Courier, had a trip to the Italian Lakes and were flying at civilised times from Edinburgh how could I possibly resist?

The Easyjet flight landed in Milan and we were met by our smiling and enthusiastic tour manager, Pauline. A 45-minute journey took us to the Hotel Concorde in Arona on the shores of Lake Maggiore. The balcony of my room overlooked the lake and across to Angero and the Rocca Borromea. We had no sooner settled in when a thunderstorm broke and this set the tone of the weather for the week. Two of the four tours had to be cancelled – one due to lack of response and the other due to the risk of avalanches and snow (in May!).

Tuesday was rather wet and even a walk around Arona led to a soaking. We all just put on a blitz spirit and devised ways to dry clothes – the hair drier, the heated towel rail the trouser press even the heat exchanger on the mini-bar fridge.

Wednesday was the three lakes tour – up the side of Lake Maggiore to Locarno in Switzerland, round Lake Lugano then on to Lake Como. For some George Clooney's house on Lake Como was a highlight of the day.

Thursday was a trip to Lake Orta and the small island of St Guilo.

Friday was to have been the trip to Milan but this was cancelled due to lack of numbers. Whilst it is cheap enough to get the train into Milan it still requires two tubes to reach the centre from the station, which is on the outskirts. Some had planned to take the boat up to Locarno then the train back instead but the railway line was blocked by a landslide and the would-be travellers were surprised to be dragged off the boat half way up the lake by our guide – the alternative would have been being stranded in Locarno.

That day I made my way up to Intra then walked to the village of Biganzola to find Riemann's grave. I also found the house where he died so that was an added bonus. In the afternoon Pauline had arranged a wine tasting in Stresa and this proved to be very enjoyable – so much so that we all signed up for another session on the Sunday.

Saturday was to have been the trip into the mountains to Macugnana and Monte Rosa but the weather and avalanche risk put paid to that. I started my day by visiting the statue of San Carlo. This is the second largest statue after the Statue of Liberty. It is quite an adventure getting to the top. There is a spiral staircase on the outside leading to a viewing platform then after that it is a vertical ladder inside the statue. I was kitted out with a hard hat and had I been younger and smaller I would also have been given a safety harness. The ladder leads up to the head then a smaller ladder allows you to look out of his eyes and his nostrils. I cannot imagine 'Health and Safety' allowing this sort of thing in Britain. Afterwards I took the boat to Angera and walked up to Rocca Borromeo with its splendid castle containing a huge toy and doll museum.

On Sunday I took the train to Stresa (only two euros for a 20 minute journey) then the cable car to Mottarone. A short walk takes you to the summit. On the descent I stopped off to view the botanic gardens at Alpino.

Overall, the hotel was very comfortable and the area is well served with reasonably priced trains, boats and buses. There is plenty to do from visiting the islands in the lake to walking in the hills. The area has lots to recommend it and, despite the wet weather that we had, I certainly plan to return there for some more walking and sightseeing.