

OVERSEAS

Garda: it's the low-key Como

It may not have the Clooneys, but this Italian lake has much to offer homebuyers, says Liz Rowlinson

The countryside around Lake Garda, the largest of the northern Italian lakes, is a diverse mix of rolling hills covered in vineyards and lemon groves, old-fashioned towns and the dramatic foothills of the Dolomites. Halfway between Milan and Venice, it is perfectly positioned for exploring romantic Verona and the beautiful Renaissance city of Mantua.

While some would argue that it lacks the character and history of Lake Como — and is farther from the fashion capital of Milan — the fact that it doesn't have George Clooney in residence has helped to keep it comparatively off the radar for American and British property buyers (American buyers genuinely choose where to live on Como based on proximity to the actor, according to Knight Frank's local agent there).

History and geography also dictate the different mix of homeowners on Garda. "Over a century ago Garda became a holiday resort for Bavarian industrialists, especially the northern side, where they built Liberty-style villas," says Gabriela Geminian of Immobiliare GREI, Knight Frank's associate agency on Lake Garda. "The lake was under Austrian control until the reunification of Italy in 1870, but it is the Germans that keep the market dynamic, along with numbers of Poles and Russians, a few Milanese, British and South Africans."

Its most high-profile homeowners are also low-key — among them the German Formula One stars Sebastian Vettel and Michael Schumacher — and some buyers just prefer it to the fashionable Lake Como "brand".

"We feel that Garda is less touristy than Como, and a bit more authentic, with plenty of Italians still," says John O'Brien, a businessman from Bristol who, with his wife, Julia, bought a new contemporary, three-bedroom villa in Manerba del Garda as a second home. "It's only 50 minutes from Milan, half an hour from Verona and Brescia, and there's just so much to do there for the family."

The lake is famed for its water activities and family-orientated atmosphere, says Amy Redfern-Woods of Knight Frank's Italian desk. "It appeals to a younger demographic than Lake Como, especially those who like the outdoors — and who might spend their time sailing, windsurfing and cycling."

Younger visitors may be delighted that Peppa Pig has arrived at the lake, at the Gardaland theme park. For adults, wine tourism is also popular; nearby Brescia is home to the increasingly fashionable alternative sparkling wine to prosecco, franciacorta, while there are the popular light reds of Valpolicella and Bardolino on the Verona side.

Eleven golf courses — including Garda Golf Country Club, which hosted the 75th Italian Open last year — keep golfing homeowners happy. There are also six Michelin-starred



This three-bedroom villa on the Gardone Riviera, Lake Garda, is €7.3 million through Engel & Völkers



restaurants and the award-winning Lefay Resort & Spa.

Wide-open and appearing almost like the sea, Lake Garda feels flatter and more expansive than Lake Como, where the Alps block out the sun on some parts of the lake for most of the day. Choosing a location is based less on sun exposure than being close to amenities and motorway access in its southwestern corner.

The most popular stretch is around Sirmione, Gargnano, Salo, the Gardone Riviera, Desenzano, Manerba and Padenghe sul Garda. For many, the pretty Sirmione promontory in the south is the best location on the lake, famed for its thermal baths, medieval fortress and shingle Jamaica Beach.

"Sirmione never closes down and is popular with investment buyers seeking to take advantage of strong demand for Airbnb lets," Geminian says. "Small touristic apartments cost between €300,000 and €400,000 [£266,000 and £355,000], or larger, more luxurious ones up to €1.5 million."

The history of the lake means that most of the largest period-style villas are in the north, so those in the south command a premium, she says. "There are also hardly any large waterfront properties in the southwest, although we do get many requests for them. In the south a villa with a lake view, a must, is €4 million-plus."

For the best properties, buyers are willing to pay €10,000 a square metre, she says. "The trend is to build modern, and there are some impressive

contemporary properties, although there are plenty of rather ordinary-looking properties built 30 to 40 years ago."

In the hills above Padenghe is an uber-contemporary development, HPA, that offers luxury hotel-style facilities, including an infinity pool, golf links, tennis court, children's play areas and a fitness trail. While it is not lakeside, what sets it apart is the oversized swimming pool and the beautifully landscaped and peaceful gardens.

Prices start at €720,000 for a two-bedroom, 80 sq m apartment, rising to €3.5 million for the largest properties with private plunge pools. Service charges start at €3,000 a year.

"This sort of high-end development is in demand," Redfern-Woods says. "Buyers want access to a pool, but not the hassle of maintaining one, parking, concierge services and smart technology. HPA is a very future-proofed project, with thumbprint recognition security and pay-as-you-go services that can be ordered on a multilingual app."

Riccardo Cornacchia, the office manager at the agency Engel & Völkers, agrees. "British buyers want to be close to amenities, with everything on tap," he says. "They don't want big gardens, but modern, energy-efficient, easy-to-sell second homes and will typically spend up to €2 million."

He says that the pretty lakefront village of Salo and the main hub of Desenzano are good places for income-generating properties.

Top of the market are villas from €8 million to €10 million, according to Cornacchia. The agency is selling a villa designed by the architect Richard Meier at just over €11 million. It is part of a small exclusive luxury development, Villa Eden, on the Gardone Riviera, where there are also for sale two different, but contemporary, properties designed by leading architects, at €7.3 million and €9.7 million through Engel & Völkers.

The north of Garda is more dramatic and windy, attracting buyers who love windsurfing, with Campione and Torbole favoured spots. "The north is more affordable [with prices] 30 to 35 per cent lower than the southwest," Geminian says.

Prices in the HPA development in Padenghe start at €720,000, rising to €3.5 million, through Knight Frank



INTERIORS

Tastemakers
Michael Camerlo

Creative but logical design has always been of interest to Michael Camerlo, 29. Originally from France, he studied at the Marseille School of Architecture and is now the store manager and head of design at BoConcept's flagship Westfield store in White City, London. Founded in 1952, BoConcept is a Danish design and lifestyle brand with almost 300 stores worldwide and offering interior design services. Camerlo recently furnished and styled a £3.9 million penthouse in Television Centre, the former BBC headquarters in White City and he and his team are working on residents' properties within the building. He lives in West Kensington, west London.

► **What is your biggest source of design inspiration?** My travels in cities around the world. I see different ways to live, and design and style a home depending on people's lifestyle and beliefs.

► **Chintz or minimalism?** Minimalism.

► **What is your design essential?** Accessories — the perfect final touch. They turn a space into a home.

► **Your favourite interior design quick-fix?** Again, accessories. You can use them to easily update your space or to breathe life into much-loved furniture.

► **Your prediction for the next big interior design trend?** I see a trend for a more sensorial experience in our homes, using ceramics, marble, cotton velvet, natural materials and plush fabrics.

► **The design pitfall to avoid?** Incorporating too many beautiful pieces of furniture. Employ an interior designer to cut through the clutter.

► **If you could live in anyone's house whose would it be and why?** Fashion creatives tend to have amazing homes. From neutral tones to dark, dramatic and sophisticated features, I feel they will match my own style and taste: fresh minimalism, styled to perfection.

► **When decorating what do you splurge on?** Anything that needs to be comfortable.

► **What would you save on?** The add-ons: side tables, lamps and rugs.

► **The best piece of design advice you have received?** Don't follow the trend you see, follow what you like.

► **What is your favourite thing about your home?** It shows my own experiences and expressions. It is perfectly me. My favourite room is the living area, opening on to the kitchen. It is the heart of the house.

I keep the space light and airy with simple lines and interesting textures.
Victoria Brzezinski

