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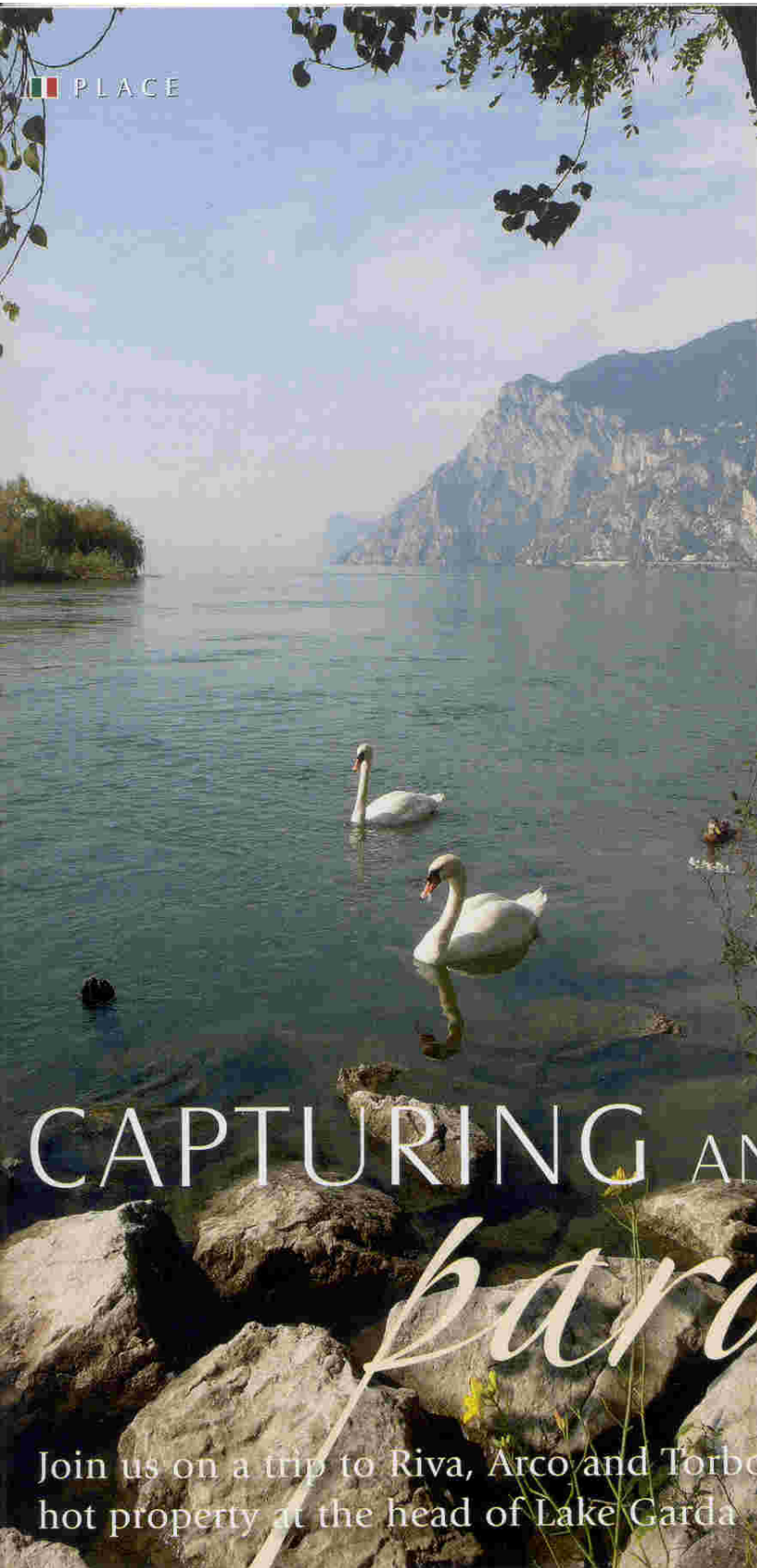
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# CAPTURING AND KEEPING *paradise*

Join us on a trip to Riva, Arco and Torbole, hot property at the head of Lake Garda

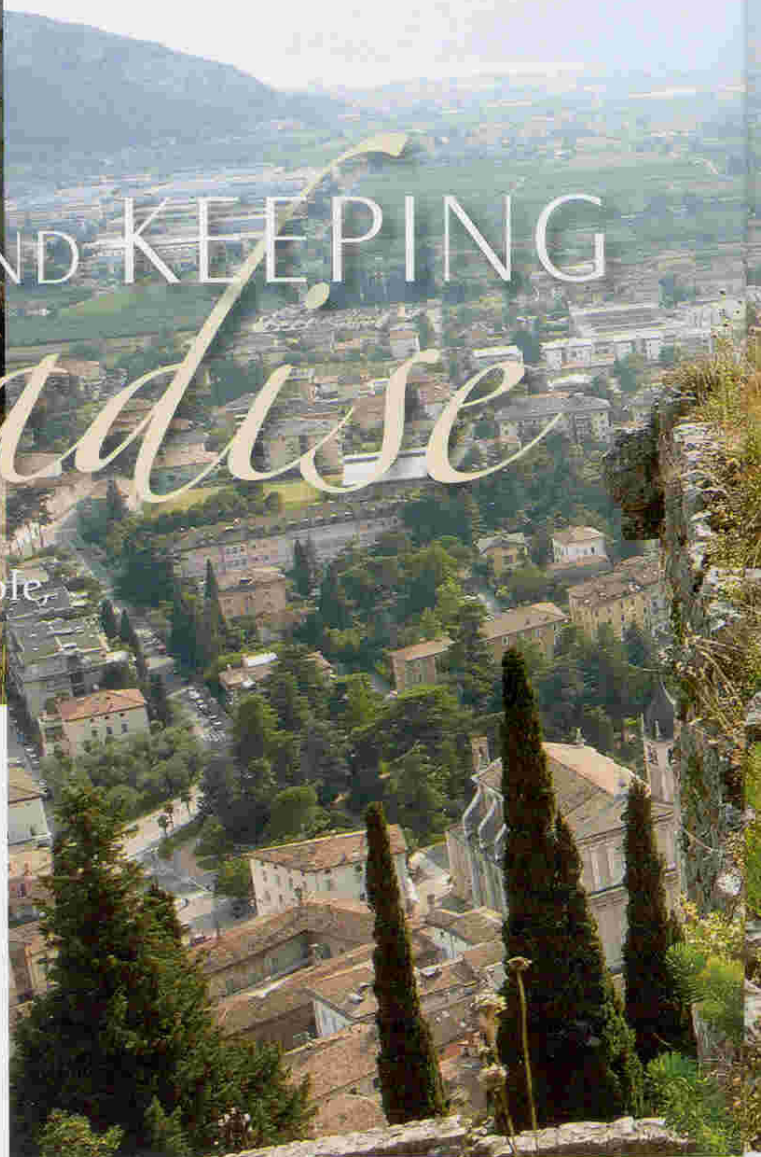
WORDS and IMAGES : JANE GIFFORD

**T**HE NEIGHBOURING towns of Riva del Garda, Torbole and Arco have long been highly desirable. In a glorious mountain landscape, sheltered by towering limestone cliffs and with the benefit of a mild Mediterranean climate, they sit on a fertile plain at the head of Lake Garda and at the mouth of The Sarca, a long river which cuts a broad pass down through the high mountain ranges to the north. Everywhere you look there is evidence of centuries of conflict between the indigenous peoples and those who have endeavoured to capture and keep this little piece of paradise for themselves.

The region was a Celtic stronghold long before Roman domination. The Latin name for Lake Garda, *Lacus Benacus*, was derived from a Celtic word meaning horned, due to the shape of the southern end of the lake. Lago di Bénaco still remains an alternative name for Garda and a surviving link with the past. For thousands of years, this has been a natural meeting point for trade and travel between the Po Valley and the Alpine hinterland. To the west of Riva is Lake Ledro, a 3-km long stretch of water which now provides the power for Riva's hydro-electric plant. When water levels are low, some 15,000 wooden stakes are revealed, the supports of ancient Bronze Age lake dwellings.

## ABBREVIATED HISTORY

A brief summary of Riva's more recent history shows how hot a property this place has been. From the early Middle Ages until the mid 14th century, the locals either perished or were allied to the Prince-Bishops of Trento from the high Alps to the North.





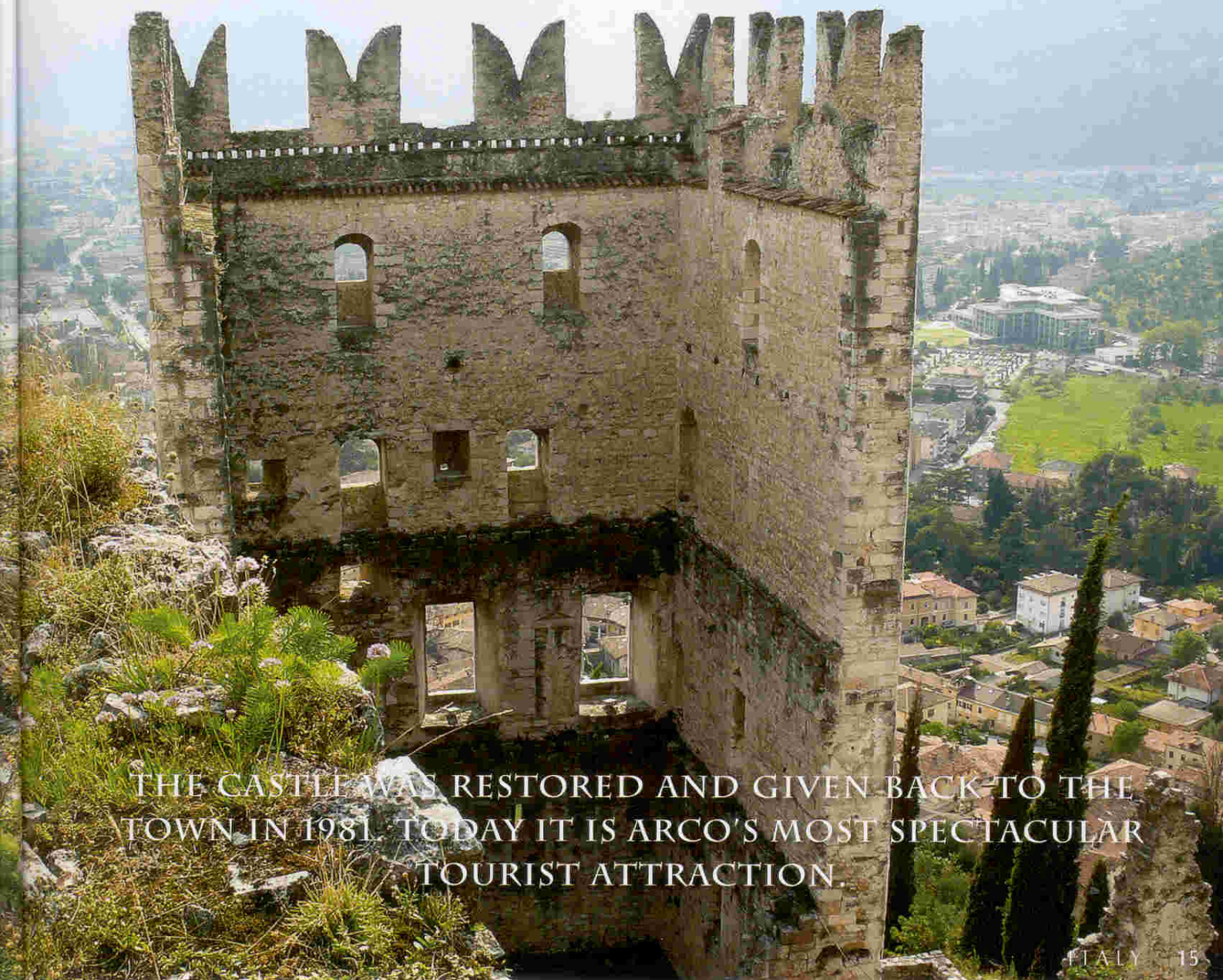
Then for one hundred and fifty years or so, noble families from the plains to the south; the Scaligeri (1349), the Visconti (1388) and the Venetians (1440-1509) attempted to claim and keep the area. From the beginning of the 16th century, the Prince-Bishops regained control until they met their nemesis in the French under Napoleon. The French were then in turn usurped by the Habsburg-Tyrol powers who transformed Riva into an Imperial Customs Post, taxing goods and controlling people transiting the lake. The region was incorporated into Austria in 1818. When Lombardy and the Veneto were annexed to the newly formed Kingdom of Italy in the mid 1800s, Austrian forts sprang up everywhere to protect state borders. At the end of WW1, the region finally became Italian but it took yet another war and many more forts before local people could finally settle down to undisputed peaceful enjoyment of their land.

### KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

This is why feudal castles and fortresses dominate the surrounding mountains. The most dramatic is perched on a craggy limestone outcrop

amongst cypresses and olive groves 250 metres above Arco (*below*). The oldest remains are Gothic, dating back to 516. The castle was originally built by 'free nobles' to protect their community, but in the 12th century, the D'Arco family took possession, usurping all former civic rights. The hall next to the tower contains a cycle of remarkable 14th-century frescoes depicting St. George killing the dragon and scenes of other knights and elegant courtiers, red-haired men and women, playing games such as chess and drafts – all with a distinctly Celtic feel about them. While all about them changed hands, the Counts of Arco possessed the perfect mix of opportunism and pragmatism to remain in possession of their castle and estates for more than 500 years. That is, until the arrival of the French who were unmoved by their brand of charm and persuasion and sacked their fortress home in 1703, although the town itself continued to bear the D'Arco family name.

The castle was restored and given back to the town in 1981. Today it is Arco's most spectacular tourist attraction. At the foot of the castle, the medieval part of Arco, Stranforio, is still lively and ➤



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Piazza 3 Novembre, the fine broad square on the waterfront in Riva del Garda (below) commemorating the arrival of Italian nationhood, is a potted architectural history lesson. Formerly this was called Piazza Benacense from the Celtic name for the lake. Although Riva suffered major bomb damage during WW1, the 13th-century Torre Apponale (left), a tower built in the centre of the square to protect the port, has survived. The weather vane on top in the shape of an angel, known as the *Anzolim de la Tor*, is the town's emblem. The old onion dome has been removed, presumably because of its Austrian associations. The 14th-century Palazzo Pretorio also remains along with a sequence of porticos which date back to the time when Riva was governed by the Scaligeri. Il Bastione, a fortress from the last years of the Venetian Republic, still looks out over Riva from the slopes of La Rochetta to the west of town. It's an easy 30-minute walk away. The route passes the house of Gian Carlo Marone, the architect largely responsible for the reconstruction of Riva in the 1930s, including the hydro-electric plant. His house

THE EXCEPTIONAL DRAW OF THE WHOLE AREA IS AS AN ACTIVITY-CENTRE TO BE EXPLORED...

inhabited. Women sit chatting around the old stone communal laundry, with children playing at their feet. It is a short but steep, circuitous walk to the castle from here, but well worth the effort, both for the ruins and for the view south towards Riva and north over terraced olive groves to the sheer rock-face of Monte Colodri, which towers over the Sarca Valey. Over the last 20 years, this has become a Mecca for rock-climbers and is now the location of one of the world's most prestigious rock climbing competitions, The Rock-Master Challenge, known as the 'Championship of Champions'.

NEW LEASE ON LIFE

Since WW2, it is tourism not war that has dominated the area, and much that was once a symbol of oppression is now a major attraction and source of income. Friendly rivalry remains as each town competes to establish itself as the main attraction. The exceptional draw of the whole area is as an activity-centre to be explored on foot or on a bike, on a windsurfing board, or in a fishing boat, a canoe or aboard a yacht. Garda is the largest and cleanest of the great Italian lakes. The use of motor-powered boats is forbidden around Riva and Torbole and all across the Trentino tip of the lake above Malcesine, making this the safest place for bathing and sailing and offering the best opportunities for fishing. No building has been allowed on a 50-metre strip all along the lake shore keeping this a beautiful and very popular public space.





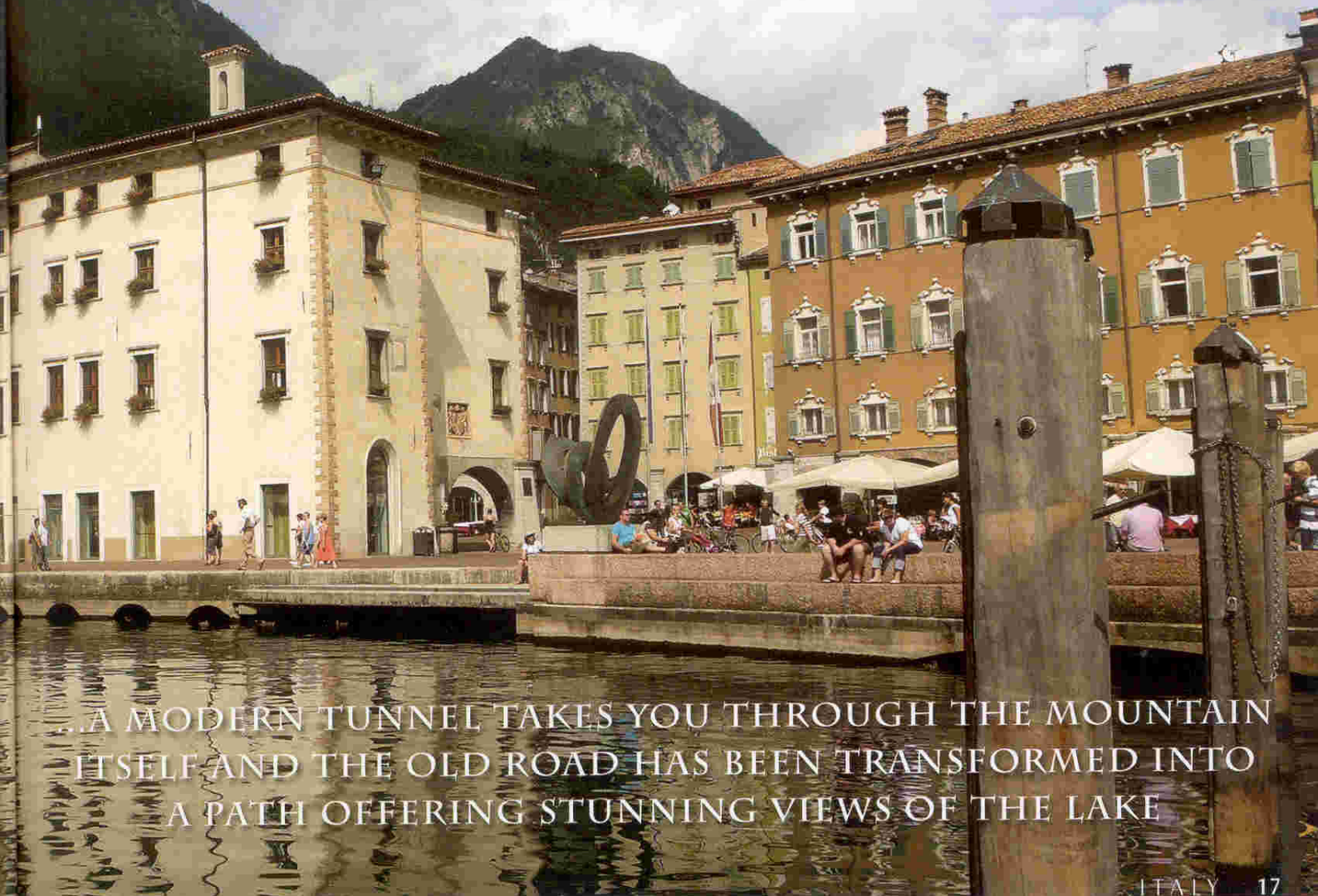
is now a restaurant. On the Bastione, as on Palazzo Pretorio, Bishop Giorgio de Niedeck's coat of arms has replaced the Venetian lion.

### TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

La Rochetta rises directly from the shore of Lake Garda to a height of 1,500 metres (*right*). Many paths wind up through the pines to the summit, offering walkers and mountain-bikers spectacular views over the lake and access to the mountain plains beyond. Until the mid 1980s, the Ponale, a road carved out of the flanks of La Rochetta, was the only way to get to Lake Ledro. Now a modern tunnel takes you there through the mountain itself and the old road has been transformed in to a path offering further stunning views of the lake.

I am staying on a farm on the outskirts of Arco. Initially a little concerned not to be on the lake itself, I follow advice and get back on a bike for the first time in 15 years, setting off, nervously at first, through vineyards and apple orchards to the much-heralded cycle track along the bank of The Sarca down to the lake. Soon I am winging my way alongside the river past hedges of crimson and white oleanders and grape-laden vineyards - and loving it. The old saying that once you have

learnt how to ride a bike, you never forget how to, seems to be true and the journey down to the lake is a genuine pleasure. At Lido del Garda where the river meets the lake, I stop for a cold drink and take time to watch the swans and line-fishermen in rowing boats. Both know that the confluence of river and lake is where the best fishing is to be found. This northern end of Garda is the breeziest and the location of many regattas and windsurfing competitions. In the morning, the Pelér blows from the mountains in the north and the Ora picks up from the south in the afternoon. But today it's hot and windless. Canoes glide by through mountain reflections. Beginners at the windsurfing school flounder and fall in time after time, with no wind to fill their sails.



...A MODERN TUNNEL TAKES YOU THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN ITSELF AND THE OLD ROAD HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED INTO A PATH OFFERING STUNNING VIEWS OF THE LAKE



WINDY CITY

A little further round the shore to the east is Torbole sul Garda (*right*). There are said to be generally more steady winds here making Torbole the most popular wind-surfing centre. Sudden storms are common though – or instant becalming as we

discovered when taking a yacht round from Porto San Nicolò in Riva to Ristorante La Terrazza on the waterfront in Torbole, one of the best places to enjoy eating lake-fish such as tench, perch, carp and chub, pike, lavaret, alpine salmon trout and *carpione*, a species of trout only found in Lake Garda. The valley and cycle track down The Sarca to the lake and The Lido itself are jealously guarded by the municipality of Arco. A sign proudly reminds visitors of this.

Porto San Nicolò (*below*), a peaceful sheltered harbour and private marina is the next stop along the cycle track from the Lido. It's at the foot of Monte Brione, overlooked by an austere Austrian fort, which now houses the Provincial Environmental Agency and the Scuba Diving Club. The water is deepest in this upper part of the lake, being 346 metres at its deepest point. A cross on a buoy just off shore marks the site of 'The Silent Christ', a statue by Riva sculptor Germano Alberti, erected 20 metres below the lake surface for the divers' protection. There are some pleasant lawns and oleander-shaded benches where you can take a breather and gaze off into the distance down the full length of the lake.

NATURAL BEAUTY

The wooded slopes of Monte Brione, dotted with Austrian and WW1 forts, are now a Nature Reserve with fine walks amongst

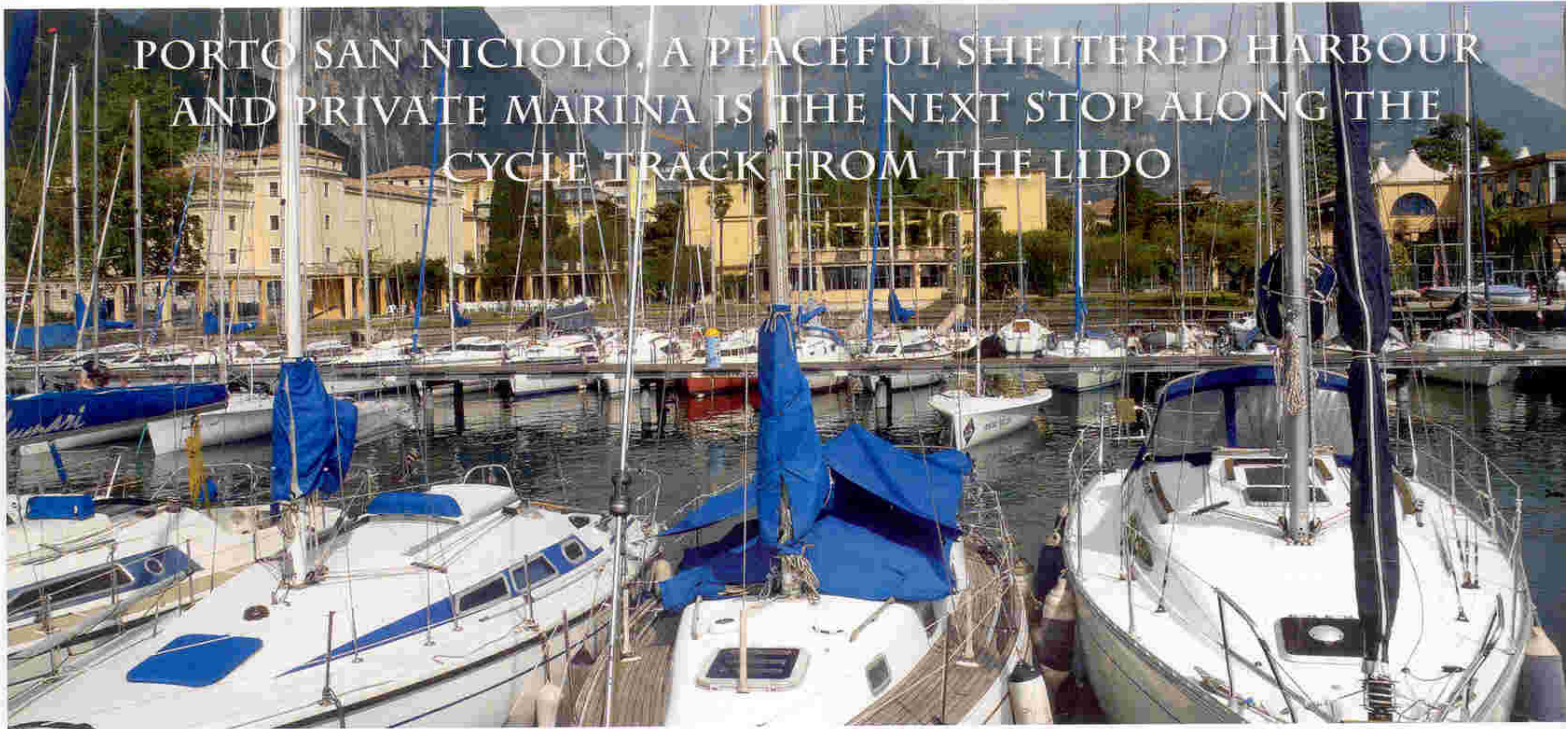


unspoilt natural vegetation – chestnut coppices on the summit, cypresses and dense ilex woods half way down and meadows and olive groves rich in wildflowers on the lower slopes. Another Austrian fort put to better use is on the crag of Nago which rises above Torbole offering a fine panoramic view down the Sarca Valley to Lido del Garda and across the lake to La Rochetta. Once it guarded the roads between Nago, Torbole and Arco; now it is a remarkably good restaurant and a small museum.

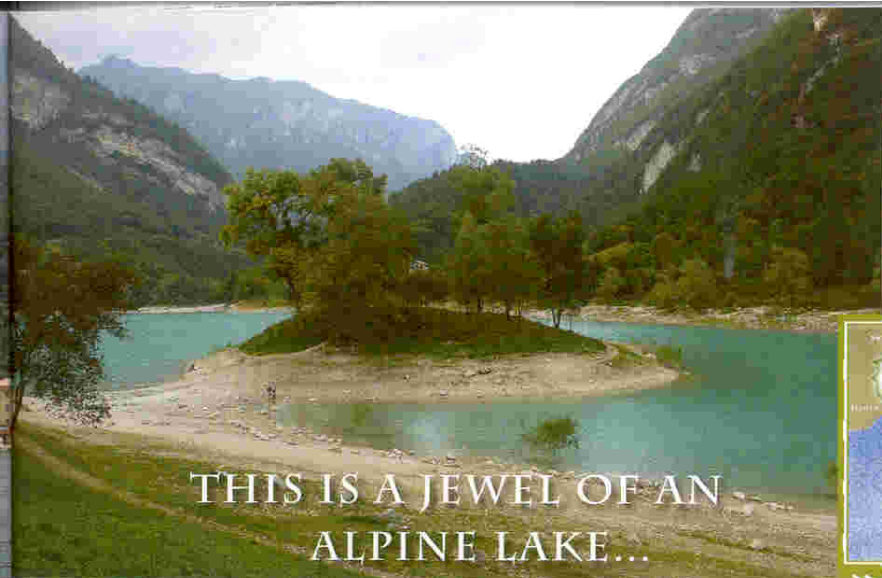
From Porto San Nicolò, I cycle on down the waterfront promenade, past child-friendly beaches overlooked by lifeguards, through public gardens shaded by exotic trees, on to the end of the pier at Fraglia della Vela, the prestigious modern local sailing club. From here it's less than ten minutes to the centre of town and an excellent cappuccino at Caffè Maroni on Via S. Maria. Dinner is at Restel de Fer hosted by the Meneghelli family in an atmospheric old building which has been their home since the 15th century.

Make time to visit the Agraria in Riva for a guided tour of the communal olive oil presses and wine-making facilities. Indulge in a spot of cheese and wine-tasting, buy some goodies for a picnic, then head up into the mountains to the 13th-century medieval village of Canale di Tenno, officially listed as one of the most beautiful villages in Italy. Completely abandoned after WW2, it became an

PORTO SAN NICIOLÒ, A PEACEFUL SHELTERED HARBOUR AND PRIVATE MARINA IS THE NEXT STOP ALONG THE CYCLE TRACK FROM THE LIDO








## THIS IS A JEWEL OF AN ALPINE LAKE...

artist's colony in the 1960s and is now an international meeting place for artists known as *La Casa degli Artisti*. On my visit, the gallery is showing an exhibition of works by resident artist Mauro Chinvaccinni. The village is immaculately restored and completely unspoilt by modern intrusions but it is a rather battered medieval barn door which pleases me most. Somehow it has escaped restoration and still looks as if it has a tale or two to tell.

### LANGUISH BY A LAKE

Armed with your picnic, take a short and pleasant walk along the rough track which leads from the back of the village, past vegetable gardens and sunflowers to the sudden bright turquoise apparition of Lake Tenno (*above*). This is a jewel of an Alpine lake, circled by high mountains, with crystal-clear water and a small island crowned with trees. It's such a complete change from everything else I have seen so far that it stops me in my tracks. You can canoe on the lake and it's a popular place to swim, if you can handle its icy waters. Or it simply makes the perfect place just to idle on the grassy shore a while. I am disappointed to find that the other side of the lake can be approached from a main road. Don't do this. It takes so much of the magic away. But whatever you do, don't leave the northern end of Garda without seeing it. 



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## details

### getting there



BY PLANE: **Verona** is the closest airport. Regular flights from Gatwick.

BY ROAD: **A22** from Brennero; **A4** Milano-Venezia; **SS 45** to Gardesana occidentale; **SS 249** to Gardesana orientale.



BY TRAIN: Linea Brennero-Bologna; Linea Milano-Venezia



*Tip:* For convenience, stay overnight close to the airport at a 4-star hotel with car-parking for up to a week with FHR for £79 or less.

Web: [www.fhr-net.co.uk](http://www.fhr-net.co.uk)

### where to eat



**Torbole sul Garda: Alla Terrazza, Via Benaco, 14.** Excellent sunny restaurant at the lakeside specialising in fish from Lake Garda.

Tel: (+39) 0464 506 083 Web: [www.allaterrazza.com](http://www.allaterrazza.com)

**Nago: Al Forte Alto, Via Castel Penda, 16.** Delicious locally sourced food, creatively prepared by Chef Marcello Franchesi in an atmospheric old fort with far-reaching views. Tel: (+39) 0464 505 566

Web: [www.alfortealto.it](http://www.alfortealto.it)

### where to stay



**RIVA: Al Restel de Fer, Via Restel de Fer, 10.** Fine food and accommodation in a building which has been home to the Meneghelli family for the past 500 years. Tel: (+39) 0464 553 481

Web: [www.resteldefer.com](http://www.resteldefer.com)

**ARCO: Agritur Vivere, Via Epifanio Gobbi.** Beautifully designed suites on a working farm surrounded by vineyards. Wonderful buffet breakfasts by the side of the pool. Tel: (+39) 0464 514 786

Web: [www.agrivivere.com](http://www.agrivivere.com)

### what to do



**International Youth Climbing Festival** held in Arco, 6th–7th June. Web: [www.rockjunior.info](http://www.rockjunior.info)

**Rock Legend & Rock Master** held in Arco, 4th – 6th September. Free-climbing International Competition. Web: [www.rockmaster.com](http://www.rockmaster.com)

**Castello di Arco**, opening hours 10am–4pm, closed Mondays. January opened only weekends. Tel: (+39) 0464 516161

**Agraria Riva del Garda, Loc. S. Nazzaro, 4, Riva del Garda.** Wine and olive-oil making plus wide range of delicious local produce to sample and buy. Tel: (+39) 0464 552133 Web: [www.agriva.it](http://www.agriva.it)

**Sailing & Windsurfing Regattas** in Riva & Torbole. Web: [www.gardatrentino.it](http://www.gardatrentino.it)

**RIVA DEL GARDA: Fairytale Nights**, 27th – 30th August. Hansel & Gretel. Festival and fireworks on the lake. Web: [www.nottedifabia.it](http://www.nottedifabia.it)

**TRALIBENKUR: Grape Festival** – Riva, Arco, Torbole, Nago, Canale di Tenno with free wine-tasting and celebrations throughout September. Web: [www.gardatrentino.it](http://www.gardatrentino.it)

For more information including news and weather visit [www.italymag.co.uk/italy/place/trentino](http://www.italymag.co.uk/italy/place/trentino)

