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Lake Como's new luxury retreat

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LAKE COMO is not the sort of place you'd imagine having any shortage of luxury. For all that, Casta Diva is supposedly the first luxury hotel to be built there in 100 years. Originally an 18th century villa belonging to the legendary soprano Guiditta Pasta, the hotel has been expanded beyond the singer's (heavily and somewhat showily refurbished) majestic lakeside villa. The most luxurious rooms – including one with a panoramic turret that makes it seem as though the bed is floating above the lake – are in the villa, and the rest are spread out among subtle-hued, minimalist structures set back in the hills.

The other guests seemed unaware of its musical ambitions, but Casta Diva's connection with music is purported to extend to a special relationship with La Scala in Milan and other cultural offerings such as the Lake Como festival. It was the latter that lured us to the hotel. After all, what could be better than a weekend of lakeside indulgence (and Casanova-class entertainment, his villa is across the lake) with a dash of culture to add interest and virtue?

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Casta Diva is highly secluded and, unlike its more established and famous sister, the Villa D'Este across the lake, it is not a place to see and be seen as much as to relax and indulge in the company of wealthy Brits, Russians and the odd Italian. A Mercedes sent to collect you from the airport in Milan (Malpensa is just 35 minutes away) will suddenly turn off a high lake road and – once through a rigorously manned gate – descend a steep drive.

The view is astonishingly beautiful. But then – that's Lake Como. And when you're right on it, as the Casta Diva is, you cannot fail to be moved by its mountainous fringe, the villas set high above it, and the small watercraft buzzing merrily through it.

The hotel has a swimming pool embedded in a floating wooden dock. As you sunbathe round it, or indeed paddle in it, you rock gently back and forth. It is absolutely marvellous, not just for the rocking, but for the feeling of being mid-lake. You can turn your sun lounger around so that all you see, through the railing, is water and the opposite banks – it's magical.

The food isn't all that special here, though the spa is. The spa, actually, might be the best one I've ever visited. "State of the art" barely captures it: it has an ornately tiled hammam, a room with Himalayan salt walls to aid breathing, an ice chamber, beautiful sauna, numerous scented and tingle-inducing showers and swimming pools with all manner of jets. This is what a destination spa should look like, and if you decide to go for treatments, the rooms are themed and audacious: "fire" features treatment beds that jiggle as if filled with water and lit from within with screaming red; "water" has fishtanks and so on. It's amazing, if unobtrusive.

On the Saturday night, we tore ourselves away and attended an exuberant, highly original dance performance in the grounds of the Villa Olmo – a mansion of superb grandeur.

For a modern take on lakeside luxury, Casta Diva is your spot. It's expensive, and the service isn't quite there yet, but it can't be beat for location, design and spa. If you can add a bit of culture to your stay, all the better.

Prices from Euro 385 per room per night (low season) based on two sharing a double room. This is inclusive of VAT, mini bar, buffet breakfast, wifi and access to the Wellness area. It does not include the "tourist tax". www.castadivaresort.com/ (<http://www.castadivaresort.com/>) +39 03132511. Como Festival takes place in July, see www.lakecomofestival.com (<http://www.lakecomofestival.com>)