

# A SPLASHING TIME ON THE WATERFRONT

Visitors to Italy's largest lake have raved about its beauty since Roman times. It didn't take long for **David Ryan** and his family to join the fan club

Everyone sang Lake Garda's praises. Italy's largest lake, fist-shaped with a long index finger pointing towards the Dolomites, has charmed visitors since the Roman poet Catallus built a house in Sirmione in the first century BC. Lovers of this glacial creation include Dante, Goethe, D H Lawrence and James Joyce.

So we were in the best of company as we marvelled at Garda's crisp beauty. We stayed in a Thomson's Al Fresco Vivaldi mobile home at the Fornella campsite near San Felici on the lake's south-west side. The impact of tourism is carefully managed here. The owner, Sigmar Cavazza, has blended the site into the olive groves from which his aristocratic line still derives much

of its income.

On nearby Isola del Garda, the lake's largest island, the neo-Gothic stately pile of the Villa Borghese Cavazza stands proud. Less posh but just as pleasurable was a day spent on the lake in a 40hp speedboat hired from the campsite's boat rental, Baia Verde. Our youngsters are 18 and 14 years old but they screamed like small kids as we crashed through the waves. Our day-long hire cost €160 (£108) plus about €25 (£17) in petrol and was worth every cent. You can explore the charming lakeside towns, take in one of the roving markets, stop for lunch or a picnic or just stop, mid-lake, and take a swim.

The narrow roads around the lake suffer from bottlenecks but there is an excellent, inexpensive ferry network if you prefer a day's

car-free touring. Our local ferry port in Portese had information on various tours, including the scenic route north to Riva del Garda where the lake narrows and the mountains dominate.

The lakeside settlements are a joy to walk around in the early morning and late afternoon. The architecture is stylish, but it's the colours that impress: the buildings painted in shades of ochre, lemon or cream with purple bougainvillea, vines and olive trees. The narrow streets in Salo, Sirmione, Desenzano or Malcesine offer respite from the sun. After dark, these towns are vibrant with street concerts in high season.

Fornella has a good restaurant, but our most memorable meal was at Gran Fausto in Portese, an excellent family-run restaurant on the harbour which

is popular with the locals. Three courses cost €30 to €40 (£20 to £27) per head.

The lake is famous for its sailing regattas but water skiing is popular in the south. There's also cycling, golf, rock climbing, horse riding and paragliding off Mount Baldo, where the cable car from Malcesine offers a sedate way to sample spectacular scenery.

Traditionally, the British have tended to cling to the south-eastern side of the lake, and 80 per cent of Fornella's campers in June and July are Dutch or German. Keith, our Thomson rep, said: "The Dutch make the campsite the centre of their holiday and can go for days without leaving it."

I could see the Dutch viewpoint. The mountain air, lake waters and gentle sunshine penetrate to the bones. But if you really need to flee your

campsite, it's hard to beat Verona. The arena provides a fantastic setting for opera at an affordable price and no restricted views. Tell that to the West End.

## THE COMPACT GUIDE

### HOW TO GET THERE

David Ryan and family stayed at Camping Fornella (00 39 0365 62294) as guests of Thomson Al Fresco (0870 166 0366; thomsonalfresco.co.uk). Seven nights costs from £286 to £1,284 for up to six people in a Vivaldi mobile home including ferry.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

Italian Tourism Office (020-7408 1254; enit.it).





**LAKE WITH A VIEW:** Sirmione, Lake Garda, where the poet Catullus built a house which has been much admired ever since

