

Italy's Little Secret

Enjoy exploring Lake Levico, an Alpine retreat in a very a special, rural location with a natural ecosystem and spectacular views

The big Italian Lakes are bustling, well-known tourist destinations, but for tranquillity and rural charm, why not head instead to tiny Lake Levico.

Formed in the shape of a petite Norwegian fjord, this idyllic mountain tarn nestles next to its big brother, Lake Caldonazzo in the densely-forested Trentino-Alto region of northern Italy.

The shuttered ski chalet-style farmhouses clustered on the surrounding grassy slopes are decorated with windowboxes full of tumbling, scarlet geraniums.

Peaceful and unspoilt, it's hard to imagine this idyll as a war zone, but the territory was in Austria-Hungary before WW1, and the Valsugana valley (www.visitvalsugana.it/en/) is

peppered with the dips of shell holes and former trenches.

Now all is calm, and an 1860 aqueduct still channels water from the region's thermal springs to lakeside spa town Levico Terme, site of the majestic Grand Hotel Imperial.

Steeped in history

A sojourn to enjoy the health benefits of the local iron-rich waters became very fashionable in the 19th century, and titled families from all over Europe – including the Russian Romanovs – stayed at this serene spot. With its entrance colonnades and extensive park location, the Grand certainly looks like a palace, and the Austrian Royal Family made it their summer residence.

I stay on the top floor in a snug attic

hideaway with slanted roof and a metal key with chunky keyring to open the door. (No plastic card with digital code at this traditional establishment!)

After my flight to Verona and minibus transfer, dinner at the hotel is excellent, and the lightly spiced fish soup perfectly seasoned.

Next day, my companions hire e-bikes to work up a sweat on a few nature trails, but I opt instead for a leisurely walk around the lake.

Levico has Blue Flag accredited crystal-clear water, teeming with bass, pike,

chub and trout. The shaded 'strada dei pescatori' (fishermen's path) leads you around the reed-lined bank, where bird-watchers can find strutting grebes and coots.

There's a lido and beach where families are picnicking and canoeing. But, for me, as the sun sets across the water, a short speedboat trip with an Aperol Spritz aperitif in hand is the perfect evening treat.

The Trentino Guest Card, included in my trip, gives me free public transport in the province of Trento, as well

Food Lovers

Try the beetroot dumplings, braised meat with blueberries and panna cotta at the Hotel Ariston. Frutti di bosco (berries) are used in many local dishes, and speck is the region's much-loved prosciutto.

Great For





Great
For

Independent Explorers

It's under three hours to Venice by train, so you can tailor your own day trip. Take in the Doge's Palace, Rialto Bridge and Piazza San Marco in a very special outing.



6 days
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Slovenia and Lake Bled

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from May to October 2018

It might be one of the smallest countries in Central Europe, but Slovenia boasts an incredible diversity just waiting to be discovered during this cross-country six-day tour. Nestled between Italy, Austria, Croatia and Hungary, at the very top of the Balkan Peninsula, its unique position means that this exceptionally green and pleasant land proudly showcases a contrast of influences, including a trio of different climates, from Alpine in the north, to Mediterranean on the tiny sliver of Adriatic coastline and Italian border, and Continental elsewhere.

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Great
For

Spirited Adventurers

Cyclists adore Levico's mountain bike trails and, for the very hardy, there's the 80km Valsugana cycle path stretching along the railway line towards Bassano del Grappa.

as entry to museums, castles and other attractions. It's a long, steep climb up a zigzag path to the 1883 Forte Colle delle Benne, but the squat military base has a great view.

Head for the hills

A must-see is Arte Sella, an outdoor sculpture gallery with creations made from natural materials that are designed to return to the environment. Artists from all over the world have been invited to stay at the site and construct a unique and ephemeral work of art. It's a rather spiritual place, and there's something wonderful about a tree cathedral and spacious twig cocoon with room to meditate inside.

Head into higher-altitude areas for more delights. An excursion to Malga Fratte is a gastronomic treat. Situated on the lofty Vezena plateau,

this family farm has been making unpasteurised cheese for generations. Sample the ricotta - fresh or smoked over juniper - in the sunshine.

The farmer has to keep a close eye on the cows, donkeys and goats that graze on the rich pastures because wolves and bears prowl the area. Mini subways have been constructed for frogs, too, allowing them to escape being run over.

To end your holiday, the mountain lodge Rifugio Crucolo is a tavern alive with

music and laughter. Join local diners for a lively conversation or karaoke.

Once the refuge of woodcutters and cowherds, the Purin family have been the hosts since 1782, and offer specialities including polenta, porcini soup and stewed rabbit, as well as their own flaming liqueur Parampampoli. A mix of coffee, grappa, wine and caramelised sugar, it's served with a flourish in tiny, floral, ceramic cups. *Salute!*

GETTING THERE

A 7-night half-board stay at Grand Hotel Imperial costs from £799pp (incl flights, transfers and Guest Card), based on two sharing in May 2018. Visit inghams.co.uk/lakes-mountains-holidays or call 01483 791 116.