

The Sweetness of Doing Nothing — Il Dolce Far Niente

Varenna, Lago di Como, Italia — I am sitting on the terrazzo, watching the ferry boats slide by one at a time across the lake — Lago di Como, a bright blue jewel in Italy's northern lake region. The sun is trying to get behind the mountain across the lake from us, but finding it slow going. No hurry. There is wine in the bottle. Dinner is in an hour — il dolce far niente, "the sweetness of doing nothing," is in full flower.

Every quarter hour or so, a large goose on the fishing pier announces the joy of this place in a long, deep honk. No need to disturb the sound of lapping water more often than that. By now, the ferry that launched ten minutes ago from just to the right of my balcony is reaching the point across the lake where a decision must be made: either to put to the right into Menagio, Varenna's more businesslike twin, or to turn left and wander down the left leg of the lake toward Bellagio, its more famous and fashionable cousin. This one, the *Ghisallo*, simply makes a wide mid-lake Uturn and returns straight for my balcony before angling back to the dock to my right. Tourists . . .



So, how does a day in Varenna begin? After breakfast, when we turn and walk away from this view -- back through our bright sunlit room, down spiral stairs, through the colorful lobby, and out into the narrow alleyways that pass for streets here -- I find a town interested mostly in itself. While the newspapers are full of national politics, the Italians here have a much more local focus. The headlines describe the impassioned chaos that has caused Italy to elect and dissolve more than fifty governments since WWII; but the local chatter is about the weather and the tourists, the gelato and the children, and who has a new fishing boat. Looking across the red tile rooftops of this town it is easy to see why the 800 people who live here would have a hard time getting serious about the world outside of their colorful self-contained village and its very own slow-paced business.





Room #2 at Albergo Milano (left), red tile roofs, and our "Street

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The "business" of the day begins, well ... late. If a shop posts hours suggesting that it opens at 9:00, you can be fairly sure that it will be ready for you by 9:30. While businesses in America usually post hours like 9:00-6:00, or so; here the sign will read something like:

9:00 - 12:00 13:30 - 18:00

The midday break is seldom less than ninety minutes and preparations for midday closing, bringing in the outdoor displays and shuttering the windows, begin around 11:45, shortly after the single gong from *San Giorgio's* at 11:30. Sometimes the afternoon doesn't begin in earnest until 15:00.

So, what do the residents of Varenna do for ninety minutes in the middle of the day? The grocery store is closed. The *tabacchi* shop, where stamps, newspapers, train tickets, and . . . well . . . *tabacchi* are sold, is closed. *Il pharmacie* and *il ufficio postale* are closed. *Il banco, il fiorista, La Villa Monastero* — with its beautiful walkways lined with labeled trees and flowers of every color combination — are all closed. Only the *pasticceria* is open, selling pastries, sandwiches — *pannini con formaggio et carne* — *birra*, *vino*, *aqua minerale frizzante*, *cioccolati*, and of course, *gelato*. So, the logic is clear. At midday, we go to the *pasticceria*. Until . . .

Seven bells. The announcement comes from the bell tower of the church of *San Giorgio*, built "probably about 1200" (but first written record of it doesn't appear until 1313) with four bells, installed in the 17th century, just loud enough to inform this small village that it is time to prepare supper. Click here to see and hear San Giorgio's bells in action: *Bells of San Giorgio — Varenna*

If you happen to walk by *San Giorgio's* on your way home and look inside, you will find a simple church, with frescoes of the Holy Family, Saint Christopher, other biblical scenes on the side alters, a small pipe organ, and a very unusual sign, for a church, that greets you in two languages. In English it says:

"Beauty lives here.
Come in!
But first,
Order your thoughts
And prepare yourself to meet her."





The main altar inside San Giorgio's

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As the sun begins to drop behind the mountain, it is time to turn to a more important task: dinner. For a small village, Varenna has a wealth of wonderful food. Most typical is Cavatappi (it means "cork puller"), about twenty yards down our street. It has five tables in a room no larger than my grandmother's dining room. This is remarkable for a restaurant, considering that in much of Italy, a table belongs to you all evening. So, they serve five magnificent dinners and call it a night. But by far the best food we have tasted in Italy is Egiddio's cooking right in the restaurant of the small hotel where we have stayed each of our three visits: Albergo Milano. Our favorite table is by far the most beautiful spot to have dinner we have seen anywhere in the world.



Our Table

So, if you've observed that not much happened on this day in Varenna, you'd be right. It could be a full-time job if it paid better; but it is not without its compensations. The mind is enriched with simplicity. The eyes are filled with colors, the ears with natural melodies, and the heart with a particular local sweetness. One could do a lot worse than to be a "doer of nothing" in Varenna.

Getting There

- A thirty-minute bus ride from Milan's Malpensa airport to Milano Centrale train station
- A breathtaking 55-minute train ride from Milano Centrale to tiny Varenna-Esino station (watch for it, the train stops for ONE minute and, depending on how long the train is, you might not see the station when it stops)
- A 5-10-minute walk to any hotel in town.

Staying There

(We are returning here for the fourth time in 2010)

• Albergo Milano is a dream, with some of the best views and food anywhere.

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"Buona Sera!"