

# WEEKEND JOURNAL.

EUROPE

## Liquid refreshment

Italy's Lago Bolsena offers a cool break  
from summer touring



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# Liquid refreshment: A dip in Italy's Lago Bolsena



The town and lake of Bolsena. Right, Viale Colesanti leads to the water.

By Cathryn Drake

Special to *The Wall Street Journal*

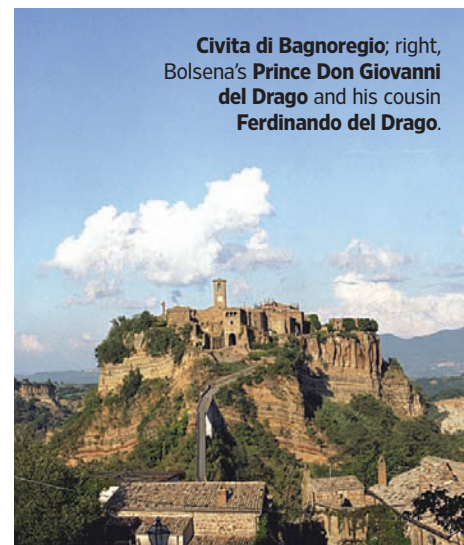
**A**FTER A TIRING pilgrimage to the frescoes of Piero della Francesca under the 38-degree Umbrian sun in and around Arezzo, Italy, my companion and I had only one thought: to get into water. We were headed back toward Rome, and a conveniently located blue spot on the map just west of the north-south A1 attracted our attention.

It was Lago Bolsena, the largest volcanic lake in Europe, nestled in a corner of the Lazio region just south of the borders of Tuscany and Umbria. We turned off the highway, and the picturesque winding road from the Orvieto exit brought us to the top of the Rocca Monaldeschi della Cervara, the medieval fort dominating the town of Bolsena. There, we encountered an exhilarating vista of glistening blue framed by gentle hills beyond the red-tiled roofs of the lower town, the tranquil prospect of the lake interrupted only by two verdant islands and an occasional sailboat.

Most tourists overlook Lazio to seek out the hill towns of Tuscany and Umbria, and even Romans tend to frequent the smaller Lago Bracciano, which is closer to the city and more crowded. About an hour farther north, Lago Bolsena was formed about 370,000 years ago by an eruption of the Vulsini volcano, inactive since about 104 B.C. Nearly 150 meters deep, its water is clean and crystal clear.

When later in the day we finally plunged into the cool, limpid water, accompanied only by a regal family of swans, we felt instant relief from our exhausting few days trudging around the cultural riches of Cortona, Perugia and Arezzo.

Earlier when we arrived into town, we took a stroll along the cobbled street traversing the fortress complex, lined with tidy stone dwellings and colorful heraldic flags. We entered a passage at the opposite end and descended the curving stone steps into the



Civita di Bagnoregio; right, Bolsena's Prince Don Giovanni del Drago and his cousin Ferdinando del Drago.

lower town.

At the bottom we emerged into the central Piazza Matteotti, next to the 13th-century San Francesco church, plain except for the twisted relief decorating its Gothic portal. It's now a community theater. From there, the Viale Colesanti leads straight to the lake. Lined with attractive villas painted in subdued terra cotta shades, the one-way street ends at the circular Piazzale Dante Alighieri. Just opposite is the marina, populated with small leisure boats, and next to it the Trattoria del Moro, with a salon on a pier jutting over the water.

The town had the tranquil atmosphere of a curative spa resort lost in time. There were hydrangea bushes everywhere—volutuous pink, blue and white blossoms exploding like fireworks, planted for the yearly June festival dedicated to the flower. People strolled, cycled or lounged on benches along the well-manicured waterfront, while fishermen cast their lines from tiny rowboats moored near the shore.

Farther along the tree-lined lakeshore road, we found the midcentury Le Naiadi, the only hotel fronting the sandy public beach. Its magenta-flowered balconies overlook a kidney-shaped swimming pool adorned with



charmingly kitsch statues of nymphs. At the back is a much larger swimming pool and a spacious glass pavilion that accommodates wedding parties. This is where we booked a room, and as the sun turned pastel and slid behind the far hill on the horizon, we finally took our swim in the lake.

Once refreshed, hunger took over so we drove to the center of Bolsena and ascended to the fortress of Rocca Monaldeschi on the stone steps leading up from Piazza Matteotti.

The Castello Monaldeschi was first built high up on the escarpment in the 12th century on the remains of ancient Velzna, the last of the 12 Etruscan cities conquered by the Romans. Following a period of neglect after the downfall of the Monaldeschi family, it was eventually handed over to the Bishop of Orvieto as a summer residence and then destroyed by an earthquake in 1665. Captain Florido



Zampi restored the castle about 100 years later, but then the locals demolished it in 1815 to prevent its seizure by Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's competitive younger brother. Now completely restored, the castle houses the Museo Territoriale del Lago di Bolsena, dedicated to the area's geology and archaeological relics. A walk along the ramparts affords a dizzying view of the entire lake.

When we arrived into town people were perched on the stone steps in front of Aenos, a tiny wine bar opposite the castle serving vineyard, the lively proprietor, Alessandro Casciani, claimed that he didn't know how to smile at that hour.)

For our return in the evening we dined at the restaurant Il Castello: grilled lake fish topped with a garlicky pesto sauce, lattarini fritti (tiny fried smelt fish) and a mixed antipasto platter including salami, marinated artichokes and radicchio stuffed with fish salad. The rosé, from nearby Montepulciano, and the homemade blueberry-and-ricotta tart were outstanding. Even prices felt a few decades behind the times: our dinner cost about €40 for two, not counting a bottle of bubbly offered by the gregarious head waitress Marcella as an emphatic apology that our salad arrived slightly late. Next to the restaurant is a medieval washhouse with an arched portico, where women still wash their linens. Our neighbors on the picnic tables lining the alley-



The Cathedral of Santa Margherita in Montefiascone.



a dramatic promontory shooting up from a deep canyon. Since its founding, the town has been crumbling over the edge in landslides but is being revived through an extensive soil-fortification project started in 2004. The only way to enter is over a concrete footbridge with a rather steep incline, worth it just for the breathtaking panoramic view of Orvieto and beyond to the Umbrian mountains. Entering through a 12th-century Romanesque gate, you come to the main piazza, the site of Etruscan and Roman temples, whose worn ancient columns still stand in front of the church. Other ruins include the facade of a Renaissance palazzo that was lost down the cliff. Farther down along the lake on the ancient Roman Via Cassia is Montefiascone, another town worth visiting on the way back to Rome. From the road, the 16th-century dome of the Cathedral of Santa Margherita—the third largest in Italy—looks out of proportion to the town, which was a stronghold of the church from the 13th century until the unification of Italy. There is a stunning view of the lake from the Rocca dei Papi, which sits at the highest point of a volcanic ridge.

More practically speaking, Montefiascone is renowned for its local wine Est! Est! Est!, which is what a monk is said to have exclaimed—it means "It is! It is! It is!"—in the year 1000 upon drinking it. Just inside the grand portal of the historic center, you will find the impeccable Trattoria Al Buongusto, which advertises "family treatment." After a delicious plate of beef carpaccio topped with arugula and a savory Parmesan basket, I had tortelloni stuffed with porcini, which was fresh and tasty, topped simply with a light mushroom sauce. The proprietor, who charmed us with his warmth and enthusiasm, told us that the cuisine is taken from all three bordering regions. The Est! Est! Est! white wine, of trebbiano and malvasia grapes, was delightfully light, subtle and slightly sweet.

Just an hour north of the capital along the same Rome-to-Florence route, Viterbo is surrounded by spas and hot sulfur springs due to its volcanic geology. It became a near obligatory stop for pilgrims in the Middle Ages when several popes were reportedly cured of chronic back pain after a dip in the thermal waters, which had been frequented long before by ancient Etruscans and Roman soldiers returning from foreign missions. Among the natural open-air fonts are Bulicame, toward Tuscany; Bagnaccio, at the end of a gravel road a few kilometers away; and the well-maintained Pozze di San Sisto, eight kilometers south of Viterbo. The most popular is the commercial Terme dei Papi, a full-service spa in a modern building where contemporary Romans loll about and gossip in the enormous steamy outdoor pool.

More-contemporary art associated with the area is Cy Twombly's "Bolsena" series, 12 drawn and painted abstract landscapes that he made when a guest of the local prince, Don Giovanni del Drago, in the late 1960s.

Heading out of town the next day we found what seemed like another fairytale vision just several kilometers east: Civita di Bagnoregio, population 15, built by the Etruscans on top of



Clockwise from left: formal gardens at Villa Lante at Bagnaia; 16th-century sculptures at Sacro Bosco in Bomarzo; the cathedral in Orvieto.

## Trip planner: around the lake

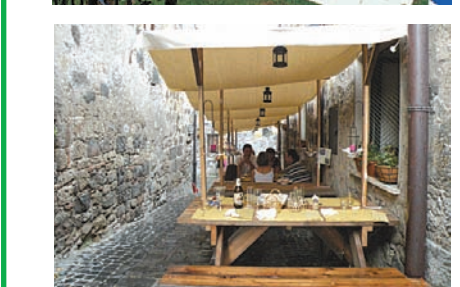
### What to do

Long a destination for religious pilgrims on the road to Rome, Bolsena still makes a good rest stop for road-weary travelers on a cultural itinerary, with its proximity to historic hill towns and the option of a revitalizing swim in the pristine lake.

Nearby Orvieto is a major center of Etruscan civilization, with a fascinating underground maze of ancient caves and tunnels dug 3,000 years ago into the volcanic rock, which you can visit on a tour leaving from the Piazza Duomo. The town's Gothic cathedral is magnificent.

Farther south near Viterbo you can visit the Renaissance garden of the Villa Lante at Bagnaia and the bizarre 16th-century monster park at Bomarzo's Sacro Bosco, created by Prince Pier Francesco Orsini.

About 20 kilometers south of Viterbo at Caprarola you can visit the splendid Palazzo Farnese, one of the most important examples of Mannerist architecture in Italy.



From top, Hotel Holiday in Bolsena; Il Castello restaurant in the fortress.

### Where to stay

With rooms overlooking the picturesque beachfront, Le Naiadi is in a tranquil location slightly outside the center of town in Bolsena. It has two pools (€31-€49 per person with breakfast; Viale Cadorna 95; ☎ 39-0761-799017; www.hotel-bolsena.it).

The friendly Hotel Columbus is conveniently located on the lake near the town center on the quaint Piazzale Dante Alighieri (€62-€99 per person with breakfast; Viale Colesanti 27; ☎ 39-0761-799009; www.bolsenahotel.it).

Located on the lakeshore, Hotel Holiday has a large pool and tastefully decorated rooms with wooden floors. It offers a romantic weekend special: two nights with breakfast served in the room and dinner in the hotel's restaurant Ai Platani for €120 per person (€53-€63 per person with breakfast; Viale A. Diaz 38; ☎ 39-0761-796900; www.hotelholidaybolsena.it).

### Where to eat

Il Castello, in the Rocca di Monaldeschi, serves pizza and local fish dishes in a medieval alleyway (main courses around €10; Via degli Adami 41; ☎ 39-0761-798377).

In a luminous salon on the lake, Trattoria del Moro specializes in local wines, such as Orvieto Classico, and the three types of fresh lake fish—pike, perch and eel—featuring the traditional l'anguilla alla Vernaccia. The dish is immortalized in Dante's Divine Comedy, in which a pope dies from gluttony after eating Lake Bolsena eels marinated in milk and then stewed in wine (main courses €7-€11; Piazzale Dante Alighieri 5; ☎ 39-0761-798810; www.trattoriadelmoro.it).

In the historic center of Montefiascone, Trattoria Al Buongusto features a fusion of cuisine from all three bordering regions in a lovely room with friendly service (main courses €10-€16; Via XXIV Maggio 51, Montefiascone; ☎ 39-0761-825777).

—Cathryn Drake