

LAKE COMO

The journey out had been horrendous - as any bus journey of 24hrs must be, however comfortable and convenient the bus, and however attentive the staff. We had no knowledge of the terrain, or that we would be deposited at 7am at a point miles above the town, and have to descend busy traffic-filled many-laned roads to reach the lakeside. Plus not having a notion where we were going!

It was cold, and I was shivering in the early-morning mist as we waited for the ferry that would take us to Menaggio. A party of students chose this moment to use as a target-practice for their spoken English viva-voce. I was not only tired and disgruntled, but also sick. We spent the night before the journey in a hotel in Leeds, where we both felt very uneasy as each had independently developed a fear of taking this journey. Where psychics are involved, you have to take note of these feelings, especially as we love cycling and were looking forward to exploring foreign places! So uneasy were we that I drew three tarot cards - after which we wanted to go even less! I forget the exact lineup now, but I know it included Death and the Tower. I looked at Wolf. "If a client of mine got these, I'd tell her to forget about the trip and go home," I said.

"If you want to go back home, it's all right by me," he replied. I decided to hedge our bets.

"Let's go for the bus in the morning, and if I get a bad feeling we won't get on." Ridiculous really, and not what I would have advised that imaginary client!

Since I didn't get a feeling of Dire Doomdom, we boarded the bus and went on our way.

It was 11.30am by the time we disembarked at Menaggio, the cold, freezing mist not having lifted. This was June for heavens' sake! We made our way to the Youth Hostel, which was closed. A notice on the gate said no admittance until 5.30pm.

"What we gonna do?" asked Wolf.

"I want to get my head down right now," I said, "Let's go see if there's a campsite anywhere. Enquiries in the village (God knows how, as I don't speak Italian, neither does Wolf, but between us we

have English, French, German and Latin, so we made a do) elicited the information that there were two campsites. With unerring confidence, we chose the worst. Not that we knew. The place was deserted, so much so it was eerie. We chose a spot and pitched camp



Deserted campsite, Menaggio

We assumed the awnings were to keep the sun off the tents, but we ought to have noticed the staging in the background!

Next step is always to find the showers. A notice there announced that there would be water between the hours of - hours that were a good long way away from where we were at that moment. So, no shower then. Food was beyond us at that moment, all we wanted was sleep. We got our heads down. Soon we were wakened by strange noises - people and instruments. Poking a head out of the tent we found ourselves in the middle of a budding festival. Nothing we could do about it. We could not think of leaving with a load of thieving Italians on the premises, and had to stick it out in hunger and thirst, and without sleep, until it was mercifully over - which was around 8pm. At least it wasn't an all-nighter!

We walked into Menaggio, and came across a fence full of beautiful roses. Even though it was 8pm, it was still sunny and warm.



Lady of the Roses. My 56th birthday, Menaggio, 14.6.97

We had planned to ride round the lake, but we quickly dropped this idea. It was frankly too dangerous to be attempted by a blind man. The roads were extremely narrow, with lake one side and sheer mountain climbing upward on the other. In addition, the



Lakeside promenade, a bit later that evening

roads had no chamfer, the tarmac was finished in a clearcut ninety degree line - with Wolf's poor sight there was a constant danger of him hitting this edge and falling into the cliff face. Add to that the traffic, which was constant and of the Sterling Moss variety, and the way the road frequently disappeared into terrifyingly dark tunnels, with no escape route should anything go wrong. I simply could not risk Wolf's life. (page 5)

We decided to leave the lake and head south for the coast. We could then travel west into France, and pick up the bus at one of the stops there in three weeks' time, when we were due to return.

Leaving the lake was bad enough, and climbing the steep slope out of town even worse than coming down it. Once into the hinterland, everywhere looked like Dewsbury. So depressing. Signposts were confusing. We would pass a sign saying it was 10km to the next town, then a couple of kms further on it would be 15. There was neither sense nor reason in it.

Night was falling and we were approaching a place called Malnate where a campsite was marked on the map. Drawing up at enormous iron gates we had to press a bell, and a disembodied voice answered us. I don't know what I said, but with a creak the



Wolf at side of road, Lake Como. At this point there is some protection, but this was not always the case

gates swung open. Now we were in a dim, dark wood, where caravans stood under the trees. Each one had a shed built onto its

side, and they all looked deserted. The whole place was creepy, and I felt extremely uneasy. We kept going up the drive until suddenly, on a bend, a very small nun leapt out in front of us. We dismounted and looked at her. I could not understand anything she said, but a bit like a bee demonstrating the whereabouts of honey, she did a kind of wild, stamping dance which seemed to indicate that we must put our tent there, and nowhere else. She then took BOTH our passports and left, never to return. Never had more than one been taken, and it had always been returned promptly.



Caravans with sheds attached seem to be a Como thing. These at the Lenno campsite were less intimidating than the ones at Malnate

Wolf said he was not going for a shower as he did not like the look of the fellows in the caravan-cum-cabin opposite. There were two of them, and they were looking at us from out of one of the caravan-cum-cabins. We decided to go back down the drive and into the

small town to find something to eat.

This proved difficult. Nowhere seemed to be selling food, or in some cases not food we would want to eat. The whole place had the air of one of those towns in a cowboy film where something bad is about to happen. In the end we settled for some mediocre fare and were eating it when Wolf said to me, "Don't turn round but those blokes from the campsite have been following us. I'm going into the toilet so I can get just enough money to pay out of the moneybelt. I don't want them seeing what we've got or where I keep it."

We knew we were being followed back to the tent. Wolf said he was not going to sleep, he was going to sit up with the knife. I decided I would sit up with him; I did not fancy being wakened by whatever was going to happen. I took the other knife and we sat both sides of the tent flap.

Those guys crept out of their shed three times in the night, and

each time Wolf shone his Krypton bike light in their faces and they went back. My nerves were in shreds when they crept out for the fourth time. "Why don't you shout at them?" I said. "You told me Italians are scared of Germans. If you shout, very loudly, in German, you might scare them." So that's what he did, and they didn't come out again, but there was no question of sleep.

We had no sleep the night before the trip, in the hotel in Leeds, because we felt so ill at ease. No one can sleep on the bus. We got no proper sleep in the Menaggio campsite, so this was our fourth night without sleep. No man can survive that, nor woman neither. We were both a bundle of nerves.

"Let's go into town and phone Bolero," I said, "and see if we can go back at the end of the week. I can't take much more of this." Wolf agreed. But first we needed to get our passports back. We went to the door of the convent, if that is what it was, and banged and knocked. It was a long time before anyone came, and then it was a very scared looking nun, with whom we could hardly communicate. I was certainly not going to pay them for the kind of night we had had, and was prepared to haggle. But we were surprised when she handed us our passports and practically shoed us out of the door.

I know this is a ridiculous idea, but did the nuns not expect to see us alive in the morning? Was there some sort of racket going on where they were murdering tourists and selling their passports on the black market? You tell me. There was something not right about that place.

There was a railway station, and I left Wolfram outside while I went in the booking hall and used the phone. I had been prepared to use tears as a weapon if they would not agree to our request, but I didn't need to. As soon as I heard the friendly Northern tones of Bolero I burst into floods of tears. I was weak and exhausted and sleep-deprived. They said it was not a problem. They told me there was a newsagent's shop nearby where they could fax through a new ticket, and to go there and wait.

When Wolf saw me coming out of the station, tears running down my face, he thought I had been assaulted. "Who's done that to you?" he said, ready to go in and do battle. I explained and we made our way to the shop, then tried to explain to the proprietor

that we must wait for a while. Newspapers and magazines in another language are not very interesting, but after a while I noticed a door that led into another section of the shop. I went through and could not believe my eyes! Cases full of tarot cards, all beautifully displayed. I had learned with Rider Waite, and been given my second pack, the Golden Dawn by my friend Mrs Noble. But I had never had my 'own' pack, chosen by me. Fascinated, I browsed among the cases until I saw one that really took my fancy. At that point the proprietor came in. A pleasant man, he was smiling. I pointed to the pack I liked, and he took them out.

"You read the cards?" he asked. I was beginning to get the hang a bit of Italian now. The Latin helped. I nodded. "You read for me please?" Oh God! What! In Italian? But he was smiling and holding out the cards to me. I could not refuse. I would do a simple three card reading. I indicated to him to pick three cards.

"You must work hard," I began - "No! No!" he said, taking the cards off me and putting them back in the pack. "Another three!" And I began again. This time he liked it more. The first card was my own - the Queen of Pentacles. I indicated to him that this was my card. He smiled. He was happy with that. Then the seven of cups and the ten of cups. It was good.

"The Queen of Pentacles comes into your shop - me - she brings you luck and you make much money." Now he was ecstatic, shaking my hand and grinning.

"I knock you 25% off price," he said. "Thankyou, thankyou so much!" So a good time was had by all.

With the new tickets safely in our pockets, we decided to return to the Lake, which was at least beautiful, and not like this Dewsbury-like wasteland. We would find a campsite, not at Menaggio, somewhere else, park up the bikes and go walking and climbing in the mountains. Pity the mist did not lift.

Again we negotiated Heartbreak Hill and the terrifying roads round the lake, walking wherever it felt more than usually dangerous. We found a beautiful site at Lenno, where we pitched our tent with its back to a fence, under an overhanging tree. Wolf, who knows everything, told me to hang our food in its canvas bags from the branches of the tree, to keep it out of the way of the ants, which we had not yet seen but which he said were everywhere.



Our tent at Lenno camp

Sure enough every morning when we got up the outside of the tent was covered with them. The showers and toilets were clean and good, and were hosed down every day. There was a shop on the corner, buses ran everywhere, and we walked in the hills and visited Villa Carlotta. We were happy, but even though we climbed high in the hills we never saw any views. The mist never lifted until the last day, when, on our ride back to Como and Heartbreak Hill, the sun suddenly broke through and we saw the breathtaking beauty that had been all around us but which we had never seen.

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Watch the slideshow for many more beautiful pictures!



We stopped for a coffee at a lakeside restaurant on the ride back into Como town. The sun broke out in all its glory and showed us what we had been missing!



Wolf fell asleep at the bus stop, mug in hand