

Europe is currently a travel bargain. Here's a unique way to see the sights, including waterfront properties visited by Julius Caesar!

We were flying through a high mountain pass, a twisting maze of switchbacks across the top of the still-snowing Alps, a pass may have been the same route Hannibal selected to bring elephants into battle with the Roman Empire. Ahead, the sprawling coastline of Lake Como comes into view. The deep blue water is circled by castles and villas and resorts extraordinaire. Lake Como has been a celebrated destination for literally thousands of years for people like Julius Caesar to Hollywood celebrates. But none of them have had quite the experience available as that available to pilot with a seaplane.

Cesare Baj dropped the first notch of flaps on the Lake Bucaneer as we made our final approach onto Lake Como. A few seconds later and we floating in front of a villa that recently sold for more than \$30 million. We weren't invited, but we weren't intruding either. We were enjoying Lake Como. "This is why we like to fly floats," he said with very big smile.



visit Europe SEAPLANE

by Francois Lautreaumont



even pilots with zero sea plane time. “Many pilots come here just to learn how to fly on the water,” Baj says. The club asks that a pilot fax them a copy of his/her license and medical so they can have you ‘validated’ to fly in Italy prior to your arrival. Once you are there, a local instructor will acquaint you with the Italian flight rules and regulations, and you’ll begin your lessons flying a Skyhawk or the 180-hp Super Cub on floats. Experienced pilots may have little more than a single engine aircraft checkout before they are good to go.

A successful checkout does not come immediately with carte blanche access to all of Europe’s waterways. Though Aero Club Como pilots log an aggregate 4000+ hours a year of float flying, the group has an outstanding safety record. Newcomers, even high time pilots, are first encouraged to visit any number of highlights along



Lake Como’s shoreline, and have to work their way towards earning any serious cross country privileges.

“You can have 20,000 hours in a 747, but

you haven’t learned to think about what happens when you turn the engine off on a float plane and start to drift toward the shore... Where are you going to end up? If

Baj is a member of the 75+ year-old Aero Club Como on the shores of Lake Como in northern Italy, near the border with Switzerland. With the exception of the German occupation, followed then by the Allied occupation during World War II, the club has proudly maintained itself as one of the most celebrated seaplane bases in the world. In addition to offering rides and instruction, Aero Club Como is one of the few remaining places in the world where you can rent a float plane to fly solo. And that makes for some remarkable opportunities.

“People take our float plane all over the place,” Baj says proudly. Lake

Como itself offers hundreds of miles of shoreline, with countless villas (one belonging to George Clooney) and resorts (including the original Bellagio). Also within easy range from Aero Club Como is the Alps, the Mediterranean, Florence, Venice and Milan. San Maritz, the highest airport in Europe, is a mere 35 minutes away.

Baj has just returned from a flying/floating adventure to the Greek Isles. “It was like that Frank Sinatra song,” he says of his trip, then sings “It’s unforgettable...”

Aero Club Como has more than a hundred local patrons, and three times that number who come from around the world to fly float planes. The non-profit club charges 150 Euros for membership which gives you access to the whole fleet of sea planes, from Cessna 172s to the Lake Buccaneer, which the club claims is the only flying boat for rent in the world.

Pilots of all skills levels come to take advantage,



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you don't have a lot of experience with sea planes, it might not end up the way you imagine," Baj points out. He says even high time float pilots can become complacent and become an accident waiting to happen. "There is data from studies in the United States that shows that safety begins to occur after a pilot has accumulated about 500 hours or more of sea plane time," he says.

"When I'm doing an aircraft checkout, I watch the pilot's eyes. If he keeps his eyes in the cockpit very long, I know he's not a sea plane pilot!" Baj says matter-of-factly.

But if sightseeing across southern Europe is high on your list, one shortcut is to take along a 'safety pilot' Aero Club Como will loan you an experienced pilot with lots of local knowledge at no charge. "Recently an attorney from Los Angeles came here and took one of our planes and a safety pilot to do business in Tuscany and Venice. I'm sure it is a business trip he'll always remember!" Baj laughs.

Aero Club Como also organizes supervised group trips to variety of other locations around Italy. There is never a shortage of participants. And in June, on the Summer Solstice, the club puts on an annual celebration. All the club's planes are flying until the last bit of sunshine disappears behind the mountains, usually well past 10:00 pm in the evening. Hundreds of people come to enjoy the sights, the



flying, lots of food and sometimes even some live music.

What draws so many pilots to Aero Club Como is the organization's unmatched legacy, along with its idyllic setting at one of Europe's most beautiful locations, Lake Como. Julius Caesar was one of the first of

the celebrities to visit the lake, and even today, descendants from families who came there during the height of the Roman empire still live in the terracotta houses and villages that surround the region. Hollywood luminaries are common in the restaurants and villas and activities around the lake shore regularly appear in the international press.


And to the locals, activities at Aero Club Como don't seem unusual. Float flying began on the lake in 1913 and residents are accustomed to seeing sea planes taxi across the narrow street from the club's hangar and continue down into the water. The club has an extensive collection of photos and information about the history of flying floats on lake. That heritage alone is worth the time spent to visit Aero Club Como.

But most that come are interested in stick time. Pilots with the compassion for float flying make time to return to Aero Club Como



year after year. "We want to continue this tradition," Baj says, gesturing to the sea planes around him.

Pilots who want to earn their sea wings in one of the aviation's most celebrated shrines make arrangements to train at Aero Club Como year round. They report that the club's time-tested approach is more comprehensive than the garden variety sea plane courses often scheduled over a couple of days. "If you just want to get a signature in your log book, you should go and do the two day course," Baj says. "If you want to be a sea plane pilot, you should come here."

Contact Aero Club Como at AeroClubComo.com, +39.031.576695. 



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