

FINANCIAL TIMES

Wörthersee in Austria has obvious parallels with the Italian

It's a little after six in the morning on Wörthersee and the view across the lake from my balcony at the Villa Miralago is of an Alpine idyll, dramatic yet reassuringly benign.

Wörthersee is in Carinthia, on Austria's southern flank, and though the winters can be brutal, at this time of year there's a hint of southern softness in the mild early morning air. The mountains that frame the view stand back from the shore, close enough to add grandeur to the scene but not so close as to overshadow it; the obvious parallels are with Maggiore, not Hallstatt. Carinthia has long found tourist lucre in the elusive quality of being almost Italy, and the snow-capped peaks that terminate the view on the far side of the lake tantalise with thoughts of the Adriatic, which lies not so very far beyond. That Carinthia is also almost Slovenia is less commonly trumpeted, though the proximity to Bled or Istria is surely as much cause for celebration as the nearness of Venice, barely two hours away by car.

The villa itself is a turn-of-the-century dream, ochre-washed in the traditional *Kaisergelb* of the Habsburg lands and satisfyingly ornate, its cool verandahs shaded by white linen and its sloping lawn terminating in a cupola-topped wooden boathouse of ramshackle elegance. The villa is one of a pair built in 1893 for the brothers Urban, wealthy pencil manufacturers from Graz. Nowadays it's a small hotel of slightly broken-down charm, with high-ceilinged, spacious rooms furnished in Old German style, and oozing raffish simplicity. It's not the place for those who prize the sophistication of a hotel's plumbing or the cool hum of its air conditioning, but lovers of the *fin de siècle* and the grand gesture will be seduced: the house is a protected historic monument, and the owners organise gourmet excursions by boat to Schlosstern, a Michelin two-starred restaurant across the lake, or – more decadent still – by aircraft to the fashionable Hangar 7 in Salzburg.

Miralago is among the loveliest surviving examples of the resort architecture favoured by the turn-of-the-century Austrian elite, who built their summer homes on Wörthersee after the Südbahn railway linked the region to Vienna. The style is eclectic, though rusticated stone, oriel windows and graceful timberwork are often part of the picturesque mix, and there's a strong English influence in the layout of the houses.

What's constant is the enviable relationship to the water; the grandest villas preside over the pick of the sites on the lake's intricate shoreline of bays, peninsulas and headlands. Many of the most splendid were



Tranquil Villa Miralago is an example of the resort architecture favoured by Austria's turn-of-the-century elite

the work of vienna-born architect franz Baumgartner, who was active in the region from the first decade of the 20th century, and whose style slowly made its peace with the modern movement in the years following the first world war. One of his finest houses, the Villa Karrer on the north shore, boasts that honour badge of the interwar avant-garde, a flat roof. The best way to see the villas is from the water, ideally aboard the graceful old lake steamer *Thalia*. But at this hour the lake is not yet awake. The speedboats that are Wörthersee's most coveted status symbols have yet to disturb the morning calm and the clear waters have a mirror-like stillness, reflecting the masts of sailing boats and the pale blue overhead that hints at the beautiful day to come. Only birds twitter, and it's easy to understand how Mahler found on Wörthersee the tranquillity he craved. From 1901 until 1907 he spent his summers in a villa on the southern shore at Maiernigg, where he worked in a little hut or *Komponierhäuschen* in the woods.

Wörthersee's villas may be magnificent but the lake does not live by past glories alone. It remains a haunt of the super-rich, with a Riviera-like ambience to match, and the neat lakeside resorts are replete with Bentleys and Hummers. Scarce motorboat permits change hands for astronomical sums, the villas themselves for a king's ransom, if at all. A trip on the lake reveals

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that money, not decay, has been the enemy of Wörthersee's villa architecture. Even now, when their beauty is widely recognised, villas fall victim to inappropriate renovations or, worse still, are acquired for the site alone and torn down.

Wörthersee came through two world wars in good shape but much of its architectural heritage did not survive the peace. The most magnificent of its hotels was demolished in the 1960s, replaced with an oversized slab typical of the era, though the superlative position fronting the west-facing promenade at Pörtschach is beguiling still. Here, too, is the fragile, beautiful Werzer-Bad, last survivor of the graceful wooden bathing platforms that were once characteristic of the lake.

Not all change has been for the worse. Here and there, distinguished modernist villas add contemporary interest to the shoreline. On a hillside site at the eastern end of the lake, the Aenea Designhotel is as crisp and clean as the mountain air, with breathtaking views along the southern shore towards the church of Maria Wörth from the infinity pool on the top floor. At the western end of the lake, the Renaissance Schloss Velden has been renovated and extended in subdued good taste to create a contemporary five star hotel and apartment complex.

There will be time enough to explore later. Sun streaming through the curtains woke me early and I feel disinclined to rush. At six in the morning, with breakfast still two hours away, I have a good book, a sunny balcony and a view as lovely as any in the Alps. Most of all, I have the luxurious and quite unexpected gift of time.

VILLAS WITH A VIEW

Where to stay and what to do

Double rooms at **Schlossvilla Miralago** (right) in Pörtschach on the north shore cost from €100 a person in high season (www.miralago.at); room 17 is the one with the south-facing balcony on the top floor. A suite at the **Aenea Designhotel** (www.aenea.at) costs €550 a night including breakfast



Chef Silvio Nickol acquired a second Michelin star in 2009 at the hotel's fine dining restaurant, **Schlosstern** (tel: +43 4274 520000).

The best guide to Wörthersee's architecture is the free illustrated map compiled by local architect Heimo Kramer and available through local hotels and tourist offices (www.woerthersee-architektur.at). To see the villas, take a trip on the lake steamer **Thalia** (www.woerthersee-schiffahrt.at).

