

★ Star break: Rio



KATE MOSS enjoyed the pleasures of Rio de Janeiro on a recent visit to Brazil and made it a family affair with daughter Lila Grace and her musician beau Jamie Hince.

The supermodel was in the South American country on an assignment for *Vogue* and during their sunshine break they checked into the elegant five-star Copacabana Palace hotel.

Since 1923, the sophisticated art deco establishment which faces the famous white sand Copacabana beach has attracted the rich and famous including legendary dancing duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

Brazil's most vibrant city is filled with hotels, restaurants and beach bars. Local specialties include *agua de coco* (coconut water) and national drink *caipirinha*, a potent but delicious blend of limes, *cachaça*, sugar and ice.

There are historic forts at both ends of the beach with Fort Copacabana, built in 1914, at the south and 18th-century Forte Duque de Caxias to the north, framed by Sugarloaf Mountain.

For those visiting next month, Rio Carnival (March 4-8) is one of the world's most extravagant parties. Streets become a riot of colour, with floats and thousands of people in flamboyant costume.

● GETTING THERE:

Hayes & Jarvis (0871 664 0246/hayesandjarvis.com) offers seven nights at the Copacabana Palace hotel from £1,649pp (two sharing), room only. Price includes return flights from Heathrow and transfers. Brazilian Tourist Board: 020 7396 5551/braziltour.com

CHARLOTTE CIVIL

Beat a retreat to

PAULA O'CONNOR revels in the tranquility of a glamorous hotel on the shores of Italy's biggest inland waterway

MY HEAD was still spinning from our chauffeur-driven Mercedes ride up the vertiginous, nerve-racking road from Gargnano to the Lefay Resort. As we pulled into the drive, I half-expected Daniel Craig to step from one of the parked Aston Martins. For the Lefay looks every inch like a glamorous set from a James Bond film.

Perched on a hill above Lake Garda in Italy's Brescia region, the main building is a work of art, a combination of Seventies-style cladding and glass that hides a reception with lush velvet sofas and roaring fires that doubles as a late-night bar.

Our first job was an easy one: drink in the incredible views of the hazy west coast of the lake as we checked in alongside the resort's generous swimming pool. Around us other couples dozed on luxury daybeds wearing fluffy white dressing gowns to keep out the spring chill.

Set in 27 acres of forest where every tree planted is considered for its sustainability, the Lefay is a great place to relax away from the bustle of the town of Garda itself, while the lush surroundings are excellent for the short walking tours that are organised every morning by the hotel (though be warned: they feature a steep climb).

My partner and I were led on to the terrace of Bistrot La Vigna, the more relaxed of the hotel's two restaurants and shaded by vine pergolas. It's a fantastic spot to enjoy those views and sample the buffet of assorted local meats, cheeses and breads.

Arriving in our room, we found the hotel's good taste extended to the 90 suites, all with private terraces. Ours felt like a stylish apartment with beautiful floors and side tables crafted from olive and Italian walnut.

After a siesta to recover from the journey and sleep off our lazy lunch, we were keen to try out the hotel's main attraction, the spa. We loved the heated indoor and outdoor pools, divided by sliding doors. At night it's like swimming in a mint-green milk bath.

There is a wide variety of treatments on offer from facials to massages. I opted for a consultation with the in-house Chinese "doctor". I was slightly sceptical of his authenticity, given his white coat hid a suit by the very Italian Prada.

After he questioned me for an hour on every aspect of my lifestyle, he asked me to remove my earrings as they were affecting my posture. Remarkably, my bad back felt slightly better from the visit, even though I was a little confused as to how.

The hotel gym's design means you can take your mind away from the calorie burning and turn it to the views from the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. There is also a magnificent grotto-style area divided into thermal rooms, including a Moroccan-style steam room lined with deep-red mosaic tiles and a waterbed room which is a must if you can brave the strict no-clothing rule.

The following day we ventured out to explore Gargnano itself, a 15-minute drive from the Lefay. It's a pretty lakeside town, made even better by being unreachable by coach, so it never feels overrun by tourists.



One of its most attractive buildings is the Chiesa di San Francesco with its campanile, or bell tower, that can be seen for miles.

During the 13th century its monks brought citrus fruits from the Ligurian Riviera to Lake Garda, hence the town's association with lemon houses that were built to grow the fruits in cold temperatures.

We sat by the quaint harbour sipping Prosecco and watched the fishermen bring in their catch, their chatter competing with the chiming church bells. An early dinner beckoned. Café Olympia, a romantic, family-run taverna set in a cavernous arch by the water's edge, proved just the spot.

We tucked into home-made pizza and spaghetti with clams, which we knew would be good when we noticed the owners were eating the same dish at the next table.

YOU CAN'T visit Lake Garda and not go on a boat trip. Head to Toscolano Maderno from where the car ferry crosses the lake. In atmospheric mist we set off on our voyage, the sun emerging as we reached our destination Torri del Benaco. Here we were able to sit in the pleasant square and take a romantic walk along the water's edge.

The Garda area combines classic Italian style and culture with the added beauty of the lake itself. The Lefay certainly adds a star-studded quality with every detail adding to the relaxation and recuperation of stressed-out city dwellers.

We'd heard it was a favourite with football manager José Mourinho and several Italian politicians but the hotel staff were reluctant to share any information with us.

Their reticence seemed to sum up the ethos, that this was not a place to be seen but a place of escape.

● GETTING THERE:

Kuoni (01306 747008/kuoni.co.uk) offers seven nights at Lefay Resort & Spa, Lake Garda from £1,610pp (two sharing), half board. Price includes return BA flights from Gatwick and private transfers. For departures throughout May. Italian State Tourist Board: 020 7408 1254/italiantouristboard.co.uk



GREAT ESCAPE: The splendid Lefay Resort & Spa is one of Lake Garda's prime assets

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placid Lake Garda



ITALIAN SPLENDOR: The Chiesa di San Francesco overlooks the pretty town of Gargnano

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HALF-TERM is upon us, meaning countless child hours to fill. Not got a plan of action? Don't worry, the National Trust (0844 800 1895/nationaltrust.org.uk) has it all covered.

Among its 300 historic properties and gardens are some fantastically family-friendly sites, perfect for keeping the children amused come rain or shine.

From storming castles and dressing up in period costume to adventure playgrounds and nature trails, above, there's a year's worth of entertainment on offer.

Head to Rufford Old Hall in Lancashire and while your offspring are trying to outdo one another at traditional Victorian games such as skittles in the Great Hall, you can join the daily snowdrop walk.

Alternatively, Corfe Castle in Dorset is a playground for all ages with its spooky ruins, dungeons and tales of treason and treachery. You don't get that on the games console.

DUNCAN CRAIG

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