



PRAMOD KAPOOR

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# LAKE COMO diary

**Heaven's lake** Exalted company and beautiful surroundings; what could be better? Lake Como is one of the most beautiful places in Italy, and to be there as part of the prestigious Motovun Group is a rare privilege. Twenty-five years ago, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the tiny booth set up by my publishing company was visited by two very famous names of publishing: Bato Tomasevic and Jurgen Braunschwieger. Bato was bringing the Manchester football team to Belgrade in 1958 at the behest of Marshal Tito, when their plane crashed in Munich. The entire team perished; Bato was one of two survivors. Jurgen, during the days when dissenting authors like Alexander Solzhenitsyn were exiled or jailed, would smuggle their manuscripts from jail to make their writings known to the world. The two men had invited me to join the prestigious Motovun Group. I could not then, because of India's strict foreign exchange restrictions. But I accepted the offer in 1994. It was a dream and a singular honour. We meet each year to exchange views and motivate each other. This year, we met in Moltrasia, a small town caressed by the gentle waves of Lake Como. The Motovun Group has some legendary members, among them William Nygaard, a Norwegian publisher who received six bullets that were meant for Salman Rushdie. He was targeted for daring to publish the Norwegian edition of *The Satanic Verses*. The origins of the group are fascinating. Bato and Jurgen decided to put together an illustrated book called the *Islands of Adriatic*. To give a memorable and novel twist to the enterprise, they invited seven publishers to sail from one island to another in a wooden boat. At the end of the cruise, seven different editions of the book were signed and the Motovun Group Association was born.

**Watery welcome** At Moltrasia, the conference started with a plunge in the pool leading to the lake. The three days were packed with lectures, presentations and meetings. In between, there was a smooth election to the board, held every three years, and conducted by the chairman Jan Martens, a Belgian publisher. He had published the last book commissioned by the Shah of Iran, but it never saw the light of the day as the monarch was deposed before the ship carrying the books could reach Iran. My wife Kiran, a co-director at Roli Books, was voted for the fourth consecutive term. From Moltrasia, we

were transported to another island to witness the spectacular fireworks that are held in June every year to ward off an ancient curse. The Motovun Group now plans to hold a summer meeting in Srinagar in 2017 to celebrate its 40th anniversary.

**Mafia and dragons** We were staying in a villa as guests of German music magnate Michael Haentjes. Michael bought the villa in the 1990s from Marcello Dell'Utri, friend of former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, and a member of the Italian, and later, the European Parliament. Owing to his mafia connections, Marcello was convicted by the Italian courts. But he fled Italy and was eventually arrested in Lebanon with help from the Interpol. Michael, a successful German businessman and regular visitor to Lake Como, found the perfect time to buy the villa. Besides his music company, Michael owns a few well-known publishing houses in Germany. An India lover, he often visits the country to participate in vintage car rallies or buy things Indian.

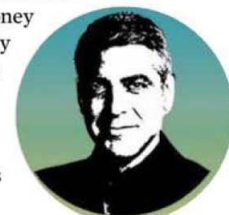
The villa is opposite Isola Comacina, and it gave us a spectacular view of the fireworks. Every time we took a plunge into Lake Como from Michael's boat, I was reminded of Larry, a crocodile-like monster of local legend, comparable to the Loch Ness monster of Scotland, affectionately called Nessie. Larrie has apparently been spotted quite a few times. Como, like the rest of Europe, was going through a heat wave this summer, and Larry or not, the waters looked extremely inviting. And there are plenty of swimming spots in the lake, which spans about 70 kilometres.

**Clooney's here** Como was and remains a residence for aristocrats, industrialists, celebrities, artists and intellectuals. Some James Bond films, *Star Wars: Episode II* and quite a few Italian movies have been filmed here too. One of the most famous residents here is of course George Clooney. Even at the height of the Greek Euro crisis, the local newspaper ran a six-column front page headline that said 'Robert DeNiro and George Clooney in residence in Lake Como'. Apparently Clooney is very friendly with the locals and they take great pride in protecting him from the paparazzi. Clooney or not, left to myself, I would love to explore Como. It's a paradise on earth and Italians are simply the nicest people.



### Seeing red...

Before the celebrities, centuries ago, Como was home to cardinals. It is said they would entice nuns from across the lake, and the monastery had to be moved after quite a few nuns became pregnant!



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