

POSTCARD
FROM . . .THE JOHN
O'GROATS TRAIL

A black, shiny smooth curve appears for a few tantalising seconds in the white-flecked sea before vanishing from sight.

Moments later the seal surfaces again, this time to look curiously at me as I eat sandwiches in the shelter of a grassy hollow above Clyth Harbour, near Lybster, in Caithness.

The only other living creatures in sight are a pair of swallows but the ruins of a tall stone building hint at what was once a thriving fishing port in the far north-east of Scotland.

Few visit this remote historic spot today. Those that do tend to come on tourist boat trips. But soon hikers will be able to get here on foot thanks to a new walking trail hugging the fascinating coastline from Inverness to John O'Groats.

The John O'Groats Trail will cover 145 miles using paths and back lanes, passing hidden heritage sites including villages long abandoned in the notorious Highland clearances.

The trail is due to be officially opened by 2018 when work installing stiles, waymarkers and footbridges is expected to be finished, but it can all be walked now with care. The project is being led by American hiker, Jay Wilson, a lawyer-turned-author who decided to trek along the clifftops after learning that rambblers on the epic



Jon Willocks

cross-UK route from Land's End to John O'Groats currently have to walk along one of Scotland's most dangerous roads — the A9 — north of Inverness. Wilson is writing a guidebook to the new route and has already created a website describing the trail in 14 day-long stages, from five to 15 miles, each with recommendations for accommodation and food stops. I am hiking the 11th stage from Lybster to Whalgie, one of Wilson's favourites.

It starts with what looks like a set of white, plastic swimming pool steps in lieu of a stile. "They were already there when I first walked here. I think they are one of the most whimsical sights on the trail," Wilson tells me.

The landscape is vivid with colour from brilliant yellow lichen to golden fields of barley and purple heather

The day is, to say the least, windy, and the prospect of being blown into numerous barbs or off a cliff is slightly concerning. At points, I stay a little further inland than I would have done otherwise, but have no problem climbing fences.

Crossing waterfalls is another matter. Just before Clyth my new flask, filled with piping hot tea, shoots out of a side pocket on my backpack with surprising speed and disappears downstream as I jump over the gushing torrents on to a slippery rock in the middle of the fast-flowing burn.

There is plenty to see in a landscape vivid with colour from brilliant yellow lichen to golden fields of barley and purple heather. Gulls wheel above and below, their nests dotted on a labyrinthine mass of sea stacks, arches and geos, or gullies.

A sudden flash of red in the long grass alerts me to a startled deer, which instantly darts back out of view. I don't meet a soul, and while the A9 is occasionally visible and audible to my left it's easy to forget its existence.

At the end of the afternoon my legs and patience wane slightly as I struggle to find a way over another burn. After wading back and forth through shoulder-high bracken I decide the main road is actually my best option right now, but it's a relief to get back into the fields after a few minutes on

the tarmac. Whalgie Steps Cafe appears like an oasis, the stone building dominating the skyline.

I gratefully tuck into moist carrot cake, divine hot chocolate and, for good measure, copious amounts of tea. I'm intrigued by the 'coffee beef' special on the menu, which chef Karen Davies explains is a favourite Maltese recipe.

I am dining a few miles inland at Thrumster House, and my host Catherine MacLeod is here to provide a much-needed lift. The former Victorian laird's home is now a friendly B&B run by MacLeod and her mother, Islay, whose own mother once lived here. I enjoy a welcome gin and tonic beside a fireplace in an impressive room designed for gatherings, I'm told, with a grand piano by a central staircase.

Dinner includes delicious crab from Sarclet, another former fishing haven on the trail where pioneering engineer Thomas Telford first suggested building a harbour in 1790. Telford apparently branded Whalgie a "dreadful" place for a port, and looking down the 300-odd steps earlier that start the next stage of the walk I could see why.

But for anyone hiking here now, it's well worth the effort.

Julia Horton

i / DETAILS

The John O'Groats Trail (jogt.org.uk) is due to be completed by 2018

Julia Horton was a guest of Thrumster House (thrumster.co.uk), Whalgie Steps Cafe (whalgiesteps.co.uk) and Arnold Clark (arnoldclarkrental.com)

Rooms at Thrumster House, from around £50 pppn. A set three-course dinner costs £30; lunch/dinner at Whalgie Steps Cafe from around £15/£20 (Open Thurs-Sun 10.30am-5.30pm in summer, dinner by reservation)

Car hire with Arnold Clark, from around £25 a day

Hotel Insider | A cutting-edge

designer's five-star creation is

causing ripples of excitement

on Lake Como. By *Rebecca Rose*

On a hazy September afternoon on Lake Como, there is an unusual amount of speedboat activity. Unusual even for Como — the speedboat's spiritual home. Every couple of minutes, a wooden Riva boat swooshes by with a bronzed shirtless skipper at the helm and, more often than not, a couple of bikini-clad friends lounging behind on deck. As they approach the calm jade waters in front of Il Sereno, the motor dies slightly, giving the crew a few seconds to peer through their Ray-Bans at the guests sunbathing around the hotel's lakeside infinity pool. Some snap photos on their phones, before revving up and nonchalantly zooming out of sight.

The unveiling of Il Sereno, a sparkling new five-star hotel, at the end of August has caused ripples of excitement across Como. Not only is it the first contemporary design hotel to be built on the lake, but its opening night took the form of a very exclusive wedding party: the nuptials of Spotify co-founder Daniel Ek and partner Sofia Levander. Security was upped significantly for the weekend-long affair, not least to protect Ek's entourage, which included best man Mark Zuckerberg, master of ceremonies Chris Rock and the couple's appointed wedding singer, pop star Bruno Mars.

The lakeside setting was surely one selling point for the couple. Another is that Il Sereno, which comprises 30 suites, including two penthouses, has been entirely conceived by architect-designer du jour, Patricia Urquiola. Every element of the hotel, from the bronze taps in the bathroom, to the leather straps around the globe light-fittings, to the extraordinary, apparently weightless, wooden staircase in the lobby, has been designed or chosen by Urquiola herself. As a cohesive work of design, it is a staggering success.

Il Sereno's proprietor, Luis Contreras, whose Le Sereno hotel in the Caribbean was designed by the Parisian interior designer Christian Liaigre, had been looking to expand his luxurious Sereno brand for a while before he homed in on Como. A couple of Milanese architects who had stayed in his St Barths hotel alerted him to a potential spot on the south of the lake — Villa Flora, a dilapidated restaurant in Torno which once did a good trade in local weddings, only a 10-minute drive from the city of Como.

Como may be best known for its elaborate Renaissance palazzos, of which Villa d'Este still reigns supreme, but as Contreras points out, over a delicate parmigiana in Il Sereno's chic lake-level restaurant, "We are a few miles away from Milan — arguably the global capital of design!" Indeed, principal design manufacturers including B&B Italia, Cassina, Molteni and Olivari all have factories in the area. The plan to build something contemporary was therefore obvious to him. "We knew we would not do a fake old hotel," he says. When it came to choosing an architect and designer, Urquiola, who lives and works in Milan, and was named Wallpaper magazine's designer of the year in 2015, was the natural choice.

When Contreras first visited the site in 2011, however, it was its verdant



Lake expectations

potential that made the strongest impression. "I looked at the place from the water," he remembers dreamily, "and the first thing that struck me was that its topography is vertical and everything is green. So I decided to call my friend Patrick Blanc." The French botanist, known for his vertical gardens, in particular the extraordinary living façade of Paris's Musée du Quai Branly, loved the spot, and agreed to create the hotel's high-rise gardens.

After the lengthy process of convincing the local authorities that Como needed a 21st-century hotel, it was necessary to excavate deep into the stone hillside (to provide enough depth for a discreet service entrance), before construction began. Contreras, who wanted a building that was at once contemporary and timeless, dismisses any suggestion that it is a radical structure: "It is rationalist — and the architect of rationalism, Giuseppe Terragni, was from Como." Almost all of the old villa was razed, aside from the *darsena*, the stone archways where boats were kept, and

From above: view of Lake Como from a suite in Il Sereno; the hotel as seen from the lake

Patricia Planinjad, Rebecca Rose



which now provide a fabulous vista from the hotel's restaurant.

The use of natural materials, to blend with the shifting colours of the lake, but also to make the most of the local quarries and suppliers, was something Contreras and Urquiola felt strongly about. For the infinity pool, a marble called *verde karzai*, chosen to match the colour of the lake in the afternoons. Patrick Blanc's two fragrant vertical gardens — "Le Miroir Vert Du Lac" and "The Canyon" — composed of more than 2,000 plant species, counter the smooth edges of the hotel's Rubik's cube façade, with an organic liveliness.

All this is catnip for design aficionados, and word has spread fast among those who know their Urquiola from their Isokon. The bar and restaurant is booked up with lunches and dinners for the Milan fashion and design set, and the hotel is already taking bookings for next year. A handful of guests have already made discreet inquiries as to whether any of Urquiola's pieces are for sale (answer: not for the moment).

But Il Sereno is also piquing the interest of longstanding Como visitors, particularly from the US, UK and France, who come to the lake to unwind, and are

curious to try something different. This was definitely the case for one American couple in their sixties who we noticed at the reception desk, requesting, sotto voce, a "little tutorial" on the room's high-tech lighting systems.

In the wood-paneled sanctuary of our suite, we pretended it was our own minimalist lakeside apartment: sleek modernist sofas and smooth wood tables, perfectly positioned fruit bowls, the anglepoise lamp of your dreams. But for guests who still want a taste of palazzo life, Il Sereno has a 20-year lease on nearby Villa Pliniana, a fabulous waterside palace built in 1573, and named for none other than Pliny's Elder and Younger, who discovered a spring there in the 1st century AD.

The villa, one of the finest on the lake, was visited by Byron, Shelley, Stendhal and Rossini, who composed "Tancredi" on the piano that still stands in the villa's ornate salon today.

To provide a certain continuity with Il Sereno, Urquiola has designed select pieces of furniture — a startling injection of contemporaneity among all the gilt and frescoes. The 19 bedrooms have also been given the requisite high-tech luxury overhaul, and an infinity pool and spa installed.

Whizzing back to the hotel on one of Il Sereno's three custom-made Riva speedboats, I wondered which of these two venues I would choose for my wedding if I were the co-founder of the largest music streaming service in the world. This was obviously a dilemma for Ek too — one he overcame by sensibly hiring out both: Villa Pliniana for the ceremony, and Il Sereno for partying until dawn.

Rebecca Rose was a guest of Il Sereno. ilsereno.com. Suites from €800. Villa Pliniana is available for private hire also through ilsereno.com

Short cuts

Amsterdam According to the Worldwide Fund for Nature, 427 species of mammal are found in Brazil, a diversity that inspired the artist Frans Post, who travelled in the then partly Dutch colony from 1637-44. Recently discovered in an archive, 34 of his drawings of animals — among them a capybara, jaguar, llama, opossum, porcupine, monkeys and a yellow armadillo, which he declared "good to eat; tastes like chicken" — go on show at the Rijksmuseum from October 7 till January 8, the first time they've been seen in public. rijksmuseum.nl

Maldives This weekend sees two openings in the Indian Ocean. First, 40 minutes by seaplane from Malé airport, lies Soneva Jani, eco-aware hotelier Sonu Shivdasani's first new venture since he sold the Six Senses hotel group in 2012. Where most Maldivian five-stars promise a private island, this is a whole atoll: an archipelago of five islets, four deserted, within the Medhufaru lagoon. There are just 24 overwater houses with pools. If the villas at sister property, Soneva Fushi, favour straight lines and angles, here it's all voluptuous curves and serpentine walkways. The most



Frans Post art. René-Gabriel Ojéda / RMN-CP

original detail is the retractable roof above master beds. From \$1,935, www.soneva.com/soneva-jani

Seychelles Also opening October 1 is Six Senses Zil Pasyon on verdant 263-hectare island Felicite', 20 minutes by helicopter from the Seychellois capital Mahé. Owned by US private equity group Pegasus Capital Advisors and designed by Studio RHE, the handsome neo-brutalist residences are built not only from granite (in keeping with the beach boulders) and basalt, but reinforced concrete, surely an eco no-no. The 30 villas are uncontroverial: rustic-looking balau timber houses, with shingled roofs. From €1,200 a night, sixsenses.com

Greece Given that "family friendly" can be as off-putting to some as it is appealing to others, Sani Resort and Marina on the Halkidiki peninsula — long a winner with the parents of young children — is building a new hotel exclusively for grown-ups. Named Sani Dunes, it is due to open next June. Booking for summer 2017 is open already. From €129, sani-dunes.com

Claire Wrathall



Islands of Soneva Jani