

By Tom Chesshyre

THINGS are not looking good for Andy Murray, Britain's No.1 tennis player. 'Poor old Andy,' says a woman clutching a cocktail at the pool bar of the Messini Beachclub in the Greek Peloponnese. The afternoon sun glares beyond an awning, heating the grass on a crisp lawn leading to the golden sands of Analipsi beach. But all of our focus is on a television in the bar. Murray is playing in the French Open final against Novak Djokovic and he's having a hard time.

Oohs and ahhs emanate from the 50 or so people gathered. 'Yes: in the net!' says one holidaymaker after Djokovic makes a mistake. He's drinking a half-litre of Mythos lager and is gripped by the contest. It is 'Happier Hour' at the resort; the implication being that all times are happy, though some more so than others (when the drinks are cheaper still). 'I still believe!' he bellows. 'COME ON ANDY.'

Just as with group walking holidays, tennis breaks create a camaraderie. I'm on a week's break with tennis lessons included. It's the official launch of a new programme in which instruction is headed up by Andy Murray's former coach Mark Petchey.

Staying at a hotel with a tennis academy during a grand slam is a great way of creating a buzz and cementing friendships off the court. But the focus of the week is the game itself... and how to get better at it.

Petchey has been brought in to Messini Beachclub (and six other such clubs run by tour operator Neilson in Greece and Turkey) to fine-tune their tennis coaching. His belief is that many tennis academies do not allow participants to hit enough shots as the buckets used by coaches to feed balls to players are too small. So instead of perhaps 100 balls for each coach, special baskets have been introduced with as many as 300.

'I hate it when lessons are spent picking up balls for the next drill,' Petchey says during a pause on one of the resort's five artificial grass courts. 'I want people hitting as many shots as possible and to do that with a plan: to correct mistakes.'

This means you run about a lot. Balls are fed to you by the four coaches after instruction is provided on each shot – forehand, backhand, serve and volley – and you are given ample opportunity to hone your new swings without dropping to your knees in exhaustion.

There's a simplicity to the approach, which starts with participants choosing one of four categories: green (beginners), blue (intermediates confident in a rally), red (club players) and black (advanced). Each day – over six days – an hour's instruction is organised, then there is a chance for 'social tennis' from 5pm to 7pm.

'Low to high! Low to high!' says Joe



It's a volley holiday with Andy

(...well, his ex-coach) to be precise!

GETTING THERE

Neilson (neilson.co.uk, 0333 014 3350) offers seven nights at the Messini Beachclub from £480pp, including return Heathrow flights, transfers, most meals and activities. A July 3 departure costs £875pp.

GAME ON: Tom, above right, on court with Mark Petchey, former coach of Andy Murray, left. Far left: Keep-fit classes



Hoose, 24, from Crosby in Liverpool. He is head coach at Messini and, despite his age, he has the right temperament for instruction: patient and laid-back, yet precise in his communication.

I'm in the red group and he's soon telling me to start my forehand

swing lower in order to whip over the ball and accentuate its top-spin. I do this. The shots get better. He comes over and suggests I try gripping the racket less firmly. For a drill, he asks me to play shots with just a thumb and two fingers holding the racket. This feels peculiar, although the ball is flashing over the net with exactly the right spin. It's a marvellous sensation.

Apart from the courts, there's

an excellent 50-metre pool, keep-fit classes – and I joined an organised bike ride into the nearby hills. But the highlight of my stay is a private lesson with Mark Petchey. It is baking hot and he puts me through my paces. He can see my old strokes coming through (I haven't held a racket for six years). He checks out my forehand and backhand and calls me over.

'Take a semi-open stance on

your forehand. Step back and then move into the ball on your back hand,' he says, indicating the body positions required for each shot. We start playing again and his advice immediately has an effect.

One moment sticks in my mind. Mark fires a stinger of a serve at the end of my lesson. Somehow I punch the ball down the line. Petchey lunges but is nowhere near. It's a clear winner...

Hollywood's other hills

It's beautiful, luxurious and packed with film stars...no wonder **Emma Merriweather** fell in love with Lake Como

BESIDES the hills of Hollywood, there may be no sight as familiar from films, adverts and glamorous photo-shoots as the hills surrounding Lake Como. The region is more beautiful than any set designer could craft, though, with deep blue water, offset by rugged, wooded mountains, while the snow-capped Alps lie in wait just beyond.

With huge villas set among each hillside, each with their own jetty and walled garden, as well as villages so charming you can barely pass through them without wanting to stop and explore, it's unsurprising that Como has become the second home of choice for the Hollywood elite.

George Clooney spends his summer at his 22-bedroom home in Laglio. Villa Oleandra. Bought in 2001 for \$10million, it's now thought to be worth \$100million.

While Clooney bought the home as a place to escape, it has been his A-list parties that have made Como a paparazzi's dream. On a typical summer break, Oleandra can see the likes of Brad Pitt, Bono, Matt Damon, Julia Roberts, Jennifer Aniston and Cindy Crawford coming and going. In fact, Oleandra is now a stop-off for tourists visiting the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of Clooney with his wife Amal.

Our taxi-driver scoffs when I ask if he can point out the villa on our journey from the airport. He says he is asked so often about Clooney, but 'he's just a guy'.

Ah yes, the taxis. Flying into Milan's Malpensa airport, we assumed a taxi would be the best way to make the 40-minute journey from the airport to our base, the Grand Hotel Tremezzo, 15 minutes from Clooney's home. I had never seen a meter rise so



GETTING THERE

Double rooms at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo start at £342 a night. Visit grandhoteltremezzo.com. For information on rail travel from Milan to Como, visit voyages-sncf.com. British Airways (ba.com), easyJet (easyjet.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com) offer flights to Milan Malpensa.

SHEER GLAMOUR: George Clooney and wife Amal, who have a house on Lake Como. Left: A terrace overlooking the lake at the Grand Hotel Tremezzo

fast. By the time we arrived, it had passed the £200 (£153) mark. The best way to avoid this is to take a train to Como town and then catch a hydrofoil (which offers the best views of the lake anyway).

YOU may feel you've seen the Grand Hotel Tremezzo somewhere before; and if you've seen the film Grand Budapest Hotel, you'll know why: their art nouveau facades are virtually identical. When you arrive, you're even ushered into the old-fashioned elevator by a bus boy dressed in a pillar-box hat.

There's a sense of occasion that accompanies even the smallest thing: can't finish your wine at dinner? Your glass will be waiting in your room by the time you've walked back from the restaurant. The ice in your water has melted while you sunbathe at the lake? Open your eyes and it will have been silently replaced.

The hotel, where Clooney has enjoyed a drink or two at the

terrace bar, has two pools, one set in the lake with huge wooden decking surrounding it.

It's a wonderful experience to swim in a pool that's moving with the ebb and flow of a lake, as boats sail past.

We ate breakfast and dinner at La Terrazza. Dinner was simple but exceptionally cooked northern Italian dishes such as fresh mushroom tagliatelle, beef with gnocci or lake fish with risotto.

On our last night, we agreed we had eaten the best dinner of our entire lives.

Outside the hotel, Villa Carlotta, a 17th Century former palace, is a ten-minute walk away and has a huge botanical garden, and a museum inside. Or go across the lake to Bellagio, described as 'the jewel in Como's crown'.

If last year's report that Clooney is considering selling Oleandra is true, it may be that a trip to Lake Como will no longer hold the excitement that you might bump into him at any moment.

But there's enough Hollywood magic without him.

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How YOU can travel like a millionaire

By Fred Mawer

THE CRAFTY TRAVELLER

THIS month the BBC broadcast The Millionaires' Holiday Club, a behind-the-scenes look at very extravagant holidays. The trips were put together by ITC Luxury Travel, which specialises in lavish breaks. So if you want to splash out on a break, should you turn to ITC, or a high-end rival such as Elegant Resorts, Carrier or Caribtours?

EXPERTISE

IN THE TV show, staff from ITC visit the Seychelles and Thailand on research trips. With any self-respecting luxury tour operator, you should be able to talk to staff who have visited any hotel on their books. They should be able to weigh up the pros and cons, based on their experience.

SERVICE

WITH a luxury tour operator, one person from the company is

likely to manage your holiday from start to finish. You can have much more than the flights, transfers and accommodation taken care of. ITC and others offer a complimentary concierge service, which can, for example, fix boat trips and reserve tables in restaurants.

ADDED PERKS

IF YOU book with a luxury operator, overseas airport-hotel transfers are likely to be private, not shared, and in smart vehicles. You may also get airport lounge access at no extra cost – for example, with ITC at Barbados and Antigua airports, and with Caribtours at UK airports. You may also have escorted VIP fast-track service through airports, allowing you to skip immigration queues.

DO YOU PAY MORE?

I OBTAINED quotes for two travelling to Barbados from November 21-28 – staying B&B in a garden suite at the five-star Cobblers Cove, flying premium economy with British Airways from Gatwick and including private airport hotel transfers. Caribtours quoted £5,200; Carrier, £5,563; Elegant Resorts, £5,670 and ITC Luxury Travel, £5,699. Note the hefty price difference of £499 between Caribtours and ITC – operators clearly add on different mark-ups.

You can book many luxury holidays with more mainstream companies – including at Cobblers Cove. So I also got online quotes with Travelbag (£4,746) and British Airways Holidays (£4,978), and Kuoni (£4,754).

These undercut the luxury operators by as much as £953 for the Travelbag package over the ITC one. I should point out that, as well as access to a concierge service, the ITC quote included a meet-and-greet service at Gatwick, and at Barbados airport fast-track immigration on arrival and executive lounge access on departure.

The other luxury operators' quotes included some similar perks, while those with Travelbag, British Airways Holidays and Kuoni didn't.

It's up to you to decide whether you think it's worth paying extra for the personalised service and extras. Lastly, what about booking direct? For top-end long-haul packages, the perceived wisdom is that it will often work out cheaper booking through luxury operators, as they get preferential rates with airlines and hotels. By booking direct with BA and Cobblers Cove, and paying taxis on the spot for transfers, the total would have been about £5,630, similar to the priciest quotes, but more expensive than the cheaper ones.

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