



lazing on
LAKE MAGGIORE

Italy's picturesque lake serves up serene days on the water beneath the snow-covered Alps.

By Deborah R. Huso



Like many of the towns along the western shore of Lake Maggiore, Cannobio—the last town before crossing from Italy into Switzerland—features a picturesque lakeside promenade.

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taly is world-renowned for its bustling cities full of resplendent architecture, museums, shops and restaurants. If you're seeking something different or just looking for a quieter way to experience *bel paese*, however, then consider a pilgrimage to the shores of Lake Maggiore, one of the more popular escapes in northern Italy's Lake District.

That's what I did when taking a winter trip to Italy and seeking some serenity after a week in Florence, Pisa and Cinque Terre with a friend and our two 10-year-old daughters. We reserved a little cottage only a few blocks from the water in the lakeside town of Stresa and then oriented ourselves with a boat tour on Lake Maggiore.

The Best Way to Experience the Lake

Lake Maggiore is the second largest of Italy's famous alpine lakes—41 miles long but only 6 miles wide at its broadest point. With nearly 200 miles of shoreline, it is best known for the Borromean Islands that occupy the waters of its western arm, known as the Borromean Gulf.

Although the region is one of the wettest in Italy, it has a temperate climate despite its proximity to the Alps, meaning you can enjoy most of the region's activities even in winter. With temperatures on winter days ranging from the mid 40s to low 60s, the area around the lake continues to attract travelers in its off-season, and most hotels and restaurants remain open, though you may find some attractions with limited hours.

In warmer months, the boat tour providers at Piazza Marconi in Stresa will take passengers on trips that include the opportunity to disembark at some of the Borromean Islands. In winter, however, access is normally closed. Nevertheless, you can still enjoy the islands from the water, and there's no better way to

experience the beauty of the region than by sailing on along the lake's picturesque western shore.

While visiting in the quieter winter months, we nabbed a private boat tour for an up-close cruise around Isola Bella with its lavish Baroque palace, extensive terraced gardens and white peacocks wandering the palace lawns. There are three other islands and two islets on Lake Maggiore that were acquired in the 16th century by the Borromeo family, who had made their fortune as merchants and bankers. Six centuries later, the prominent family still owns the majority of the Borromeo Islands.

After our boat tour, we enjoyed cocktails, gelato

Here, we came across the complex of buildings that make up a church dedicated to the martyrs Saints Gervasio and Protaso. Inside the Romanesque church, the walls and ceilings feature beautiful frescoes. The church's narrow and delicate stone bell tower dates to 1075, and the adjacent octagonal baptistery reportedly dates to the fifth century, though its interior paintings depicting the life of Saint John the Baptist are from the 1500s.

While our daughters wandered the promenade opposite the church with its fading open-air frescoes depicting the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ, my

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and cheesecake at Marconi Beach, one of many lakeside cafes and restaurants in Stresa. The cafe is steps away from the historic and palatial waterfront hotels Grand Hotel Bristol and Grand Hotel des Iles Borromées & SPA, one of the settings for Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

The Italian Lake District's Medieval Past

Some of the finer and perhaps unexpected features of the Italian Lake District (and the towns around Lake Maggiore, in particular) are the beautifully intact medieval town centers. On our second day by the lake, we ventured north of Stresa to the village of Baveno. While it's easy to get lost along Baveno's lakeside promenade, the real treat here is the town's historic center—the Complesso Monumentale—accessible via a staircase up the hillside opposite the lake.

friend and I headed back toward the lake and the Museum Granum. Worth a quick visit, the museum showcases the geology of the region, which is well known for its pink granite used in the construction of buildings everywhere from Vienna to New York City.

The Largest Alpine Wilderness in Italy

Of course, you should not visit Lake Maggiore without exploring the scenic mountains that surround it. About a 45-minute drive north of Stresa is Val Grande National Park, Italy's largest wilderness area, covering more than 37,000 acres. Because this mountainous landscape never saw population beyond farmers looking for summer grazing land, it remains virtually unspoiled. Since this is a vast wilderness area, even experienced hikers should hire a local guide (the park's website,



The village of Baveno boasts a lakeside promenade that's perfect for an evening stroll.



Piazza Grande, Locarno, Switzerland

A DAY TRIP TO LOCARNO

Perhaps best known for its annual film festival, the Swiss city of Locarno is worth a day trip if you're staying on the Italian side of Lake Maggiore. About an hour's drive north of Stresa, Locarno enjoys a lakeside setting at the base of the Alps.

When you take a curling drive north on SS34, an often narrow but incredibly scenic two-lane highway that hugs Lake Maggiore's western shore, be sure to stop for a quick visit in Cannobio, just south of the Swiss border. Here, you can take a stroll on the picturesque waterfront promenade or window-shop along cobblestone streets in the main village, where some of the architecture dates to the 13th century.

When it comes to food and language, you'll barely notice you've crossed the border into Switzerland. Still, the city has some decidedly Swiss

features. A prime example is Lido Locarno, a lakeside recreational complex with indoor and outdoor pools fed by natural thermal waters. The best spot to occupy? The outdoor thermal pool that seems to merge with the lake, where you can soak for hours in steaming mineral waters with magical vistas of the snow-capped Swiss Alps. The facility, which is open year-round, also has an indoor pool with winding water slides the kids will enjoy.

After your sumptuous soaking, head into the historic city center, the Città Vecchia, with its colorful mix of stone and stucco buildings and intricate wrought-iron balconies above cobblestone streets. Città Vecchia is full of cafes, boutiques and, of course, the requisite Swiss chocolate shops.

parcovalgrande.it, offers a list of approved ones) to visit the park's more isolated reaches.

There are a number of trails that are more easily accessible. Among the best is the Beech Wood Trail, climbing almost 1,200 feet to the summit of Mount Faiè and dominated, of course, by beech trees. The summit offers a panoramic vista of the alpine landscape, including the Ompio Valley and Lake Maggiore.

Should you find access to Val Grande closed due to winter weather conditions, you can still get a taste of the Italian Alps an hour's drive west to the Atrona Valley, where, in addition to hiking, you can even do some Nordic skiing in Alta Valle Antrona Natural Park.

Whether you visit for relaxation or a little outdoor adventure, Lake Maggiore offers a slower-paced taste of Italy where you can take in the landscapes of water and mountains that once inspired wealthy Italian merchants to build palaces here and continue to inspire families to build vacation memories.

Lake Maggiore Travel Tips

- Fly into Milan Malpensa Airport if you're planning to visit Lake Maggiore via an international flight into Italy. It's just over an hour's drive from the lake.
- Rent a car to truly experience all that Lake Maggiore has to offer, from nearby national parks to a twisting drive north into Switzerland. But be prepared to handle high-speed and impatient Italian drivers! Stay in the right lane on major highways.
- Consider renting a cottage or villa on or near the lake to live like a local. If you're visiting in the cooler months, keep in mind that Italians often see the provision of heat as an add-on expense when they rent their homes. You may have to pay extra for heat and/or firewood if renting from a private owner as opposed to staying in a hotel.



From top:

The ornate terraced gardens of Palazzo Borromeo on Isola Bella are an architectural masterpiece and a natural extension of the Baroque palace that's the centerpiece of the grounds.

Among the attractions in Baveno's historic town center is the Romanesque church dedicated to Saints Gervasio and Protasio, which features beautiful frescoes.

Straddling Switzerland and Italy in the Alps, Lake Maggiore stretches some 41 miles long and 6 miles wide and offers nearly 200 miles of shoreline. Along the lake and in the surrounding mountains, you'll find historic towns, inspiring architecture, refreshing recreation and scenic beauty galore.