

Inghams guide and insights to Lake Maggiore

Introduction to Lake Maggiore

Lake Maggiore's rich and colourful past seems ever present as you explore and enjoy this spectacular lake with shores bordered with lush Mediterranean vegetation, and the backdrop of the Alps in the distance.

Ever since Napoleon built the Simplon highway from Geneva to Milan, which ran to the shores of Lake Maggiore, it became part of the Grand Tour, a haven for Europeans and British pioneers. Seduced by its Mediterranean climate, they built imposing villas and beautiful gardens attracting aristocrats, poets, writers and composers of the time.

It was the setting for Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" and it is easy to imagine his heroes fleeing from the Italian police in a rowing boat, trying to reach the Swiss border of the lake.

Kings and Queens, writers, poets and composers such as Verdi, Wagner and Rossini have enjoyed the same panoramic views, nearby islands, exquisite botanical gardens, woodlands and tranquility that exist today.

Lake Maggiore is the second largest lake on the south side of the Alps. The west bank is in the Italian region of Piedmont and the right in Lombardy. In the north Lake Maggiore crosses the Swiss border into the canton of Ticino. It is 65 km long and 10 km across at its widest point between Pallanza and Stresa.

In spring and early summer the shores are lined with oleander and the scent of orange blossom pervades. Ever present are the magnificent palm trees and the heavenly scent of verbena. Across from Lake Maggiore lie the Borromean Islands and Isola Bella. The view is spectacular from the magnificent Grand Hotel Des Iles Borromees, a former villa now an archetypal Grand Hotel that is opulent yet understated despite its Murano chandeliers and elegant interior. It's also just a short walk from the centre of Stresa.

Weather

Lake Maggiore has a mild, Mediterranean climate year round with temperatures in summer averaging between 22-26°C in July and August. The Lake Maggiore region enjoys 280 days of sun a year, which is 2,400 hours of sunshine. In July and August average temperature of water is 20-22°C.

Spas and Relaxation

Thermal baths and mineral springs have been a feature in the Lake Maggiore area for centuries. There are natural thermal baths in the Bognanco Valley, which have a range of treatments and facilities such as Jacuzzis, saunas and natural thermal baths.

Many hotels have outdoor heated pools and spa facilities. The best are The Grand Hotel Des Iles Borromees in Stresa, has two heated outdoor pools, a wellness centre with hydromassage, a small indoor pool, sauna, steam room, treatments and massage and tennis courts and a gym. Also recommended is the spa at Hotel Regina Palace, which has an outdoor heated pool in a lovely setting, sauna, Turkish bath, small gym, heated indoor pool and massage and beauty treatments.

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Where to stay

Inghams offer 2 summer resorts in Lake Maggiore. Our package holidays include flights from a range of regional airports, return transfers and a selection of accommodation with a variety of catering options to choose from. Many resorts offer the choice to extend your holidays to stay in two or three hotels in different locations.

Below is a brief guide to our resorts, further details can be found on our website resort pages:

Stylish Stresa is Lake Maggiore's leading resort. The idyllic Borromean Islands are a short boat ride away and Monte Mottarone, with its superb views, is easily reached by cable car. The lush gardens of Villa Pallavicino and Villa Taranto are well worth a visit

Baveno has been a well-known tourist resort since the early 19th century, reflected by the beautiful villas in the surrounding area. It enjoys lovely views of the Borromean Islands. There is a small harbour, an attractive promenade with lakeside cafés and a profusion of flower and oleander trees.

Food and Drink

As Lake Maggiore is in two Italian regions, Piedmonte and Lombardy and crosses the border into Switzerland, regional wines and food specialties are plentiful. There are more than 200 restaurants in the area. Some restaurants on the islands such as Verbano on the Isola dei Pescatori will send their own launches to pick you up as the ferries usually stop around 7 pm.

Fresh fish from the lake is plentiful. One specialty is missolti, sundried lake fish with polenta. Pizzoccheri is a buckwheat pasta served with potatoes, cabbage, cheese and butter. Piedmonte is renowned for its beef, and salamis. From the mountainous regions expect to find several cheeses such as gorgonzola, Toma del Mottarone and Bettelmatt. The northern plains south of the lake are one of Italy's largest rice growing regions so rice, especially risotto is on the menu. Polenta is also a staple. Towns and villages on the lake have regular markets with fresh fruit and vegetables brought in by neighbouring farmers.

Wines include Ghemme and Gattinara in the Pietmonese area with other vineyards in the Novara Hills, the Ossola Valley and in the Canton of Ticino. Inghams offer a half day wine tour to vineyards near Stresa.

Festivals

Boat races, Saint days, film, music and fireworks are all in the summer festival calendar.

This year the 54th Stresa Festival presents a series of Midsummer Jazz concerts throughout July with many other concerts throughout the summer. Classical music concerts include the Settimane Musicali of Stresa.

Musical Meditations are a series of concerts in August held in several locations such as Santa Caterina and Isola Bella. Followed by Visions, 16 concerts at the end of August/ September, held at Isola Bella and Stresa.

The Locarno International Film Festival (5-15th August this year) brings film stars and top directors coveting the Golden Leopard Award for the best film.

During July and August you can take a ferry to Isola Bella where various food stalls, bars and restaurants serve specialties.

San Vito Feast Day in August is a celebration of music and dance with food stalls, bars and a finale firework display on Lake Orta. There are local food fairs and festival throughout the season.

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Things to do

The beauty of Lake Maggiore and the necklace of little villages strung along its shores inspire relaxation and rejuvenation. You can meander around the medieval towns, visiting museums or cruising on the lake, stopping for a gelato or cappuccino. For the more adventurous there's canyoning or paragliding. Just about everything is on offer from biking to golfing with a large cross section of varied walks.

For orientation you can take the Mottarone cable car from Stresa to almost 5,000 ft to get views to the Alps and the lake. Boat life on Lake Maggiore is busy. You can travel by steamer, or rent a sailing or rowing boat. There is also a regular ferry service. The Lake Maggiore Express is a day trip by ferry and railway. The narrow gauge railway crosses 83 bridges and travels from Stresa to Domdossola passing alpine meadows, mountains and waterfalls.

On the lake there are a number of boat clubs where you can water ski, wake board, sail, swim or windsurf. The Cannobio Lido has canoeing and kayaking and there are scuba diving clubs. If you are a strong swimmer you could join the 800 entrants who do the cross lake swim on the last weekend of August.

When it comes to walking there are hundreds of miles of well marked paths that cover all sorts of terrain from gentle lakeside walks to treks along hilltops and promontories. One of our most popular guided Wanderwalks is The Chestnut Tree walk through the hamlet of Passera behind Stresa passing forests of chestnut trees and small villages and churches. There are hikes for all levels of fitness. Terra dei Laghi between Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta where there are hilltop routes to spectacular views has some great walks. Wherever you go you will find scenery studded with mountain peaks, valleys of forest and lush greenery and always the azure blue of the lake.

Not to be missed are gardens of some of the great villas such as Isola Bella, and Isola Madre where the gardens are described by French novelist Gustave Flaubert, as paradise on earth. The Villa Taranto in Pallanza has a dahlia maze, beautiful formal gardens and a huge water lily display. The Botanic Garden Alpina reached from the cable car from Stresa should also be on your list.

On the island Isola Bella you will find a Baroque villa, built by a Milanese Count in the 17th century where frescoes, sculptures, painting and fine furniture adorn the staterooms. Even more impressive are the gardens and terraces filled with lemon trees, magnolias and exotic and original displays of plants frequented by resident peacocks.

By contrast the Isola dei Pescatori, which was Hemingway's favourite island, could not be more different. Named from its origins as a 10th century fishing village. It has a small attractive harbour with narrow cobbled streets lined with colourful fishermen's houses and excellent lakeside trattorias.

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Activity Information

Excursions

Special Excursion Package - £89 SAVE £10

Pre-book the Macugnaga, Ascona and Cannobio and Wine Tasting excursions and receive a FREE one day boat ticket to Baveno or Stresa and the Borromean Islands (valid for arrivals 15 Jun- 15 Sep)

PRE-BOOKABLE

Three Lakes Tour £45, Tuesday, full day

Visit Lakes Como, Lugano and Maggiore

Milan £45, Friday, full day

Visit the Sforza Castle, the spectacular Galleria and gothic Duomo (cathedral). City guide included. Free time for shopping or La Scala visit

Macugnaga £33, Saturday, half day

Mountain village visit and optional cable-car

Ascona and Cannobio £32, Thursday, half day

Combines Swiss Ascona and lakeside Cannobio

Wine Tour £34, Sunday, half day

The gentle hills of the wine-growing area near Stresa

BOOK LOCALLY

Prices are shown for guidance only.

Zermatt and Matterhorn £71, full day

Island Tour £22, half day

Please note that we act at all times as selling agent for the suppliers of activities & excursions.