



LAKE MAGGIORE & LAKE ORTA

3 PERFECT DAYS

♥ DAY 1 // ISLAND-HOP THE BORROMEAN ISLANDS

It is worth catching a ferry (with an all-day ticket) from Stresa or Baveno to Isola Bella (p86) in order to marvel at the baroque wealth of the Borromeo family's island pleasure palace and gardens. Once saturated by all this richness, it's possible to transfer to Isola Superiore (p87) for lunch at one of this Fishermen's Island's restaurants. Then the perfect completion to this experience of the Borromean Islands is to enjoy an afternoon on Isola Madre (p87). For an extra treat, sleep on Isola Superiore (p292).

♥ DAY 2 // ASCEND MOTTARONE AND DISCOVER ROMANTIC LAKE ORTA

The splendid views of lakes and Alps can be seen by driving, hiking, or taking the funicular from the belle époque lakeside town of Stresa to Monte Mottarone (p82). Then it's worth heading down the other side to enchanting little Lake Orta (p96) and its star village, Orta San Giulio, a quintessential romantic spot and the perfect base for local exploration, in particular of Isola San Giulio and the *sacro monte* (holy mountain).

♥ DAY 3 // RIDE THE CENTOVALLI RAILWAY TO LOCARNO

It's possible to enjoy a string of mountain valley villages by catching a train in Stresa bound for Domodossola, which is the starting point for the scenic Centovalli railway trip (p76) through a string of mountain valley villages to Locarno (p70). You can then explore this elegant film-festival town and its pretty lakeside neighbour, Ascona, for the rest of the day. From there, you can head south back over the Italian border to reach captivating Cannobio (p79), one of the most enticing places to stay overnight on Lake Maggiore.

LAKE MAGGIORE

Lake Maggiore is one of the first impressions that many first-time visitors to Italy get to experience. By train or by road, travellers traversing the Alps from Switzerland at the Simplon Pass wind down from the mountains and sidle up to this enormous finger of blue beauty. The star attractions are the Borromean Islands, which, like a fleet of fine vessels, lie at anchor at the Borromean Gulf's (Golfo Borromeo) entrance, an incursion of water between the lake's two main towns, Stresa and Verbania.

More than its siblings to the east, Lake Como and Lake Garda, Lake Maggiore has retained a belle époque air. All three have mesmerised foreign visitors down the centuries but Lake Maggiore became a popular tourist destination in the late 19th century after the Simplon Pass was opened.

Locarno (scene of one of Europe's top film festivals) and Ascona, at the northern Swiss end, and Stresa, in the southwest, have long been beloved of northern Europeans seeking the soothing waters and gentle climate of the broad lake. The climate helps a multitude of colourful plants to flourish and trees thrive in a series of extraordinarily rich gardens on islands, in villas and botanic gardens.

The Piedmontese western shore is the more attractive; it's sprinkled with picturesque villages, and circled with palms and cypresses. The shoreline drive along the SS34 and SS33 (in that order heading south) is delightful. The eastern,

Lombard shore is less well groomed but contains a handful of gems well worth searching out.

TRANSPORT

BOAT // Ferries and hydrofoils around the lake are operated by **Navigazione Lago Maggiore** (☎ 800 551801; www.navigazione.laghi.it, in Italian), which has its main ticket office in Arona. Services are drastically reduced in autumn and winter. The only car ferry connecting the western and eastern shores for motorists sails between Verbania Intra and Laveno. Ferries run every 20 minutes; one-way transport costs from €6.90 to €11.50 for a car and driver or €4.30 for a bicycle and cyclist. One-day return tickets from key points at the Italian end of the lake to the towns (including Locarno) on the Swiss side are available from March to October. Adults/children pay from €15.50/8.80 to €21.50/11.80 depending on their departure port. Services are drastically reduced in autumn and winter. Limited day passes cost Sfr13.80 on the Swiss side. The Sfr24 version is valid for the entire Swiss basin.

LOCARNO & AROUND

With its palm trees and much vaunted 2300 hours of sunshine a year, Locarno has attracted northern tourists to its warm, Mediterranean-style setting since the late 19th century. The lowest town in Switzerland and the most striking one on Lake Maggiore, it seemed like a soothing spot to host the 1925 Locarno Conference where treaties were signed to bring peace to Europe after WWI.

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

TOURIST OFFICES // **Locarno Tourist Office** (☎ 091 791 00 91; www.maggiore.ch; Largo Zorzi 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & holidays, 10am-1.30pm & 2.30-5pm Sun mid-Mar–Oct, 9.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon & 1.30-5pm Sat Nov–mid-Mar) Ask about the Lago Maggiore Guest Card and its discounts.

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