

Piemonte (Italian Lakes & Mountains) – Glassy Waters, Snow-Capped Mountains and Rolling Winelands

Stresa, on the western shores of Lake Maggiore, is one of the most charming of this district's towns. Its pretty central piazza is sleepy by day and bustling by night, when the excellent restaurants open their doors and the stylish Italians begin their "passeggiata". There are many boutiques in the town to satisfy browsers, although for a full day's shopping, you should head to nearby Verbania, or, of course, to Milan itself. Stresa's famous "Gelateria del'Angolo" makes an ideal spot to enjoy a leisurely afternoon's people watching over an indulgent ice cream or cappuccino.

Of course, the main attraction of the region are its lakes. True romantics will head over Monte Mottarone to Lake Orta. You can hire a rowing boat from the quaint town of Orta San Giulio to take your loved one out to a picturesque island for a private picnic. Alternatively, wander along the woodland path behind the town, which takes in 21 chapels and 400 life-sized statues illustrating scenes from the life of St. Francis of Assisi. A boat trip on Lake Maggiore itself should not be missed – choose between a large steamer or a private boat to chug your way around the sights – and if you're visiting in July and August, watch out for the night steamers, which offer an evening meal as they cruise past the twinkling lights of the shores.

From Stresa, it is well worth taking a boat to the eastern shore of Lake Maggiore to visit the chapel of Santa Caterina del Sasso, perched precariously on a hillside ledge. History has it that it was built to commemorate the life of Alberto Besozzi, who, in the 12th century, after being miraculously saved from drowning, spent 40 years in prayer on that ledge, being kept alive by food baskets lowered to him by the locals. The boats also stop off at the several islands dotting the lake. The nearest to Stresa is Isola Bella" (the "beautiful island"), which boasts a fascinating baroque palace. Its huge blue ballroom is breathtaking and its shell encrusted subterranean grottoes have a dungeon-like eerie feel.

The manicured botanical gardens (which are home to a pair of albino peacocks) are a feat of ostentatious design and make a lovely setting for an afternoon's amble. By contrast, Isola Pescatore (the "fishermen's island") is much less formal, with higgledy-piggledy crumbling facades. Its waterfront restaurants make an ideal watering spot in which to linger for some lunch.

From Stresa, you can take a cable car to the summit of Monte Mottarone, a fabulous vantage point from which to enjoy a bird's eye view of Lake Maggiore. The more active can hire mountain bikes at the cable car station and enjoy 25 kms of downhill tracks back down into Stresa.

If you prefer hiking, then the nearby Parco Nazionale della Val Grande offers great panoramic routes, with plenty of indigenous flora and fauna to watch out for. Naturally, water-sports enthusiasts are well catered for on the lakes, with windsurfing and water-skiing, jet skiing, sailing on offer. Golfers will also be pleased to find a variety of courses in the region. If you are visiting with children, Stresa's zoo allows children to get close to the more docile animals, and a trip to the chocolate museum will not fail to entertain.

From Lake Maggiore, it is well worth travelling down to the Winelands of Le Langhe. This tiny area, located south of Turin, is famous throughout Italy for its white truffles and red wine, and so is an ideal holiday destination for wine connoisseurs and gourmets alike. The beautiful countryside of Le Langhe is scattered with charming medieval towns and castles, which can be explored on foot or for some truly breathtaking views you can opt to be flown over the area in a small aircraft. The most prominent of Le Langhe's towns, with its baroque and renaissance palaces and red brick buildings, is Alba. It is a real treat to take a leisurely stroll along Alba's cobbled streets where you can sample some of the local produce on sale. During your stay you will have the chance to taste some of the world's most celebrated wines, learn to cook some of the regions most popular recipes and discover all you could possibly want to know about truffles – the annual truffle festival is held in late October. Le Langhe is also a perfect setting for those who enjoy rambling, cycling and horse riding. It is far enough away from the usual tourist trail to provide you with a genuine Italian experience, yet it is only a one hour drive away from the Ligurian coast line, so can easily be incorporated into a longer holiday.

Getting There

Fly direct from the UK to any of the Milan airports (Malpensa is the nearest) with, amongst others, BA, Ryanair, Easyjet, Alitalia. Fly to Turin with Easyjet or BA for The Pines or Winelands Lodge.

Combine With

The Ligurian Coast or Tuscan countryside to the south. Add citybreaks in Venice or Florence.

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Piemonte (or Piedmont) is a beautiful mountainous region, nestling just south of the Alps. The distant mountain peaks, often snow-capped despite the balmy summer temperatures, make a dramatic backdrop to the glassy waters of the Italian lakes, the most beguiling of which is Lake Maggiore. The elegant palazzos and botanical gardens, which line its shores, lend an air of tranquillity that has attracted genteel holiday-makers since Victorian times. Nowadays, sports enthusiasts will find plenty of hiking, mountain biking and watersports to choose from, although there is always time for a "gelato" and spot of people watching in one of the pretty lakeside piazzas. Since it is so easy to access via Milan, the Italian Lakes region makes an ideal short break destination, but can easily occupy you for longer holidays or honeymoons in Italy.

Our Recommended Hotels in Piemonte

The Piemonte Villa
The Winelands Lodge