

Lago Maggiore

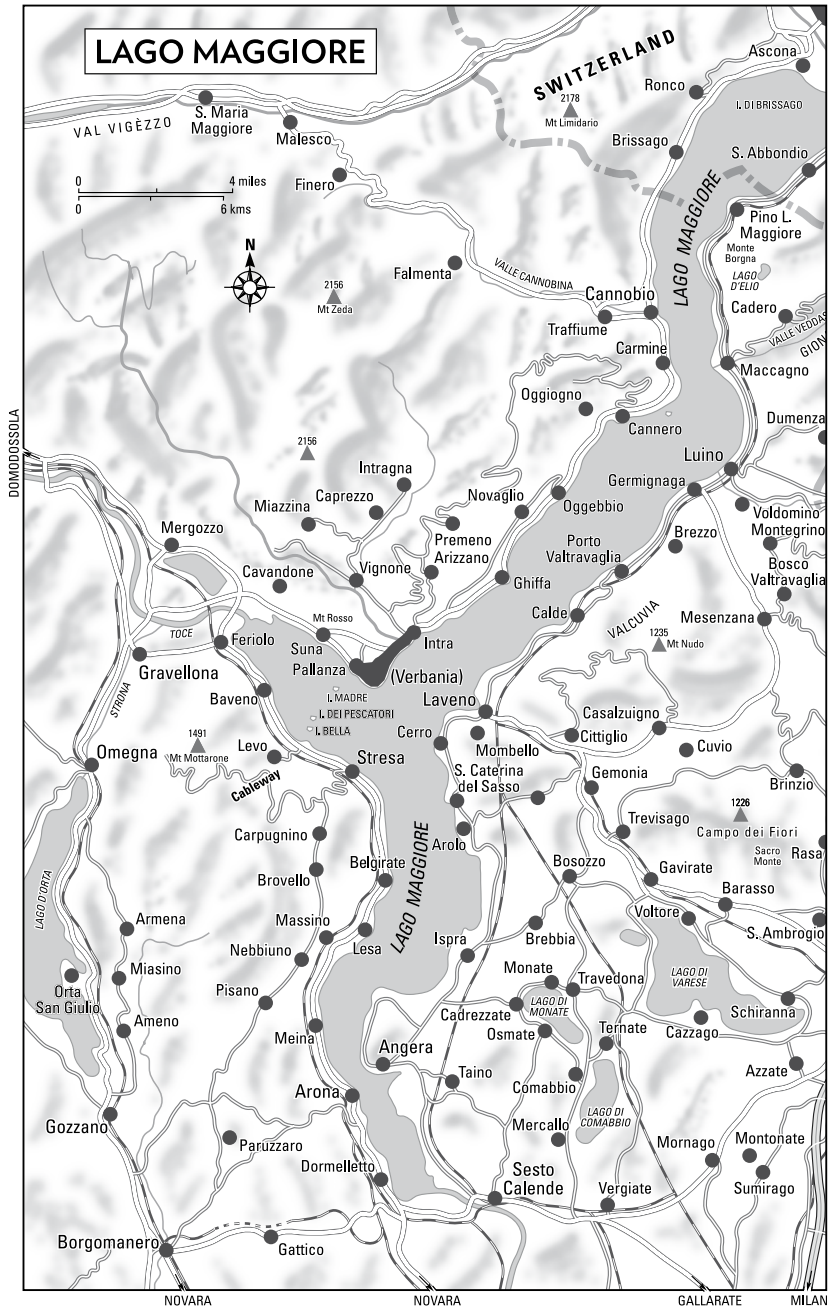
Surrounded by picturesque snow-capped mountains, Lago Maggiore (map B, C3) is the second largest lake in Italy after Lake Garda. Its 121 square kilometres divide Piedmont to the west from Lombardy to the east. The north end (about one-fifth of its area), including Locarno, is in Swiss territory.

Lake Maggiore became well known at the beginning of the 19th century as a European resort, visited for its romantic scenery and good climate. The lake is often called Verbano, from the Latin *Lacus Verbanus*, a name derived from the vervain (*verbena*) that grows abundantly on its shores. The central part of the lake, around Stresa, is particularly lovely. Since the 15th century the Italian family of Borromeo have held important possessions on the lake, notably the Isole Borromée and the castle of Angera.

THE LOWER LAKE

The Simplon road from Geneva to Milan, constructed by Napoleon in 1800–5, skirts the lake's southwest shore from Sesto Calende at the southern tip. The lower reaches of the lake are largely built up and semi-industrial. There is a protected area, however, on the lakefront at **Dormelletto**, the Riserva Naturale Speciale dei Canneti, which preserves the last remaining example of lacustrine vegetation on Lake Maggiore's west shore. The reeds of Dormelletto (*Phragmites australis*) purify the water by absorbing harmful substances and, with the surrounding woodlands, offer an ideal nesting and wintering environment for well over a hundred bird species. The Villa Tesio estate, within the reserve, is famous for its thoroughbreds, particularly the Dormello-Oliata breed.

Between Dormelletto and Arona is the **Parco Naturale dei Lagoni di Mercurago**, created to protect the six moraine circles formed around Lake Maggiore during the last ice age. The great forests that characterise this protected area consist mainly of oak, birch, pine and alder, chestnut and black locust. The wetlands are home to a precious water and marsh flora that includes the tiny, carnivorous *Utricularia vulgaris*, the white water lily and the sundew, another carnivorous plant. The wetlands of the park offer habitat for the many bird species that breed, winter or migrate through the area. Four self-guided trails—blue (wetlands), red (woods), purple (archaeology) and orange (trades)—offer educational insights into the park, and there is a 10km-long bicycle trail.



VISITING THE PARK

The park service maintains two permanent exhibits in Ceresole Reale. The **Homo et Ibex** museum, at the visitors' centre in the former Grant Hotel at Prese, traces the past, present and future relationship between *Homo sapiens* and *Capra ibex*, an animal which needs large individual browsing areas. The museum makes a great deal of the argument that sustainable development is a necessity, not a luxury, and stresses the role of parks in protecting species at risk of extinction and in preserving the environments in which they live. There is also archaeological material documenting ibex hunting since the end of the last Ice Age (c. 10000 BC), including finds from excavations in the Orco Valley (Boira Fusca) of an Epipalaeolithic and Mesolithic hunting camp.

Le Torbiere d'Alta Montagna, at Serrù, illustrates the Colle della Losa trail, which connects the Gran Paradiso with the Parc National de la Vanoise in France, and presents the outstanding natural features of the two areas.

GRAIAN ALPS PRACTICAL TIPS

GETTING AROUND

- **By bus:** GTT runs a daily service from Turin (Via Fiochetto 23, Stazione Dora; www.gtt.to.it) to Ivrea (c. 1hr 40 mins), as does SADEM (www.sadem.it) from the bus station at Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 131 (Ivrea; c. 1hr 20mins).
- **By rail:** There is a regular daily service from Turin (Porta Nuova) to Ivrea (regional 1hr; fast regional, change at Chivasso, 1hr 11mins).

WHERE TO STAY

CERESOLE REALE (map A, B1)
€ **Gli Scoiattoli**. The simple, rustic atmosphere of this small hotel in the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso recalls that of a high-altitude Alpine hut. Children are welcome (there are interior and exterior play areas) and the food is delicious and unpretentious, made from the freshest, most genuine local ingredients. A perfect place for

young families. *Borgata Barilò 4, Ceresole Reale, hotelglischoiattoli.it*.

CHIAVERANO (map B, A4)
€€ **Castello San Giuseppe**. A magnificently restored and converted former Carmelite convent, on a hilltop with a garden and fine views. Previous house guests have included Eleonora Duse and Ginger Rogers. *Località San Giuseppe, castellosangiuseppe.com*.

COLLERETTO GIACOSA (map A, D1)
€€ **Villa Soleil**. This 18th-century country manor, completely restored in 2006, comes with a renowned restaurant and a 5000 sq m park where, for almost three centuries, a tree has been planted for each new male heir. Wisteria and jasmine grow around the pool, and rooms and public areas are warm and filled with light. *Via della Cartiera 13/15, villasoleil.it*.

IVREA (map A, D1)
€€ **Sirio**. A family-managed hotel by Lake Sirio. With wellness centre and restaurant (Finch), which specialises in grilled dishes. *Via Lago di Sirio 85, T: 0125 424247*.

ROMANO CANAVESE (map A, D1)
€€ **Relais Villa Matilde**. An 18th-century villa with handsome frescoed rooms and meticulously tended grounds, this comfortable hotel is situated in a small town in the Canavese hills. The restaurant is in the former stables and there are more rooms and a few dual-level suites in the ex-dovecote. The hotel is particularly convenient for visiting Ivrea (just 15mins away) and is than an hour from Vercelli and Novara, Biella and the Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso. 43 rooms. *Viale Marconi 29, relaisvillamatilde.com*.

SAN FRANCESCO AL CAMPO (map A, C2)
€€ **Furno**. An elegant place derived from the careful restoration of a large 18th-century farm, this hotel is just 10mins from Turin's Sandro Pertini Airport. It is also convenient for visiting the Savoy residences at Venaria Reale (20mins), Rivoli (30mins) and Stupinigi (35mins), as well as Turin itself (35mins). Rooms are individually furnished, and dinner is served in relatively small dining rooms with crackling fires (in winter) or by the pool (summer). 33 rooms. *Via Roggeri 2, romantichotel torino.com*.

STRAMBINELLO (map A, D1)
€ **Castello di Strambinello**. This refined country house B&B stands in a quiet, secluded setting overlooking

the pristine valley of the Torrente Chiusella, just 15mins from Ivrea. The present owners, a professional restorer and his veterinarian wife, have brought it back to its ancient splendour and furnished it with genuine antiques. They are now working on a garden in keeping with the historic character of the buildings and the ecological integrity of their environs. Three suites. *Via Castello 1, castellodistrabinello.com*.

WHERE TO EAT

IVREA (map A, D1)
€ **La Trattoria San Giovanni**. Simple and wholesome Piedmontese fare since 1975. Closed Mon and Tues all day, Wed lunch and Sun dinner. *Corso Vercelli 45, trattoriasangiiovanni.it*.
€ **Vecchia Ivrea**. *Osteria* serving good, unpretentious cooking. Plenty of wholesome staples. *Vicolo Cantanara 16, T: 349 780 3324*.

QUINCINETTO (just beyond map A, D1)
€€ **Da Giovanni**. The architecture may be contemporary but the cuisine is firmly rooted in the time-honoured traditions of the Canavese. The menu is seasonal and is matched by the views. Closed Tues evening and Wed. *Via Fontana Riola 3, Montellina, Quincinetto, T: 0125 757447*.

SAN GIORGIO CANAVESE (map A, D1)
€ **Ristorante della Luna**. Located in the town centre and run by the same family for 80 years, this well-established restaurant offers great local cuisine and a good selection of local and regional wines, simple lunches.

THE VALLE PELLICE

TORRE PELLICE

This pleasant town (*map A, B3*) is the largest municipality of the Waldensian valleys. Its congenial air belies a history marked by persecution and violence. There are numerous Waldensian monuments in the city: the 17th-century **Tempio dei Coppieri** (in the town of Tagliaretto), the first Waldensian religious building to be built here; the Tempio Valdese of 1850, which each year hosts the opening ceremony of the Synod; and other structures including the Foresteria, the Casa Valdese, which serves as the administrative centre, and the Collegio.

The **Museo Valdese** (*Via Beckwith 3, museovaldese.org*) was established at the initiative of the Waldensian Church in 1889 to preserve Waldensian heritage and cultural memory. It presents two collections, one historical and the other ethnographical. The former traces the history of the Waldensians from the first migrations (1170) to the present day, through Bibles, liturgical objects, historical documents, weapons, furniture and material from African missions. The latter has reconstructed rooms representing life at home, at school and at work, and depicts the agricultural cycle in the Waldensian Valleys in the late 19th century. The museum is managed by the Fondazione Centro Culturale Valdese, which administers a system of museums and cultural institutions scattered throughout the Pellice, Chisone and Germanasca valleys.

THE WALDENSIANS

The Val Chisone and the Valle Pellice, also known as the Valli Valdesi, have been inhabited for centuries by the Protestant Waldensians or Vaudois. This religious community originated in the south of France around 1170, under the inspiration of Peter Waldo, a Lyons merchant who sold his goods and started preaching the gospel. His adherents were formally condemned by the Lateran Council in 1184, and persecution drove them to take refuge in these remote valleys. In about 1532 the Vaudois were absorbed by the Swiss Reformation. When renewed persecution broke out in 1655 under Carlo Emanuele II, assisted by the troops of Louis XIV, a strong protest was raised by Cromwell in England, and Milton wrote his famous 'Sonnet—On the Late Massacre in Piedmont (May 1655)', *Poems* 1673):

Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughter'd saints, whose bones
Lie scatter'd on the Alpine mountains cold;
Ev'n them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our Fatheres worshipt Stocks and Stones,
Forget not: in thy book record their groanes
Who were thy Sheep, and in their antient Fold
Slayn by the bloody Piemontese that roll'd
Mother with Infant down the Rocks...

Still further persecution followed the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685), but the remainder of the Vaudois, about 2,600 in number, were allowed to retreat to Geneva. In 1698 Henri Arnaud led a band of 800 to the reconquest of their valleys; following a rupture between Louis XIV and Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy, the Vaudois were given recognition as subjects of Savoy, in a spirit of religious tolerance. By the beginning of the 19th century Protestant countries were taking keen interest in the Vaudois, and an Englishman, General Charles Beckwith, helped them personally, building their church in Turin (1849). Since 1848 they have been allowed complete religious liberty. Towards the end of the 19th century large colonies emigrated to Sicily, Uruguay and the Argentine Republic.

The **Civica Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea Filippo Scropo** (*Via Roberto d'Azeglio 10, galleriascroppo.org*) was founded by Filippo Scropo (1910–93), an artist, teacher, critic and curator who in 1959 invited a group of artists to participate in the first Autunno Pittorico di Torre Pellice. The criterion for participation required guest artists to donate one of their works to the municipality. Over the years the collection has grown to include nearly 500 paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints.

BOBBIO PELLICE

This little resort (*map A, B3*) at the foot of the Alps, on the upper rim of the Val Pellice, is the gateway to the Oasi del Barant, an important wildlife reserve 2250 m above sea level. The main draw here is the **Giardino Botanico Alpino Bruno Peyronel**, a small but fascinating treasure chest of rare flora (*giardinopeyronel.it*) that can be reached only by foot (1.5hrs from the Rifugio Jervis at Conca del Prà, or from the Rifugio Barbara at Comba dei Carbonieri). Here, in an area of 17,000 sq m, are more than 300 marked species in a variety of habitats: scree, various types of pasture, wetlands, brush and sheer rock.

Bobbio's Tempio Valdese was rebuilt in the 18th century after severe persecutions destroyed the earlier structure.

THE ALTA VALLE DEL PO

The entire Piedmont section of the Po Valley is under environmental protection, but the management of this great ribbon-like nature reserve is divided between three different authorities. The first stretch of the Parco del Po includes the river's course through the mountains and the plain at their base. The river actually originates in a system of high-altitude lakes and bogs in the Monviso group and the source is historically identified at Pian (or Piano) del Re, in the municipality of Crissolo (*map C, AI–BI*), at an elevation of 2020m. The transition between mountain and plain environments is such that the young Po crosses a large number of different natural habitats with a wide variety of landscapes, fauna and flora. The vegetation along the

made with long, thin stone slabs with a buttress made of cement work. In the best preserved area the masonry is divided into five parallel bands separated by offsets, and the holes for scaffolding can still be seen.

The road at **Avise** (Pierre Taillée; *map E, B2*) is elevated, cut into the rock and grandly supported above the Dora Baltea. The preserved stretch, about 400m long, reveals remarkable technical skill in supporting and raising the road surface at the same time. Long stretches of the road rest on concrete (stone and lime mortar) walls with buttresses and offsets, supported by blind arches resting directly on the rock. The road proceeded for short, straight segments joined at an obtuse angle: the roadway was 3.5 to 3.7m wide, as can be seen in another section of the road, about 40m long, at **Runaz**, above the SS26.

Between Pré-Saint-Didier and La Thuile

The remains of two Roman bridges can be seen in the stretch of road between Pré-Saint-Didier and La Thuile. The first is located in the hamlet of **La Balme**, below the modern bridge: here, on the left bank of the torrent, is a massive pier made of large blocks of stone laid directly on the bedrock. The second, hardly visible because it is hidden by the modern bridge at **Pont Serrand**, preserves portions of the piers and arch, which is thought to have measured 16.7m across and to have carried a road 4.2m wide.

THE SLOPES OF MONT BLANC

Courmayeur (1228m; *map E, A2*) is a famous ski resort in a deep vale at the southern foot of Mont Blanc. It has a much milder climate than Chamonix, on the other side of the mountain in Savoy. A museum illustrates the history of alpinism in the area. La Palud is the starting point of the cable railway to Chamonix, which crosses over Mont Blanc in c. 1hr 30mins. It runs every hour (weather permitting) and provides a magnificent panorama of the Graian Alps and the south side of the Pennine Alps. It crosses the French frontier at an altitude of 3462m.

Mont Blanc (4807m; *map E, A1*) is the highest mountain in western Europe (the summit is in France). It was first climbed from Chamonix in 1786. The Col de la Seigne (2512m), on the French frontier, is the watershed between the basins of the Po and the Rhône. The Mont Blanc Tunnel, built through the mountains in 1958–65, is 11.6km long. The road descends over 100m from the Italian to the French side

On Italy's highest mountains

The great ones, the giants of Alps, stood about us here and there in a cloudless sky, a burning serenity. Their immobility never seems to me static; it has a vitality that seems to us repose, like that of a humming top at rest on its axis, spinning along its orbit in space.

Freya Stark, *Traveller's Prelude*, 1950

Exploring the Side Valleys

The tributaries of the Dora Baltea rush and tumble through steep, wooded alpine valleys that are every bit as interesting as the main Valle d'Aosta and often more dramatic in their natural beauty. There are four main side valleys: the Val di Gressoney, Valtournenche, Great St Bernard Valley and Val di Cogne, renowned for their immaculate farms, stony little villages and majestic alpine vistas.

VAL DI GRESSONEY

The Val di Gressoney, which leads towards Monte Rosa, is ascended by road from Pont-St-Martin (*map E, D3*). It contains the largest and oldest of the German-speaking colonies formed by settlers who crossed over from Valais in the Middle Ages. The people of this valley, known as the Walsers, are mentioned as early as 1218. They were subjects of the Bishop of Sion and have kept their language and customs even more distinct from their Italian neighbours than have the people of Alagna or Macugnaga. The attractive chalets (*rascards*) in the lower valley, the farmhouses (*stadel*) in the upper valley, and the costume of the women (which is brightly coloured in red and black, with a remarkable headdress adorned with hand-made gold lace) all suggest a northern origin.

Fontainemore, Issime and Gaby

There is a lovely medieval single-arched bridge across the Lys at **Fontainemore** (*map E, D3*) and some fine vernacular architecture, including eleven lovingly restored little chapels in its eleven component hamlets. It is the gateway to the **Riserva Naturale Mont Mars**, a textbook example of a glacial landscape, abounding in heaps of stones (angular detritus deposits of various sizes with associated boulders) and rocky walls, lakes and wetlands. The reserve, at the head of the valley of the Torrente Pacoulla, is known particularly for its ice-carved circular glacial basins, which with time have become lakes and peat bogs. Tall forests prevail at lower altitudes, yielding higher up to verdant meadows in those areas where the ice has not abraded the rock and the slope is not too steep. At **Pra dou Sas** is a little eco-museum with working water-mills and a bakery that makes bread from the flour.

Issime (*map E, D2*) has an interesting German Walser dialect, known as *titsch*,

