

Lake Maggiore

Lombardy · Italy

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



Overview

Lake Maggiore is Italy's second-largest lake, framed by the Alps and lined with palm trees, pastel villas, and grand hotel terraces. Regular passenger ferries link the shore towns and the Borromean Islands, so a car is optional for the classic sights.

Stresa inspired part of Ernest Hemingway's novel A Farewell to Arms, and the lake still draws travelers who want gardens, boat rides, and calm mountain views rather than one big city sight. It suits a relaxed few-night stay, or works well as a stop between Milan and Switzerland.

When to visit

Spring and early summer bring mild days and blooming gardens. July and August are warm and busy with Italian holidaymakers, autumn is quieter with soft light on the water, and winter is cold and grey, with some island attractions closed.

Plan around the Stresa Festival (Settimane Musicali), a classical and chamber music festival held across historic villas and lakeside venues from mid-July into September — the lake's headline annual event.

MONTH	CONDITIONS	DAY °C avg / max	NIGHT °C avg / min	
January	Poor Poor for watersports	7° / 13° Feels like 4°	0° / -6°	Dry air · Calm winds
February	Good Good for cycling	9° / 16° Feels like 6°	1° / -6°	Dry air · Calm winds
March	Good Good for hiking	14° / 20°	5° / -2°	Dry air · Calm winds
April	Good Good for hiking	17° / 24°	9° / 3°	12 rainy days · Dry air · Calm winds
May	Good Good for sightseeing	22° / 27°	13° / 8°	17 rainy days · Dry air · Calm winds
June	Good Good for sightseeing	26° / 31°	18° / 12°	16 rainy days · Humid air · Calm winds
July	Good Good for sightseeing	28° / 32°	19° / 14°	Humid air · Calm winds
August	Fair Fair for watersports	28° / 33°	19° / 14°	16 rainy days · Humid air · Calm winds
September	Great Great for sightseeing	24° / 29°	15° / 9°	Calm winds
October	Great Great for sightseeing	19° / 25°	11° / 5°	12 rainy days · Dry air · Calm winds
November	Good Good for cycling	13° / 19°	6° / -1°	12 rainy days · Dry air · Calm winds
December	Fair Fair for cycling	8° / 13° Feels like 5°	2° / -7°	Dry air · Calm winds

Best months: September, October

Climate data: NASA POWER (MERRA-2) · 1996–2025

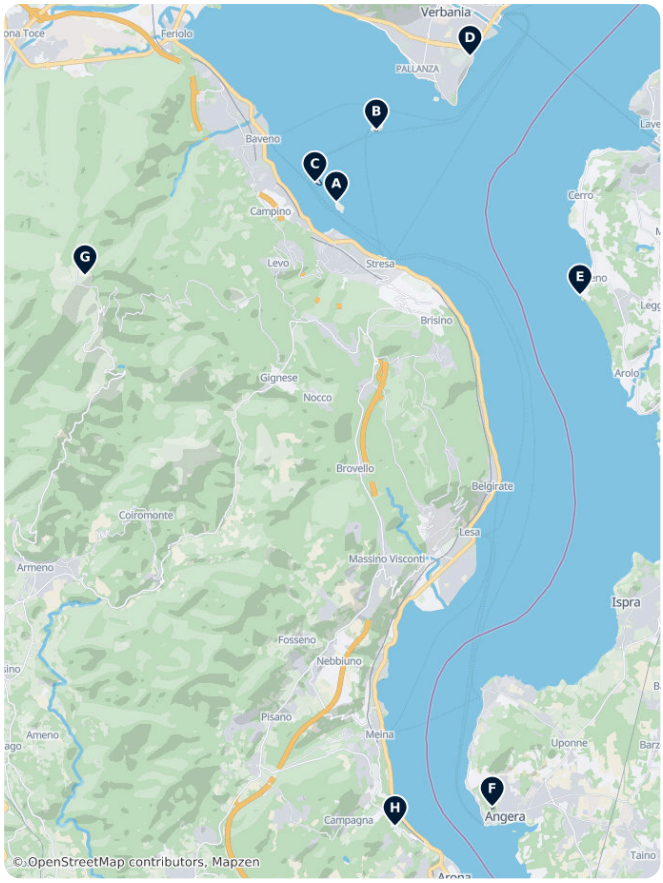
Expect crowded ferries and full hotels in July and August; May, June, and September bring warm days with thinner crowds.

Top sights

The three Borromean Islands are the main sight on Lake Maggiore. A Palazzo Borromeo (Isola Bella) sits inside tiered baroque gardens built by the Borromeo family in the 1600s, with statues, grottoes, and white peacocks roaming the grounds. B Palazzo Borromeo (Isola Madre) is quieter, wrapped in a lush English-style botanical garden. C Isola dei Pescatori is the smallest of the three, a real fishing village with narrow lanes, lakeside trattorias, and no cars.

On the western shore, D Villa Taranto is one of Italy's finest botanical gardens, known for its terraced flowerbeds and spring camellia displays. Perched on a cliff above the eastern shore, E Santa Caterina del Sasso is a centuries-old hermitage reached by a stepped path or a lift cut into the rock. F Rocca di Angera rises on a hilltop over Angera and holds one of the region's best-preserved medieval fresco cycles.

Above Stresa, G Mottarone is a 1,491-metre peak with a panorama stretching from the Alps toward Milan on a clear day; the summit road is the way up, since the cable car has been closed since a 2021 accident. In Arona, the copper H Colossus of San Carlo lets visitors climb inside its hollow body for a lake view through its eyes and ears.



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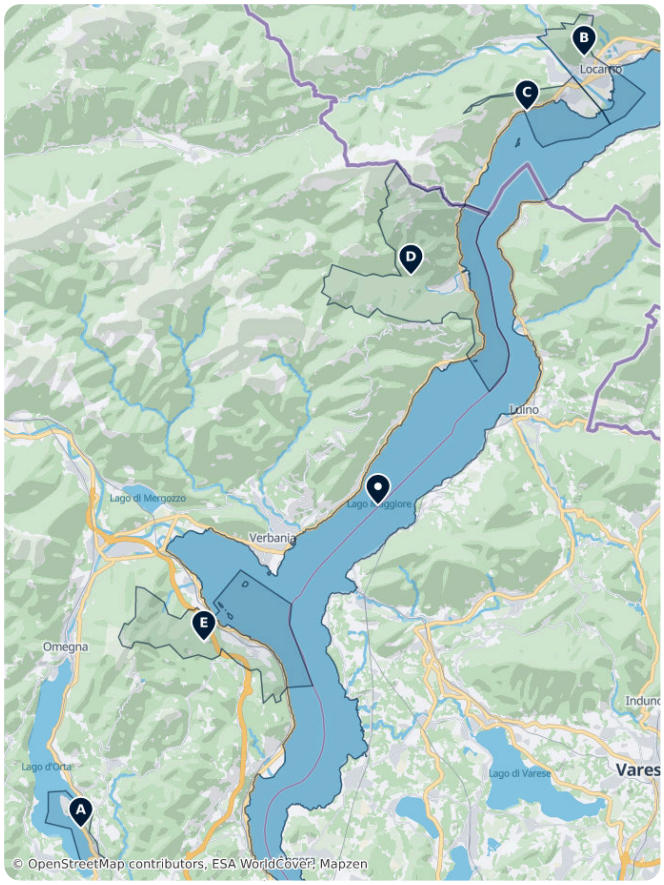
What to experience

- Follow one of the marked trails down from the Mottarone summit through beech woods to Alpino or Gignese — a half-day hike with lake views the whole way.
- Watch the camellias and rhododendrons bloom at Villa Taranto between March and May, when the gardens are at their most colourful.
- Take an evening ferry between the islands and watch the lakefront lights come on from the water.
- Join the lakeside aperitivo hour at sunset along the Stresa or Verbania promenade, a daily ritual rather than a special event.
- Try windsurfing or sailing near Cannobio, where steady afternoon winds draw local sailing schools.

Day trips

The lake makes a good base for exploring the wider Piedmont-Lombardy lake district. These are listed closest first.

- A Orta San Giulio — ≈30 min by car from the western shore. A tiny, car-free lakeside town on the smaller Lake Orta, facing a monastery-topped island in the middle of the water.
- Sacro Monte di Varese — ≈45 min by car from the southern shore. A UNESCO-listed pilgrimage route of chapels climbing a wooded hill above Varese, each frescoed with scenes from the life of the Virgin Mary.
- B Locarno and C Ascona — ≈20 min by car from D Cannobio on the northern shore, closer to an hour from E Stresa or the southern towns. Switzerland's palm-lined lakeside towns, with a lakeside castle and a walkable old town facing each other across a small bay. No passport check applies under the Schengen agreement, but bring ID and Swiss francs.



Getting there

- By air: Milan Malpensa Airport (MXP) is only about 20-25 km from the lake's southern tip, the most convenient gateway. A taxi or transfer takes about 30 minutes to Arona, or 45-50 minutes to Stresa; regional trains connect nearby Gallarate to both towns in under an hour. Milan Linate is about an hour away by car, and Bergamo Orio al Serio roughly 1.5 hours.
- By train: Regional and InterCity trains on the Milan–Domodossola line stop at Arona, Stresa, Baveno, and Verbania on the western shore; some continue over the Alps into Switzerland via the Simplon tunnel. On the eastern shore, Laveno is reached from Milan via Gallarate; Angera has no station and is reached by ferry from Arona or by bus.
- By bus: Regional coaches run from Novara and Milan, but the train is faster and more reliable for most routes.

Getting around

- Ferries: Navigazione Laghi runs scheduled boats and hydrofoils linking every lakeside town and the Borromean Islands — the easiest way to island-hop without a car. Buy tickets at the dock or online; a one- or two-day pass pays off if visiting more than one island. Navigazione Laghi timetables
- Train: Regional trains along both shores connect the main towns quickly and cheaply; buy tickets from station machines or the Trenitalia app before boarding.
- Car: Useful for reaching hillside sights away from the water, but summer weekend traffic and scarce parking make the shore road slow in July and August.
- On foot / cycling: Each town centre is walkable in under 20 minutes. Cycling paths run along parts of the western shore, including a car-free stretch near Verbania.

Getting around on foot & by bike

WALKABILITY

Moderate

Each lakeside town centre is compact and walkable, but reaching other towns and the islands means using the ferry, train, or a car.

CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Moderate

Some flat, car-free cycling paths run along the western shore near Verbania, but other stretches share narrow roads with traffic.

Driving

- Is a car worth it?: Not for the classic sights — ferries and trains cover the main towns and islands well. A car helps for hillside spots like Mottarone or Santa Caterina del Sasso, and for day trips into Switzerland or the hills.
- Parking: Paid blue-zone parking is available in Stresa, Verbania, and Arona centres; pay by app or ticket machine. Arrive early on summer weekends, when spaces fill up fast.
- Restrictions: The shore road narrows through several town centres and gets congested in July and August; no major low-emission or pedestrian-only zones apply outside the historic cores.

Food & drink

Lake fish defines the table here: look for persico (perch), often fried or served in butter and sage, and coregone (whitefish), usually grilled or smoked. Risotto appears everywhere, reflecting the lake's position between Piedmont and Lombardy, alongside classic dishes from both regions.

For something sweet, seek out the margherita di Stresa, a thin butter biscuit invented in Stresa in 1857. For dinner, the lakefront promenade in Stresa and the old town of Pallanza in Verbania are where the best restaurants cluster.

What to eat & drink

LUNCH

Pizza Margherita
Thin-crust pizza topped with tomato, mozzarella, and basil, invented in Naples and still best there.

DINNER

Spaghetti alla Carbonara
Pasta with egg, cured pork cheek (guanciale), pecorino cheese, and black pepper, a Roman classic.

Risotto alla Milanese
Creamy saffron-infused rice dish from Milan, often served alongside braised veal shank.

Lasagna · Lasagne al Forno
Layered baked pasta with ragu, bechamel, and cheese, a staple of Emilia-Romagna cooking.

SNACKS & STREET FOOD

Prosciutto and Cheese · Prosciutto e Formaggio
Cured ham paired with regional cheeses, a common antipasto plate found nationwide.

SWEETS & DESSERTS

Gelato
Dense, slow-churned Italian ice cream, traditionally lower in fat and air than American-style ice cream.

Tiramisu · Tiramisù
Layered dessert of coffee-soaked ladyfingers and mascarpone cream, dusted with cocoa.

DRINKS

Espresso · Caffè
A short, strong shot of coffee drunk quickly, usually standing at a bar counter.

Wine · Vino
Italy is one of the world's largest wine producers, with regional styles from Piedmont's Barolo to Tuscany's Chianti.

Aperol Spritz
A bittersweet orange aperitif mixed with prosecco and soda water, a staple of the early-evening aperitivo.

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Safety & health

Lake Maggiore is calm and low-crime; the main risk is pickpockets on crowded summer ferries and around the busiest docks, so keep bags zipped and close. Swim only from marked beaches or lidos — the lake stays cold even in summer, and boat traffic is heavy near ferry routes. Book Borromean Island tickets online in July and August to skip the longest queues.

History

The Borromeo family has shaped the lake's Italian shore since the 1600s, when it turned the bare rock of Palazzo Borromeo (Isola Bella) into tiered baroque gardens and transformed the older orchards of Palazzo Borromeo (Isola Madre) into a botanical retreat. Their hilltop stronghold, Rocca di Angera, is far older, built to guard the lake's medieval trade routes.

By the 1800s, the lake was a fixture of the Grand Tour. Writers and aristocrats including Stendhal and Lord Byron passed through, drawn by the mild climate and the gardens. That romantic reputation is why grand hotels still line the waterfront in Stresa and Verbania today.

Country facts

Here are the essentials for traveling in Italy:

CURRENCY
EUR €

EMERGENCY
112

ELECTRICITY

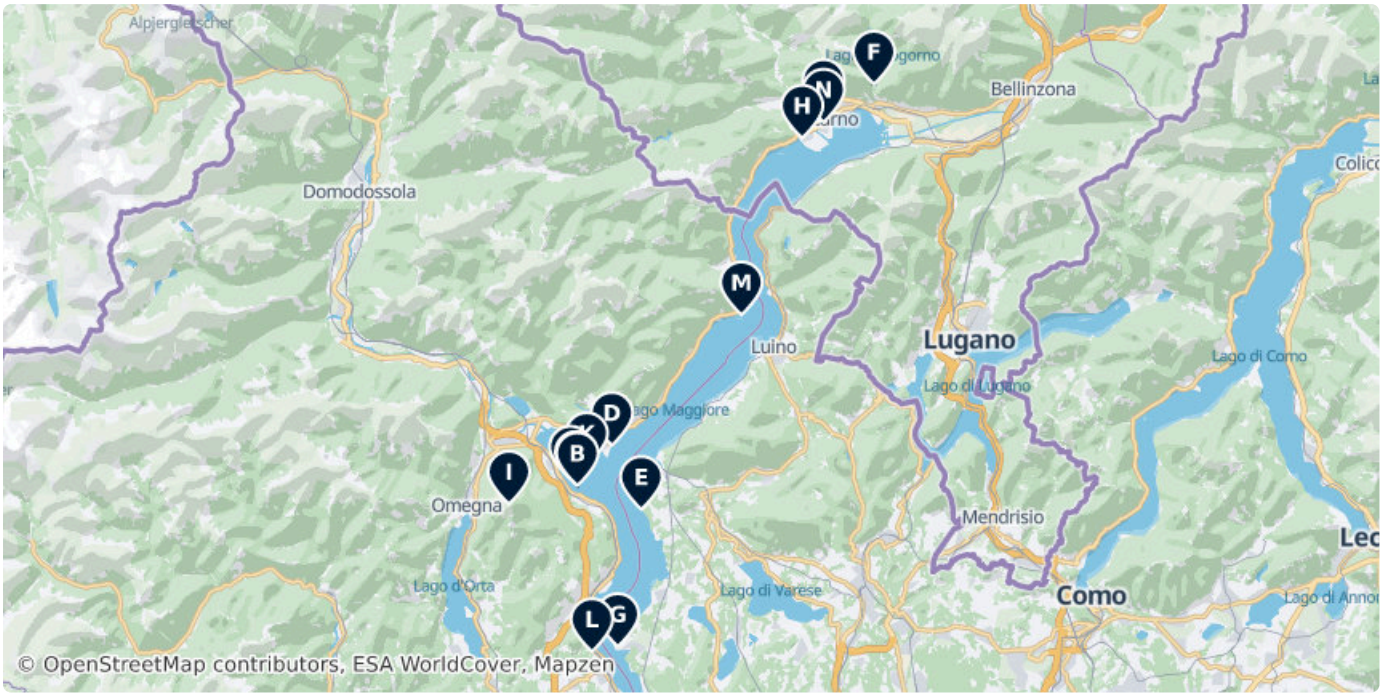
Type C / Type F / Type L
230 V · 50 Hz

LANGUAGES
Italian

TAP WATER
Safe to drink

Lake Maggiore Essentials

Lake Maggiore spans the border of Italy and Switzerland, characterized by the Borromean Islands' Baroque architecture and elaborate terraced gardens. Significant landmarks include the 12th-century Santa Caterina del Sasso monastery built into a rock face, the 35-meter Sancarlone statue, and the medieval Rocca di Angera. The Swiss northern shore features the 220-meter Verzasca Dam and the pilgrimage site of Madonna del Sasso overlooking Locarno.





A Palazzo Borromeo

17th-century Baroque palace featuring ornate shell-covered grottoes, a gallery of Flemish tapestries, and historical rooms that once hosted Napoleon Bonaparte.

Via Lungo Lago Vittorio Emanuele, Isola Bella 28838, Italy (45.89622, 8.52630)

booking.isoleborromee.it/it/product/7/detail



B Isola Bella Gardens

Ten-tiered Italianate gardens featuring a stone amphitheater, statues of mythological figures, and roaming white peacocks set against a backdrop of the Alps.

Carciano, 28049 Stresa VB, Italy (45.89519, 8.52766)

Mar 12-Oct 24 Mo–Su	10:00–18:00
Oct 25-Nov 08 Mo–Su	10:00–17:00

terreborromeo.it/isola-bella, +390323933478



C Sanctuary of the Madonna of the Rock

The Madonna del Sasso is a Marian Pontifical shrine in Orselina, above the city of Locarno in Switzerland.

Via Santuario 2, 6644 Orselina, Switzerland
(46.17516, 8.79380)

+41 91 7436265



D Giardini Botanici Villa Taranto

The Giardini Botanici Villa Taranto are botanical gardens located on the western shore of Lake Maggiore in Pallanza, Province of Verbano...

Via Vittorio Veneto, 111, 28922 Verbania, Italy
(45.92562, 8.56498)

Mar 01-Mar 31 Mo–Su	08:30–17:30
Apr 01-Sep 30 Mo–Su	08:30–18:30
Oct 01-Oct 15 Mo–Su	09:00–16:30
Oct 16-Nov 01 Mo–Su	09:00–16:00
Nov 02-Feb 28 Mo–Su	Closed

villataranto.it/it/, +39 0323 556667



E Santa Caterina del Sasso

Hermitage of Santa Caterina del Sasso is a Roman Catholic monastery located in the municipality of Leggiuno, in the Province of Varese and...

Via Santa Caterina, 21038 Reno VA, Italy
(45.87744, 8.59678)

Mo–Su	09:30–19:30

santacaterinadelsasso.com, +39 0332 647172



F Contra Dam

The Contra Dam, commonly known as the Verzasca Dam and the Locarno Dam, is an arch dam on the Verzasca River in the Val Verzasca of Ticino,...

Via Valle Verzasca 59, 6596 Gordola, Switzerland
(46.19637, 8.84841)



G Rocca Borromeo di Angera

The Rocca Borromeo di Angera, or Rocca d'Angera, also called Borromeo Castle, is a rocca on a hilltop above the town of Angera in the...

Via Rocca Castello, 21021, Italy (45.77417, 8.57139)



H Ascona

Swiss lakeside town featuring a Mediterranean-style promenade and the historic Monte Verità hilltop, known for its early 20th-century artistic and philosophical colony.

10 Viale Bartolomeo Papio, Ascona 6612, Switzerland (46.15595, 8.77072)



I Mottarone

Mottarone is a mountain in the Western Alps of Piedmont, north-western Italy, with an elevation of 1,492 metres.

Regione Mottarone, 28838, Italy (45.88140, 8.45364)



J Isola dei Pescatori

Also known as Isola dei Pescatori, this is the only Borromean island with a permanent population. It is characterized by narrow medieval streets and traditional fishing heritage.

Baveno - Stresa, Italy (45.90019, 8.52012)

navigazionelaghi.it

K Isola Madre Ferry Terminal

Site of an extensive English-style botanical garden and a 16th-century palace. The grounds are known for exotic birds and rare plant species, including a massive Kashmir cypress.

(Unnamed Road), 28838, Italy (45.91033, 8.53783)

navigazionelaghi.it



L Colossus of San Carlo

The San Carlone or Sancarlone or the Colossus of San Carlo Borromeo is a massive copper statue by Giovanni Battista Crespi, erected...

6 Via Verbano, San Carlo 28041, Italy (45.77026, 8.54331)

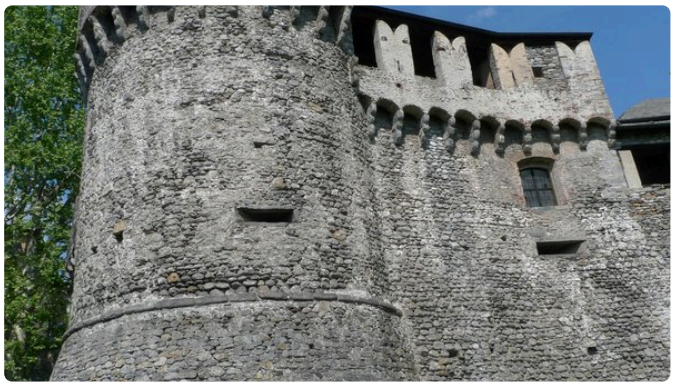
Mo–Su Open 24/7

statuasancarlo.it, +39 0322 249669

M Rocca Vitaliana

16th-century fortification ruins located on small rocky islets. Built by the Borromeo family to replace an earlier castle used by the outlawed Mazzarditi brothers.

(46.02353, 8.70498)



N Visconteo Castle

Visconti Castle Italian: Castello Visconteo is a castle in Locarno, Switzerland.

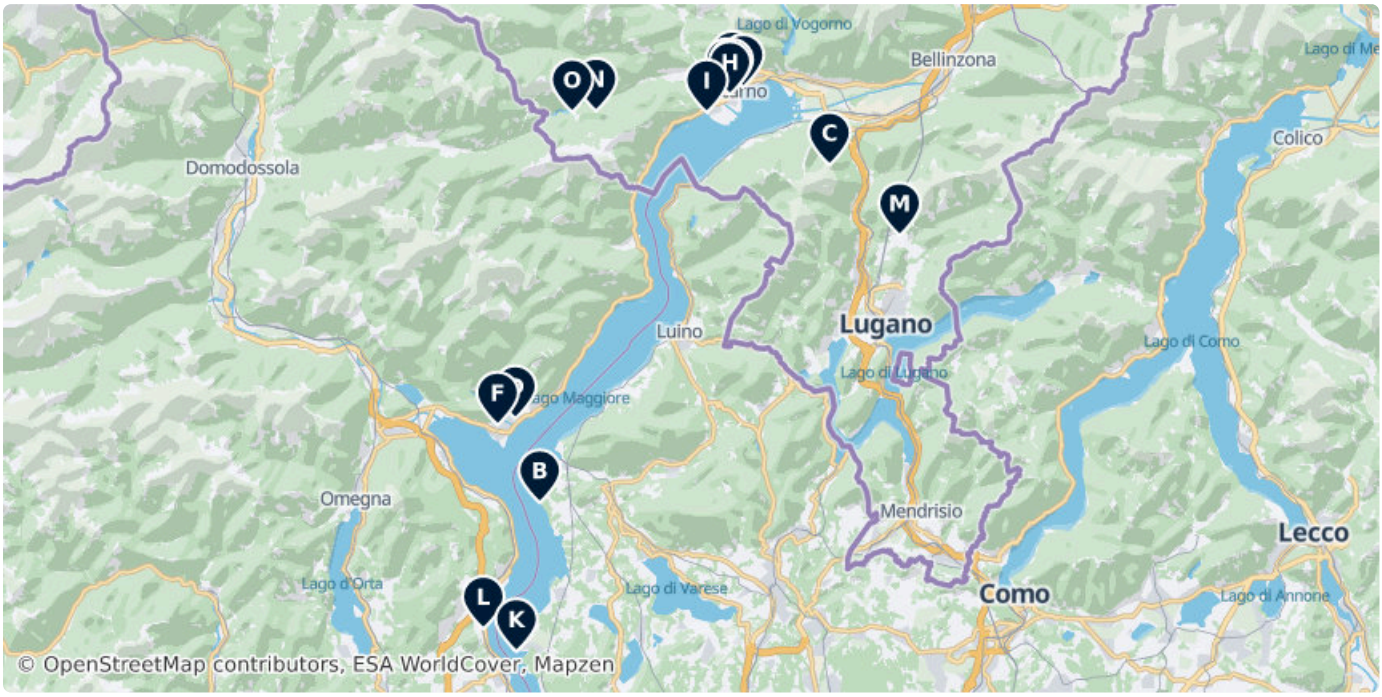
1 Via al Castello, Locarno 6600, Switzerland (46.16789, 8.79375)

Tu–Su 10:00–18:30

castellolocarno.ch/en/

Historic Churches and Shrines

Lake Maggiore's shores and surrounding mountains host a diverse array of sacred architecture. This selection includes the cliff-clinging Hermitage of Santa Caterina del Sasso and the prominent Madonna del Sasso pilgrimage site. The list highlights Romanesque structures like the Collegiate of San Vittore in Muralto, the Renaissance frescoes of Santa Maria in Selva, and Mario Botta's modern Oratorio di Santa Maria degli Angeli. These sites represent centuries of artistic evolution, from medieval stone carvings to contemporary geometric design.





A Sanctuary of the Madonna of the Rock

The Madonna del Sasso is a Marian Pontifical shrine in Orselina, above the city of Locarno in Switzerland.

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Via Santa Caterina, 21038 Reno VA, Italy
(45.87744, 8.59678)

Mo–Su 09:30–19:30

santacaterinadelsasso.com, +39 0332 647172



C Oratorio di Santa Maria degli Angeli

A contemporary chapel designed by architect Mario Botta between 1990 and 1992.
Located on Monte Tamaro, it features a distinctive stone walkway and geometric design with frescoes by artist Enzo Cucchi.

(Unnamed Road), 6802, Switzerland (46.11771, 8.89382)



D Basilica di San Vittore

The principal church of Intra, featuring a prominent 19th-century neoclassical façade and a large dome. The interior houses significant religious artworks and a historic organ.

7 Piazza San Vittore, Intra 28921, Italy (45.93743, 8.57171)



E Chiesa di Santa Maria in Selva

Located in Locarno's cemetery, this church is known for its well-preserved 15th-century frescoes depicting the life of Mary and the Passion of Christ, executed in the late Gothic style.

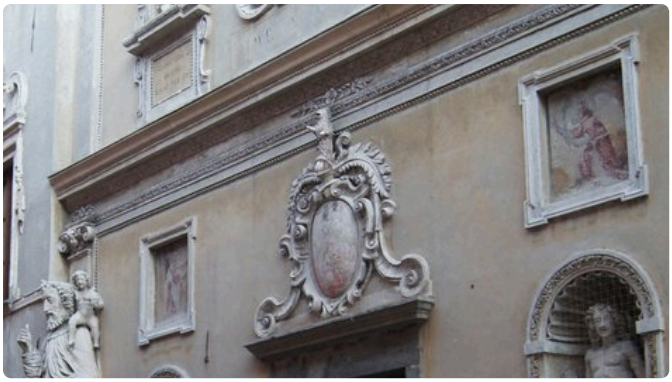
16f Via Vallemaggia, Locarno 6600, Switzerland (46.16989, 8.78815)



F Chiesa di Madonna di Campagna

A 16th-century Renaissance church built on the site of an earlier Romanesque building. It features a distinctive octagonal lantern and an interior decorated with frescoes by Bernardino Lanino.

114 Viale Giuseppe Azari, Verbania 28922, Italy (45.93281, 8.55348)



G Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta

A Baroque church in Locarno's old town, notable for its ornate stucco work, gilded altars, and a 17th-century facade.

20 Via Cittadella, Locarno 6600, Switzerland
(46.16951, 8.79362)



H Chiesa di San Francesco d'Assisi

Originally part of a Franciscan monastery, this church features a Renaissance interior with three naves supported by granite columns and several significant 18th-century paintings.

19 Piazza San Francesco, Locarno 6600, Switzerland
(46.16785, 8.79173)



I Chiesa dei Santi Pietro e Paolo

A 16th-century parish church in Ascona, identified by its tall bell tower. It contains a high altar painting by Giovanni Serodine depicting the coronation of the Virgin.

(46.15497, 8.76779)



J Collegiata di San Vittore

One of the most significant Romanesque buildings in Canton Ticino. Dating to the 11th and 12th centuries, it features a medieval crypt, historic frescoes, and intricate stone carvings.

5 Via San Vittore, Muralto 6600, Switzerland
(46.17281, 8.80514)



K Madonna della Riva

A lakeside sanctuary in Angera built to commemorate a 17th-century miracle. The church features a Baroque interior and occupies a scenic position overlooking the harbor.

(45.77125, 8.57285)



L Chiesa parrocchiale di Santa Margherita

The parish church of Meina, located in its historic center. The building features traditional ecclesiastical architecture typical of the Novara diocese.

58 Via Mazzini, Meina 28046, Italy (45.78731, 8.53902)



M Chiesa di Santo Stefano

A historic place of worship featuring a Romanesque bell tower. The site has undergone various architectural renovations over the centuries, reflecting local spiritual traditions.

1 Via alla Chiesa, Capriasca 6950, Switzerland (46.06759, 8.96554)



N Chiesa di Sant'Anna

A 17th-century church located in the mountain village of Rasa, accessible only by cable car or foot, representing traditional alpine religious architecture.

7 Nucleo di Rasa, Rasa 6655, Switzerland (46.15603, 8.65452)



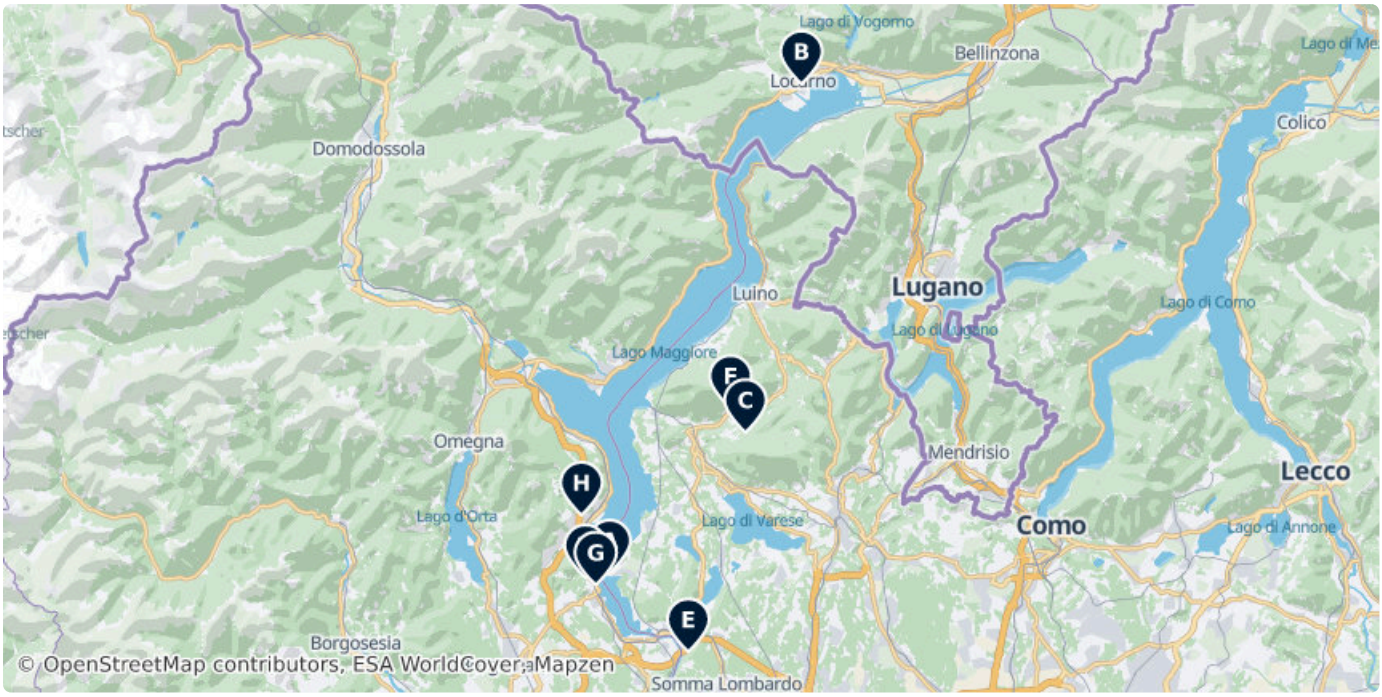
Chiesa di San Michele

Located in Palagnedra, this church is famous for its exceptional 15th-century fresco cycle by Antonio da Tradate, which depicts the months of the year and religious scenes.

2 Piazza Chiesa, 6657, Switzerland (46.15528, 8.63004)

Historic Sites & Castles

Explore the historical evolution of Lake Maggiore through its defensive architecture and archaeological heritage. This collection spans from the Iron Age necropolis of the Golasecca culture to the medieval fortresses of the Visconti and Borromeo families, such as the well-preserved Rocca di Angera and the ruins of Rocca di Arona. Highlights include the 17th-century Colossus of San Carlo Borromeo, one of the world's tallest statues, and the ornate Baroque gardens of Villa Della Porta Bozzolo.

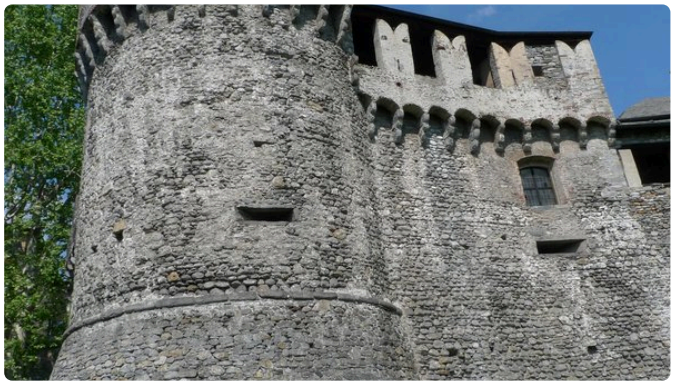




A Rocca Borromeo di Angera

The Rocca Borromeo di Angera, or Rocca d'Angera, also called Borromeo Castle, is a rocca on a hilltop above the town of Angera in the...

Via Rocca Castello, 21021, Italy (45.77417, 8.57139)



B Visconteo Castle

Visconti Castle Italian: Castello Visconteo is a castle in Locarno, Switzerland.

1 Via al Castello, Locarno 6600, Switzerland (46.16789, 8.79375)

Tu–Su 10:00–18:30

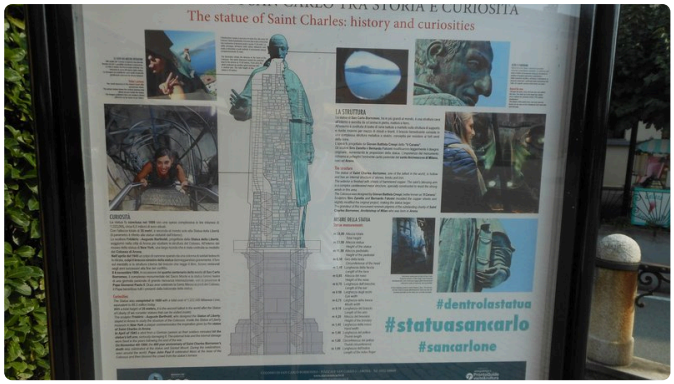
castellolocarno.ch/en/



C Rocca di Orino

An ancient fortress situated at 540 meters altitude. The site features perimeter walls and a square tower, offering a strategic vantage point over the Valcuvia.

21030, Italy (45.88754, 8.72882)



D Sancarlone

The San Carlone or Sancarlone or the Colossus of San Carlo Borromeo is a massive copper statue, erected between 1614 and 1698, near Arona,...

(45.77027, 8.54332)

statuasancarlo.it



E Golasecca culture

The Golasecca culture was a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age culture in northern Italy, whose type-site was excavated at Golasecca in the...

21010, Italy (45.71045, 8.66257)

Mo–Su	Open 24/7



F Villa Della Porta Bozzolo

Villa Della Porta Bozzolo is a villa located at Casalzuigno in the province of Varese, northern Italy.

(45.90701, 8.71158)

Feb 25-Sep 30 We–Su	10:00–18:00
Oct 01-Dec 11 We–Fr	10:00–17:00
Oct 01-Dec 11 Sa–Su	10:00–18:00

fondoambiente.it/luoghi/villa-della-por... , +39 0332 624136



G Rocca Borromea di Arona

Once a primary defensive fortress for the Borromeo family, these ruins overlook the southern end of Lake Maggiore. Historically significant as the birthplace of San Carlo Borromeo, the site was largely dismantled in 1800 following the Napoleonic wars.

Via alla Rocca, 28041 Arona NO, Italy (45.76445, 8.55527)

H Visconti Castle

The Visconti Castle of Massino is a medieval castle located on the Vergante hills in the municipality of Massino Visconti, Province of...

1 Via Vigneto, Massino Visconti 28040, Italy (45.82082, 8.53882)

DATA SOURCES

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