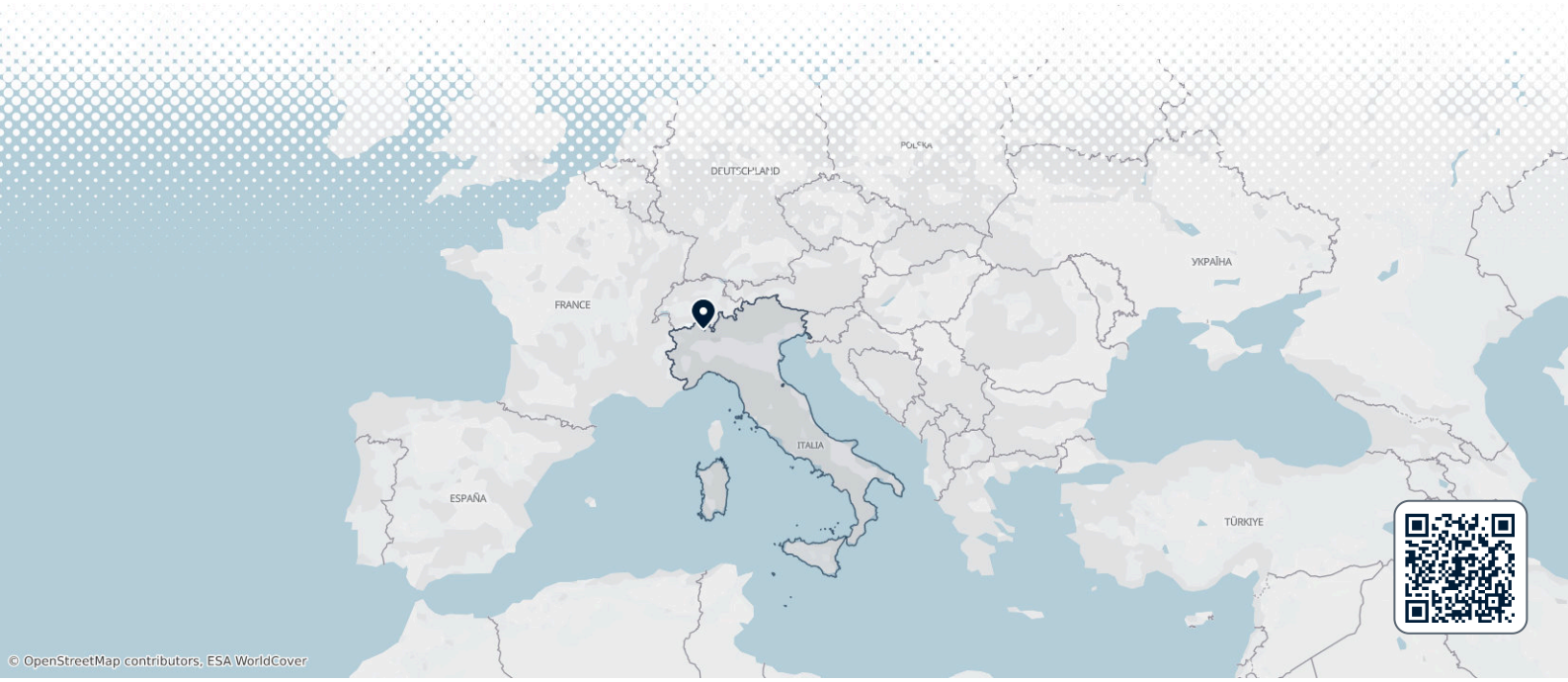


Stresa

Piedmont · Italy

TRAVEL GUIDE

Tripomatic



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Overview

Stresa is a small resort town on the western shore of Lake Maggiore, in Piedmont. Grand hotels from the Belle Époque line its lakefront, and the Alps rise behind it. Most visitors come for the Borromean Islands, which lie just offshore and belong to the town. A short boat ride takes you to baroque palaces, terraced gardens and a fishing village where people still live.

The town itself is quiet and easy to explore on foot. It suits a relaxed stay of two or three nights, with boat trips by day and dinner by the water in the evening. It is also a good base for the rest of the lake and for Lake Orta. *Ernest Hemingway* set part of his novel *A Farewell to Arms* here, and the philosopher *Antonio Rosmini* spent his last years in Stresa.

When to visit

Spring and early autumn are the best times to visit. The island gardens are at their best from April to June, when the azaleas and camellias flower. Summer is warm and humid, with afternoon thunderstorms, and the islands are busy. In winter many hotels and all the Borromean palaces close, and boats run less often.

The Stresa Festival is the main annual event. It brings classical and jazz concerts to Stresa and the lake from mid-July to early September. Book concerts and rooms early if you plan to go.

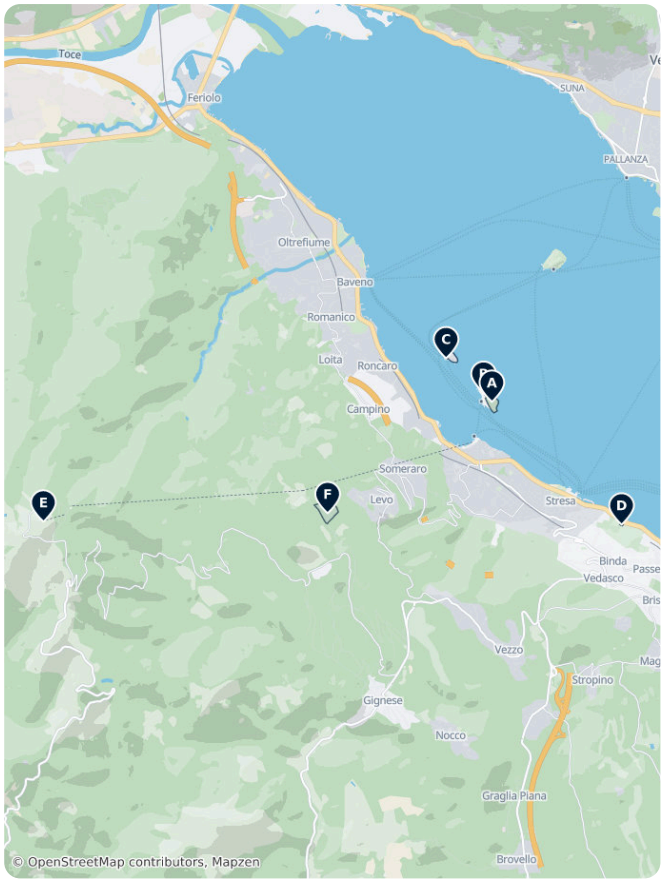
MONTH	CONDITIONS	DAY °C avg / max	NIGHT °C avg / min	
January	Poor Poor for sightseeing	7° / 12° Feels like 4°	0° / -6°	Dry air · Calm winds
February	Fair Fair for hiking	9° / 16° Feels like 6°	1° / -6°	Dry air · Calm winds
March	Good Good for hiking	14° / 20°	5° / -2°	Dry air · Calm winds
April	Good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

Best months: September

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

Top sights

The palaces and gardens of the Borromeo family open from mid-March to early November and are closed in winter.



- A Isola Bella Gardens rise in ten terraces from the lake on Isola Bella. Statues crown the top, and white peacocks walk between the flower beds.
- B Palazzo Borromeo is the baroque summer palace of the Borromeo family on Isola Bella. Visit the state rooms, the tapestry gallery and the cool grottoes at lake level, decorated with pebbles and stones.
- C Isola dei Pescatori is the only one of the islands where people live all year. Its narrow lanes, tall houses and lakeside restaurants make it a pleasant stop between the palaces.
- Isola Madre, the largest island, is farther out. Its botanical garden is full of rare trees and flowering shrubs, and the palace holds a collection of puppet theatres.
- D Villa Pallavicino is a 19th-century villa in a large park on the edge of town. Families come for the animals, the old trees and the views over the lake.
- E Mottarone rises to 1,491 m between Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta. On a clear day you see several lakes and the Monte Rosa massif. The cable car from Stresa has been **closed since a fatal accident in 2021**, so you reach the top by road.
- F Giardino botanico Alpinia is a small garden of mountain plants at Alpino, about 800 m above the lake. Its terrace looks straight down on the islands.

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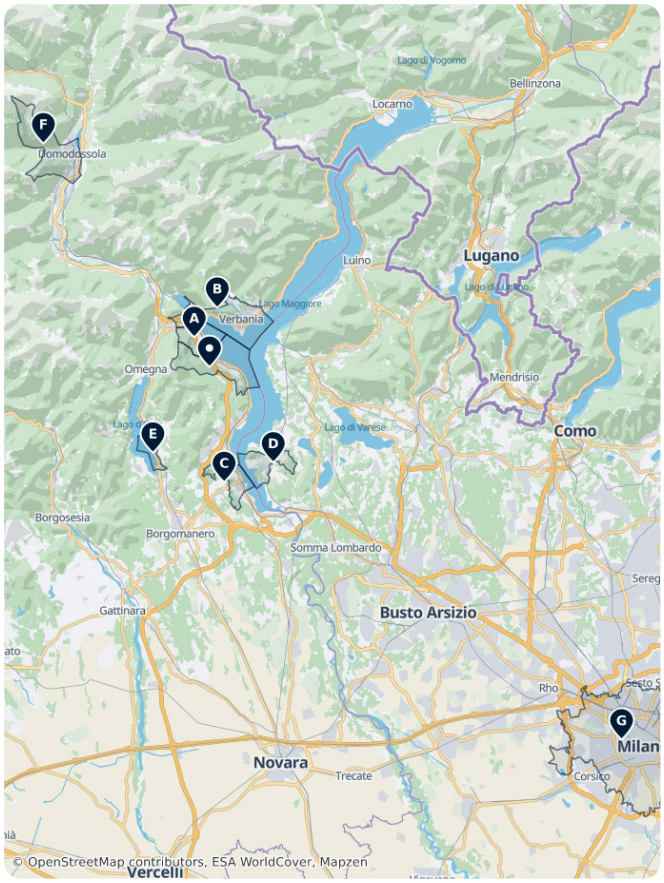
What to experience

A stay in Stresa is mostly about the lake. These are the moments visitors remember.

- Spend a day island-hopping on the public ferry, getting off at each island in turn.
- Walk the lakefront promenade at dusk, when the islands and the far shore catch the last light.
- Attend a Stresa Festival concert on a summer evening.
- Swim in the lake from the Lido di Stresa beach on a hot day.
- In season, ride the Lake Maggiore Express: a boat to Locarno, the Centovalli railway to Domodossola and a train back, all in one day.
- Hike the trails on the slopes of Mottarone, through beech woods with views over the lakes.

Day trips

Ferries and the railway make it easy to see more of the lake without a car. Here are the best trips, closest first.



- A Baveno: 10 minutes by car or bus, or a short ferry ride. A smaller resort with an old parish church, an octagonal baptistery and a long lakeside promenade.
- B Verbania: about 35 minutes by ferry to the Pallanza pier. The gardens of Villa Taranto are the main reason to go, from spring to autumn.
- Santa Caterina del Sasso: a hermitage built into a cliff on the Lombard shore. In season, boats from Stresa stop right below it.
- C Arona: about 25 minutes by car, or a short train ride. A lively lake town with a giant copper statue of Saint Charles Borromeo above it. A short ferry crosses to D Angera, whose castle looks back across the water.
- E Orta San Giulio: about 35 minutes by car. A small village on Lake Orta with an island monastery and a Sacro Monte chapel trail, part of a UNESCO World Heritage site.
- F Domodossola: about 30 to 40 minutes by train. From here the narrow-gauge Vigezzina-Centovalli railway crosses the mountains to Locarno in Switzerland.
- G Milan: about 1 hour by train. Italy's fashion and business capital, with the cathedral and Leonardo's Last Supper.

Where to explore

Lake Maggiore has its own guide, covering the whole lake and all its shores.

Along the Piedmont shore, Baveno is the next town north and Verbania lies across the bay. Cannobio sits near the Swiss border. To the south are Arona and, on the Lombard shore, Angera. Inland, Orta San Giulio stands on the smaller Lake Orta, and Domodossola is the gateway to the Ossola valleys. Turin, the capital of Piedmont, is about two hours away by car.

Getting there

- **By air**: Milan Malpensa is the nearest airport, about 45 minutes away by car. There is no direct train; most travellers use a private transfer, a shuttle bus or a train with one change. Milan Linate and Bergamo airports are farther away.
- **By train**: Stresa station is on the Milan–Domodossola line, a 10-minute walk from the lakefront. EuroCity trains from Milano Centrale in Milan take about 1 hour and continue to Switzerland. Slower regional trains run from Milan as well. The line often has weekend engineering works, so check before you travel. Trenitalia
- **By car**: The A26 motorway runs through the hills above the western shore. Leave at the Carpugnino exit for Stresa. The drive from central Milan takes about 1 hour 10 minutes.
- **By boat**: Ferries link Stresa with the other lake towns, including Arona, Verbania and Locarno in summer.

Getting around

- **On foot**: The centre is small and mostly flat. A lakefront promenade runs through town, and the station is a short walk uphill.
- **Public ferries**: Boats to the islands leave from the pier in Piazza Marconi. Isola Bella is about 5 minutes away and Isola dei Pescatori about 10. Buy tickets at the ticket office on the pier or online, or tap a contactless card on board. In winter, boats run less often and do not stop at Isola Madre. Navigazione Laghi
- **Private boats**: Local boat companies on the lakefront run frequent island hops and private taxi boats. Agree the price and the return time before you leave.
- **To Mottarone**: With the cable car closed, the summit is reached by road. The road climbs from Stresa through Gignese and Alpino, and the last section, the Strada Borromea, is a private toll road.
- **Cycling**: The lakeside road is busy and the hills are steep. Cycling suits fit riders or e-bikes, not getting around town.

Getting around on foot & by bike

WALKABILITY

High

The centre and lakefront promenade are compact and mostly flat; the station is a short walk uphill.

CYCLING INFRASTRUCTURE

Low

The lakeside road is narrow and busy and the hills behind town are steep; cycling suits fit riders or e-bikes.

Driving

- **Is a car worth it?**: Not for the town and the islands, which you reach on foot and by boat. A car helps for Mottarone, Lake Orta and the hill villages.
- **Parking**: Street parking near the lake is paid (blue lines). Car parks near the ferry pier fill up early in summer, so arrive early or stay at a hotel with parking.
- **Roads**: The lakeside road is narrow and slow in summer. Expect queues in the towns on weekends.

Food & drink

Lake fish is the local speciality. Look for perch fillets fried in butter and sage, often served with risotto. Lavarello (whitefish) and salt-cured lake fish also appear on menus. Margheritine di Stresa are small, crumbly butter biscuits, created in the 19th century for Margherita of Savoy. Bakeries in town still sell them.

For a meal with a view, take the boat to Isola dei Pescatori, where restaurants line the water. In town, the pedestrian lanes and squares behind the lakefront are full of trattorias and cafés. The last public boat back leaves early in the evening, so check it before dinner on the islands.

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

Stresa is a very safe town. Petty crime is rare, but keep an eye on your bag on crowded boats and piers in summer. Some private boat sellers on the lakefront push hard for business, so compare prices before you choose one.

Tap water is safe to drink. Lake water stays cool in early summer, and boats pass close to the shore, so swim only in marked areas. On Mottarone the weather changes fast; bring a jacket even on warm days.

History

For centuries Stresa was a small fishing village. The Borromeo family, powerful lords of the lake, turned the rocky islands offshore into showpieces. In 1632 *Carlo III Borromeo* began a palace on the island now called Isola Bella, named after his wife *Isabella d'Adda*. His sons completed Palazzo Borromeo and its terraced gardens, which took several decades to build. The family still owns the islands today.

Tourism arrived in the 19th century, after Napoleon's Simplon road reached the lake. Grand hotels rose along the shore. Tourism grew again after the Simplon railway tunnel opened in 1906 and linked Stresa directly with Switzerland and Paris. In April 1935 the leaders of Italy, France and Britain met in the palace on Isola Bella. Their agreement, the Stresa Front, aimed to contain Nazi Germany but did not last.

Country facts

Quick practical facts for Italy at a glance:

CURRENCY
EUR €

EMERGENCY
112

ELECTRICITY

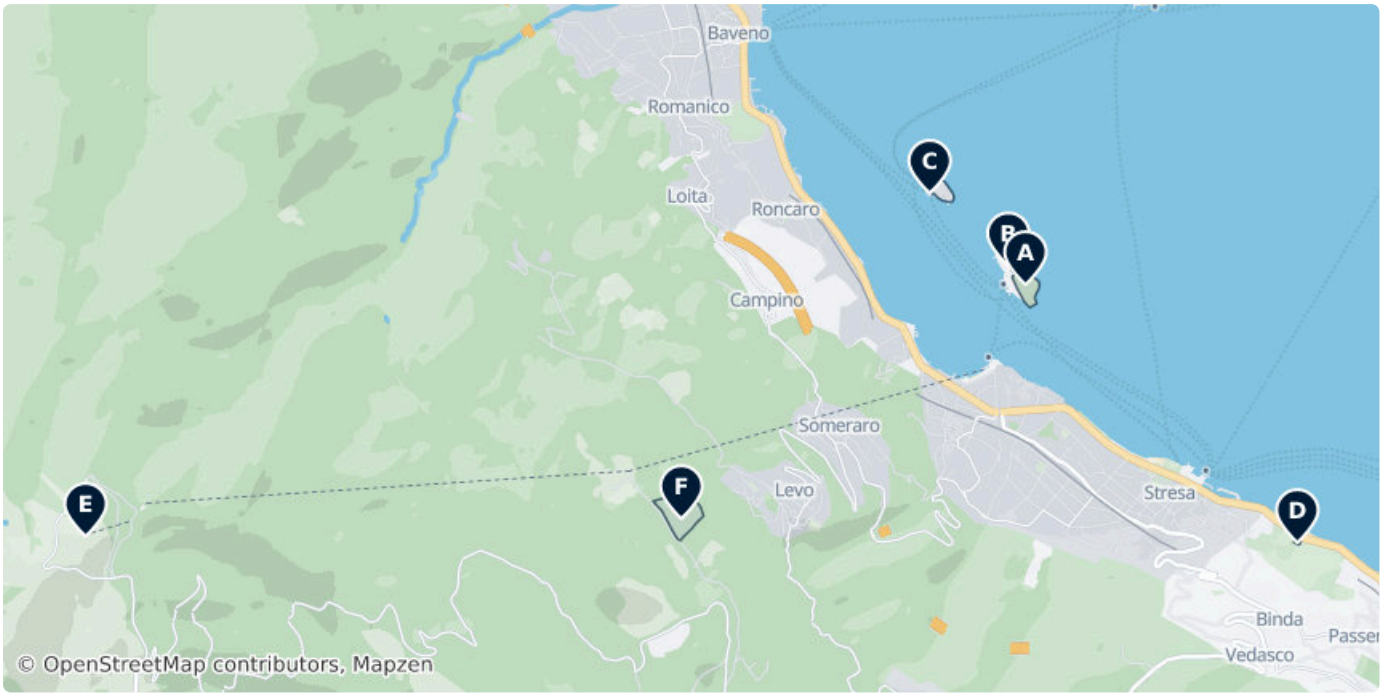
Type C / Type F / Type L
230 V · 50 Hz

LANGUAGES
Italian

TAP WATER
Safe to drink

Stresa Essentials

The Borromean Islands, a lakeside park and the mountain above town: the sights most visitors to Stresa come for.





A Isola Bella Gardens

Ten terraces of baroque garden rise from the lake, topped by statues and roamed by white peacocks.

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



B Palazzo Borromeo

The Borromeo family's 17th-century summer palace on Isola Bella, with state rooms, tapestries and pebble-decorated grottoes at lake level.

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

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



C Isola dei Pescatori

The only Borromean island where people live all year: narrow lanes, tall fishermen's houses and lakeside restaurants.

Baveno - Stresa, Italy (45.90019, 8.52012)

navigazionelaghi.it



D Villa Pallavicino

A 19th-century villa in a large landscape park on the edge of Stresa, with old trees, lake views and animals.

Via Sempione Sud, Stresa 28838, Italy (45.88106, 8.54907)

isoleborromee.it/parco-pallavicino/



E Mottarone

The 1,491 m mountain between Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta, with wide views of the lakes and the Alps. Reached by road; the cable car is closed.

Regione Mottarone, 28838, Italy (45.88140, 8.45364)



F Giardino Botanico Alpinia

A small alpine botanical garden at Alpino, with mountain plants and a terrace looking down on the islands.

(Unnamed Road), 28838, Italy (45.88237, 8.50056)

DATA SOURCES

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