

# Discover Lake Maggiore's little sister

Overlooked Lake Mergozzo was once part of its bigger and more familiar sibling – and the tourist hordes have yet to discover it, says Kiki Deere

Lake Mergozzo in Piedmont is so little known that even Piemontesi would be hard pushed to pinpoint it on a map – let alone Italians from other regions. Measuring only about a mile-and-a-half in length, this deep blue sliver of water was once the westernmost part of Lake Maggiore, Italy's second largest lake.

Then, between five and six centuries ago, flooding of the nearby River Toce created a strip of land. When the water subsided, the land came to divide the two, creating what is today Lake Mergozzo. These days, it is connected to Lake Maggiore by a marshy one-and-three-quarter-mile canal.

Mergozzo, the lake's main town, is a charming little spot, its symbol a centuries-old hollowed-out elm tree that shades the lakefront square. The Chiesa Santa Maria Assunta is one of its main sights, home to the beautiful 18th-century Porticato delle Cappelle, which is adorned with intricate frescoes depicting the Via Crucis.

The town's web of narrow, cobbled alleyways stretches out along a gentle hillside, with rows of quaint stone houses leading to hidden squares and courtyards. Tucked away in one of these courtyards is Al Vecchio Fornaio Pasticcere (0039 0323 80136), a family-run bakery known for its fugascina. This crumbly, buttery biscuit is traditionally enjoyed on St Elizabeth's Day in July, when the community celebrates the patron saint of the Sasso, the village's most ancient quarter. Tradition dictates that townsfolk prepare their fugascina batter at home, taking the trays to be baked at Al Vecchio Fornaio Pasticcere. Pop in to try them; they come in pretty tins that make lovely gifts.

Biscuits aside, the lake has long been a foodie destination. Its shores are home to the two Michelin-star Piccolo Lago (0039 0323 586792; piccolo-lago.it), where chef Marco Sacco has been crafting award-winning dishes for 20 years. Sacco's La Spirale menu showcases the best local ingredients, with produce sourced from nearby farms giving life to dishes that are, in his words, "a culinary expression of what you see around you".

His ramen dish, for example, marries marinated, smoked sheatfish with Japanese noodles, while his ravioli are filled with spit-roasted pigeon from nearby Val d'Ossola. The restaurant's setting is a delight: a glass dining room on stilts, allowing for gorgeous views of Mergozzo and the surrounding mountains.

Mergozzo's natural beauty certainly attracts those in the know, with cycling enthusiasts – road, mountain and gravel bikers – coming to explore



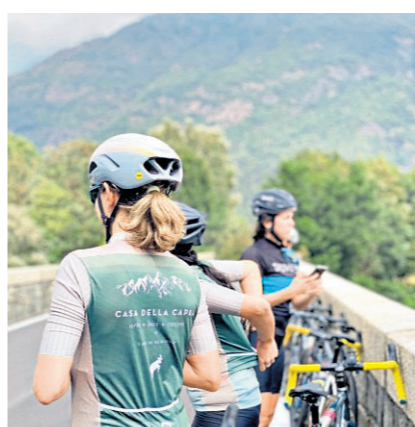
GETTY IMAGES/KATIE MAY



▲ Still waters: pretty, unspoilt Mergozzo  
▶ The area is ideal for cyclists and walkers

The waters here are among the cleanest of Italy's pre-alpine lakes, harbouring numerous fish species and supporting vegetation and fauna that thrive in unpolluted waters, such as the rare orange-spotted emerald dragonfly. Fed by mountain springs and streams, the lake is also perfect for a variety of water sports, including canoeing and fishing. Motorboats are banned, allowing visitors to engage in outdoor pursuits to the soothing sound of nature.

Hikers visiting the area won't be disappointed either. There are several paths and mule tracks that snake their way through the surrounding landscape to settlements such as Montorfano, a delightful hamlet that sits on the eponymous mountain rising from the lake shore. It is home to one of the area's prettiest churches, the Romanesque Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista, flanked by a small cluster of houses.



The mountains around Mergozzo have for centuries been quarried for their granite and marble – you may well have seen Mergozzo marble without even knowing it. Visitors to Milan in neighbouring Lombardy will have marvelled at the city's Gothic cathedral, yet few will know that its marble was

quarried from the mountains that lie northwest of Mergozzo. When Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the first duke of Milan, decided to replace brick with marble for the construction of the cathedral, he authorised the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano, the cathedral building committee, to extract white and pink Candoglia marble from the Ossola Valley.

The marble was transported by boat along the River Toce, which flows just west of Mergozzo, to Lake Maggiore, and from there along the River Ticino to reach Milan's navigli (canals). To this day, the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano extracts marble to conserve and restore parts of the cathedral. You can visit the quarries and the restoration workshop by prior appointment (duomomilano.it).

Old habits die hard here, clearly – and Mergozzo is much the better for it, having evaded overtourism and retained an authenticity that will delight even the most seasoned of Italophiles.

## Essentials

### WHERE TO STAY

**Casa della Capra**  
This lovely guesthouse (pictured below), owned by an Italian-Brazilian couple, seeks to immerse guests in the local culture. Patricia runs art workshops inspired by the natural environment, while her husband Felipe offers bike and food tours along with Italian-Brazilian speciality cooking classes. It has a good restaurant, too. Doubles from £130 (0039 0323 060865; casadellacapra.com).



### Casa Castagna 1620

Set in the heart of Mergozzo on a waterfront square, this restored 17th-century townhouse has five comfortable rooms with original stone walls. At the restaurant, tables line a little veranda offering pretty lake views, and there is a deli at the back selling local products. Doubles from £138 (0039 0323 199 1082; casacastagna1620.com).

### GETTING THERE

Milan Malpensa is the closest airport, lying 39 miles southeast, served by BA (ba.com), easyJet (easyjet.com) and Ryanair (ryanair.com). You will need a car to reach the lake and explore the surrounding area. App-based car rental service Virtuo (govirtuo.com) has vehicles for hire just a five-minute shuttle bus ride from the airport.

*Kiki Deere was a guest of the Distretto Turistico dei Laghi (distrettolaghi.it), Piccolo Lago, Casa della Capra and Virtuo*



SAVE  
**£300**  
per person\*

A HOLIDAY IS SO MUCH MORE WHEN IT'S A TOUR

7 nights from £1,439 **£1,139<sup>pp</sup>**

Why just take a holiday when you can do so much more on a tour? Our 'Little Boats' itinerary offers a new perspective on Spanish Catalonia with included boat rides, canal trips and cruises up the Catalan coast, as well as guided sightseeing in Cadaqués and Besalú. With everything expertly arranged, even transfers to the airport, all you have to do is pack. Escorted Touring by Saga.

**Little Boats of Catalonia**  
Including

- VIP door-to-door transfers
- Travel insurance<sup>§</sup>
- 9 excursions and visits
- 15 meals
- Expert tour manager
- Return flights and transfers



**SAGA**  
Experience is everything

0808 239 0569  
saga.co.uk/touring

## Travel Insurance

No Age Limits

Peace Of Mind For Your Next Holiday

- Experts in cover for medical conditions**  
Had trouble getting travel insurance for your medical conditions? **We can help!**
- 24/7 Medical emergency assistance** - just a phone call away!
- Cover for cruises**

20% OFF\*

BASE PREMIUM

Quote code TEL20



Trustpilot

★★★★★

Excellent



Call us FREE for an instant quote - it's easy!

# 0808 196 2123

Open 7 days a week

## goodtogoinsurance.com

Authorised & Regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority No. 471641. \*Discount applies to base premium only. Discount valid until 31 December 2023.

ABTA ABTA No Y174X Saga is for people over 50. With included VIP door-to-door transfers a driver picks you up from home and drives you to and from your UK departure point. \*Save £300 per person off any 2023 short-haul tour booked by 31 August 2023. This offer is not combinable with any other offers. Valid on new bookings made between 23 Jun-31 Aug 2023 (cannot be retroactively applied) for all departures before 31 Jan 2024. \*Price is per person based on two people sharing on 17 Oct 2023 departure. Other departures available Sep 2023-Oct 2024. Price subject to availability and correct at time of going to print. †Travel insurance underwritten by Astrenska Insurance Limited or a price reduction of £40 if not required. Cover is subject to medical screening. For more information about financial protection and the ATOL Certificate visit www.atol.org.uk/ATOLCertificate 014925