

GETTING AROUND THE LAKES

Lakes Garda, Como and Maggiore are all well served by ferries and hydrofoils, which dock at jetties that are usually conveniently positioned on the main lakeside piazzas: travelling by water makes a lot more sense than struggling through lakeside traffic. All three also have useful **car ferry** routes across the centre of the lakes.

For **timetables and fares** covering all three lakes, check www.navigazioneelaghi.it or consult the posters displayed at every lakeside jetty (and local tourist offices). Prices aren't expensive – the two-hour voyage from Como to Bellagio is €10.40, for example, while it costs €8.60 to take a small car across Lake Garda from Bellagio to Maneggio – and there are good-value day-passes available, with some discounts for children and EU citizens over 65.

Trains serve several points on all the lakes, and **buses** also run regularly up and down the shores. Tourist offices can advise about routes and timings. Public transport between the lakes is not very good and you're probably better off using Milan as a hub rather than fiddling around with lots of local changes.

modest ski resorts in winter (none worth making a special trip for). The nearby city of **Brescia** is a treat as a day-trip, while its neighbour **Bergamo** is a lovely place to stay, with an old walled hilltop quarter that ranks as one of the most alluring in Italy.

Lake Maggiore

For generations of overland travellers, weary of journeying over the Alps, **LAKE MAGGIORE** (Lago Maggiore) has been a first taste of Italy: the sight of limpid blue waters, green hills and exotic vegetation is evidence of arrival in the warm south. With palms and oleanders lining the lakeside promenades and a peaceful, serene air, Maggiore – at 66km, Italy's longest lake – may not be somewhere for thrill-seekers, but it is seductively relaxing.

The majority of tourists head for the western shore, from where the sumptuous gardens and villas of the **Borromean islands** are within easy reach. The area retains much of its charm: the genteel old resort of **Stresa** is still a convenient base, linked by high-speed train to Milan (1hr) and by bus and boat to all points around the lake. Across the bay, pretty **Verbania** is also well connected by train, bus and ferry, while further north, enchanting **Cannobio** – the last stop before Switzerland – is popular with families and a good place from which to explore Maggiore's hilly hinterland. The highlight of Maggiore's eastern shore is **Santa Caterina del Sasso**, a tiny monastery hewn out of the rock face, although there's also good **hiking** into the hills behind the more northern villages. Note that in winter (Nov–Easter) many hotels around the lake close down and attractions may be shut.

Stresa

The Maggiore of the tourist brochures begins at **STRESA**, whose popularity as a resort started in 1906, when the Simplon Tunnel opened, the final link in a chain of railways connecting Lake Geneva to Milan, and thus northern Europe to the Mediterranean. International trains, including the *Orient Express*, were routed through Stresa, which quickly became a holiday retreat for Europe's high society.

Today, Stresa is a bustling little place, but its greatest days have passed. Stroll the floral promenade, take in the lake views – which are worth coming for – head out to the islands, then retire to a waterside bench with an ice cream.

Mottarone

Separating Stresa from Lake Orta (see p.263) is the **Mottarone** mountain (1491m). Its wooded western slopes are a favourite destination for rambles and family outings, while the impressive views from the top stretch to Monte Rosa on the Swiss border. The mountain is accessed by a **cable car** (*funivia*), rising from the Carciano ferry

stop, 750m north of Stresa, though this is currently closed for maintenance: check stresa-mottarone.it for the latest information.

Aquadventure Park

Strada Cavalli 18, Baveno • April, May & Sept Sat & Sun 10am–5pm; June–Aug daily 10am–1pm & 4–8pm • €10.50 pools, other activities extra • [0323 919 799](tel), aquadventurepark.com

Six kilometres north of Stresa, just after Baveno, the **Aquadventure Park** is a combination of adventure park and swimming pools with water slides. It also offers climbing, mountain biking and other sporty options for kids and adults alike. Prices depend on the activities selected.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

STRESA

By train Stresa is an hour from Milano Centrale on the fast trains heading for Switzerland; slower trains also run from Milano Centrale and Milano Porta Garibaldi. Taxis wait outside the station. Alternatively walk right to the crossroads, then left on Via Duchessa di Genova for 200m down to the lakefront.

Destinations Milano Centrale (approx. hourly; 55min).

By bus Buses from Milan Malpensa airport (Terminals 1 and 2) run along the western shore of Lake Maggiore between April and Oct (€12; booking essential 48hr in advance; [0323 552 172](tel), safduemila.com). Buses connect Orta San Giulio to Stresa, dropping passengers off in the square by the *imbarcadero*.

Destinations Malpensa (April–Oct 6 daily; 1hr); Orta San Giulio (mid-June to early Sept 3 daily; 1hr).

By boat Stresa is at the centre of a network of boats serving the Borromean islands as well as ferries heading up and down the lake. Private boat-taxis also leave from Stresa for trips to the islands. The *imbarcadero* is on Piazza Marconi, across the main road from the village centre.

Destinations Arona (approx hourly; 1hr); Intra (every 30min; 55min); Isola Bella (every 30min; 10min); Isola Madre (every 30min; 30min); Pallanza (every 30min; 35min); Santa Caterina (hourly; 15min); Villa Taranto (every 30min; 45min).

Tourist office Piazza Marconi 16, on the lakefront, beside the *imbarcadero* (daily 10am–12.30pm & 3–6.30pm; Nov–Feb closed Sat afternoon & Sun; [0323 31 308](tel), stresaturismo.it or distrettolaghi.it).

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ACCOMMODATION

Grand Hotel de Iles Borromées Corso Umberto I 67 [0323 938 938](tel), borromees.com. Stresa's grandest hotel, a lakeside palace dating from 1863 that has hosted international royalty, celebrities and high society. Hemingway was a regular and the hotel features in *A Farewell to Arms*. Today the traditionally styled luxury continues to address every comfort. **€297**

La Luna nel Porto Corso Italia 60 [0323 934 466](tel), lalunanelporto.it. Ideal for self-caterers, this place features twelve spacious suites measuring between 35 and 70m², each with its own balcony or terrace. The rooms are painted in different colours, and the superior suites with sofa beds can sleep up to four. The suites have their own kitchenettes, which can be used by guests staying for a minimum of five days. **€155**

★ **La Palma** Lungolago Umberto I [0323 32 401](tel), hlpalma.it. The real draw at this welcoming four-star hotel on the lakefront is the rooftop terrace with loungers and an open-air jacuzzi; the glass-fronted gym, sauna and steam room all have wonderful views of the lake islands. The older rooms feature carpets, while the comfortable refurbished rooms have parquet flooring. **€180**

★ **Relais Casali della Cisterna** Strada Statale del Sempione 5, Belgirate [0322 7570](tel), casalidellacisterna.it. Six kilometres south of Stresa, tucked away on the hillside in the small town of Belgirate, this welcoming place has twelve well-appointed rooms named after plants and sailing boats; there's a lovely garden to relax in and a play area for children, as well as bikes for guests' use. **€180**

LAGO MAGGIORE EXPRESS

A highlight of any Lake Maggiore holiday, the **Lago Maggiore Express** (lagomaggioreexpress.com; one day €34, two days €44) combines rail and ferry travel to explore the lake and mountains while dipping into Switzerland too (so, don't forget your passport).

One of the best routes involves heading up to the mountain town of Domodossola by train from Stresa, then catching the spectacular narrow-gauge Vigezzina Cento Valli railway to Locarno in Switzerland. Here you have time to explore and have lunch before boarding the ferry for a relaxed three-hour cruise back to Stresa. The route can be reversed – taking lunch on board the ferry – spread over two days or put together from other points on the lake.

Villa & Palazzo Aminta Via Sempione Nord 123
 ☎ 0323 933 818, 🌐 villa-aminta.it. A luxurious five-star hotel with Venetian-style floors, marble columns and refined French tapestries. There's an excellent basement

spa with a grotto-style interior and state-of-the-art facilities, including a jacuzzi and steam room. All rooms have Acqua di Parma toiletries. **€394**

EATING

Il Clandestino Via Rosmini 5 ☎ 0323 30 399, 🌐 ristoranteilclandestino.com. The emphasis here is on fish – high-quality wild fish mostly from the Mediterranean that is expertly prepared by chef and owner Franco, who creates a new menu every two months or so. The pasta is all handmade, and there are a couple of meat-based dishes, too. **Mon, Wed & Thurs 7–11pm, Fri, Sat & Sun 12.15–2pm & 7–11pm.**

Il Piemontese Via Mazzini 25 ☎ 0323 30 235, 🌐 ristorantepiemontese.com. Specializing in good-quality meat dishes, this restaurant in the heart of the historical centre serves traditional Piemontese meals in a dark-wood dining room, including *vitello tonnato* (cold veal with tuna sauce; €13.50) and gnocchi with cheese and hazelnuts (€12.50). **Tues–Sun 12.30–2.30pm & 7.30–9.30pm.**

Il Vicoletto Vicolo del Poncivo 3 ☎ 0323 932 102, 🌐 ristorantevicoletto.com. This welcoming restaurant serves tasty Italian cuisine in a pleasant setting; the menu, scribbled on a blackboard at the entrance, is very reasonable indeed, with *primi* at €9 and *secondi* at €14. There are a few tables on a small terrace in the summer. **Fri–Wed noon–2pm & 6.30–10pm.**

Osteria degli Amici Via A. Bolongaro 33 ☎ 0323 30 453. This friendly, laidback *osteria* serves Italian and international dishes on an attractive vine-covered terrace. The menu also includes a range of pizzas (€5). *Primi* €8, *secondi* €10. **Daily noon–2.15pm & 6.30–10.30pm.**

★ **Sky Bar** La Palma Hotel, Lungolago Umberto I ☎ 0323 32 401, 🌐 hlapalma.it. On the seventh floor of the *Hotel Palma*, this lounge bar and restaurant serves light lunches including salads, burgers and pasta dishes (€10–12) between 12.30 and 2.30pm, but the terrace really comes alive at sunset for *aperitivo* time; this is the spot to enjoy a cocktail or two while soaking up the exceptional views of the lake islands from the lounge chairs and inviting sofas. **Daily noon–midnight.**

Taverna del Pappagallo Via Principessa Margherita 46 ☎ 0323 30 411, 🌐 tavernapappagallo.com. One of the best spots in town to grab a bubbling pizza (€5.50), straight from the open wood fire; they also serve traditional Piemontese dishes including home-made pastas, risottos and lake fish. **Thurs–Tues noon–2pm & 6.30–10pm.**

The Borromean islands

Lake Maggiore's leading attractions are three lush islands rising from the bay between Stresa and Pallanza. All three are often dubbed the **Borromean islands** (Isole Borromeo), though strictly speaking only two are property of the Borromeo family (originally bankers, raised to nobility in the 1450s and still prominent locally), namely Isola Bella and Isola Madre.

Isola Bella

Mid-March to mid-Oct daily 9am–5.30pm • €12, €3 extra for the galleries; same-day joint ticket with Isola Madre €20.50; audioguide €5; book at least one day in advance for a guided tour of the palace in English (€50) • ☎ 0323 30 556, 🌐 borromeoturismo.it

Romantics – if they can bear the crowds and the sheer hyperbole – will be knocked for six: the short voyage from Stresa to **Isola Bella** is Italian Lakes fantasy brought to life. In 1630, Carlo III Borromeo began a redesign of this modest rock: soil was brought across from the mainland, a villa, fountains and statues were built, white peacocks imported, and terraces of orange and lemon trees, camellias, magnolias, box trees, laurels and cypresses carved out. Carlo's son Vitaliano died in 1690 with most of the work completed. As well as roaming the sumptuous Baroque gardens, complete with obelisks and classical statuary, dip into the island's opulent *palazzo*, which boasts a banqueting hall, ballroom, throne room and a three-storey domed *salone*, as well as mirror- and shell-encrusted grottoes down at water level.

Isola Madre

Mid-March to mid-Oct daily 9am–5.30pm • €12; same-day joint ticket with Isola Bella €20.50 • ☎ 0323 30 556, 🌐 borromeoturismo.it

Larger but less visited than its neighbour, **Isola Madre** has an extensive garden – home to azaleas, rhododendrons, palm and citrus trees, a colony of parrots and Europe's largest Kashmir cypress – alongside a small, tasteful *palazzo* housing a collection of eighteenth-century puppets.

Isola Superiore

Closest to shore, Hemingway's favourite island, **Isola Superiore**, is commonly known as **Isola dei Pescatori**, as it was once populated by fishermen. Despite the trinket shops, the island retains a certain charm which is best enjoyed after the crowds have left in the evening. There are no sights bar a cluster of attractive old houses, but it has some decent restaurants and is a good spot for a picnic.

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE

By ferry Public ferries (www.navigazione.laghi.it) shuttle frequently between the islands (every 30min) linking them to Stresa (€16.90 return; 10min), Carciano, Baveno

THE BORROMEAN ISLANDS

and Pallanza. Private boat-taxis leave more frequently (every 20min), connecting Stresa to the three islands (€15 to each island).

ACCOMMODATION AND EATING

Casabella Via del Marinaio, Isola Superiore 1 ☎ 0323 33 471, www.isola-pescatori.it. Family-run restaurant that comes highly recommended by locals; the Mediterranean cuisine can be enjoyed indoors or on a terrace on the first floor. The restaurant runs a complimentary boat service in the evenings from Stresa, Baveno and Carciano. **Daily noon–2.30pm & 7–10pm.**

Verbano Via Ugo Ara 2 ☎ 0323 30 408, www.hotelverbano.it. To avoid the crowds, book a night at this tranquil little spot dating from 1895. Its rooms feature early twentieth-century wooden furniture, and four of the rooms give onto a large terrace with lovely lake views. The hotel restaurant serves delicious food including a range of lake-fish dishes. There are no televisions, but there is wi-fi. **€185**

Verbania

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Across the bay from Stresa lies **VERBANIA** (a conglomerate town including neighbouring villages Suna, Intra and Pallanza), whose title recalls *Lacus Verbanus*, the Roman name for verbena-fringed Lake Maggiore. Car ferries shuttle between Intra and Laveno on the eastern shore. Pallanza is a relaxed, pretty little corner with a ferry jetty and views across to the Borromean islands, while behind its manicured flower beds busier Intra's cobbled centre has local shops and boutiques for all pockets.

Villa Taranto

Via Vittorio Veneto 111 • Daily mid-March to Sept 8.30am–7.30pm (ticket office closes at 6.30pm); Oct & Nov 9am–5pm (ticket office closes at 4pm) • €10 • ☎ 0323 556 667, www.villataranto.it

Verbania's balmy climate prompted Captain Neil McEacharn, scion of a Scottish industrial family, to buy the lakeside **Villa Taranto** in 1931. The sixteen hectares of botanical gardens that he created remain exceptional, housing twenty thousand plants, including giant Amazonian lilies, lotus blossoms, Japanese maples and more, laid out with geometric precision. You need a couple of hours to do the place justice; there is also a pleasant **café**.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

By boat From Intra, just north of Pallanza, a car ferry shuttles frequently over to Laveno (every 20min; 20min), from where trains run direct to Milan, and roads connect to Varese and the A8 autostrada. Verbania has several landing stages – Suna, Intra, Villa Taranto and Pallanza – served by lake ferries heading to the Borromean islands, Stresa and beyond. You can also combine ferry and train services from here, on the Lago Maggiore Express (see p.258).

By train Verbania-Pallanza train station is on the

Stresa–Domodossola main line with trains from Milan (Centrale and Porta Garibaldi). Bus #2 or taxis cover the 8km into the town centre.

Tourist offices The main tourist office is at Corso Zanitello 8 in Pallanza (April–Sept daily 9am–1pm & 3–6pm; Oct–March Mon, Tues & Thurs 9am–1pm & 3–5.30pm, Wed & Fri 9am–1pm; ☎ 0323 503 249), with a branch by the Pallanza landing stage (Mon–Sat 8.30–11am & 2.30am & 3–6pm; ☎ 0323 557 676, www.verbania-turismo.it).

VERBANIA

ACCOMMODATION

Aquadolce Via Cietti 1 ☎ 0323 505 418, www.hotelaquadolce.it. A pleasant option whose thirteen well-furnished rooms have sturdy wooden furniture and prints of the lake adorning the walls. Rooms with lake

views are €10–15 more than those facing the rear of the building. **€70**

★ **Grand Hotel Majestic** Via Vittorio Veneto 32, Pallanza ☎ 0323 509 711, www.grandhotelmajestic.it. This charming

hotel is set in a peaceful location on the lakefront, its main entrance giving onto a quiet one-way system and cycling route. The lovely garden stretches out to the lakefront, with a small sandy beach and deckchairs; there's an inviting pool, sauna and well-equipped gym too. The well-appointed rooms are spacious and comfortable, and the fifth-floor junior suites are set on two floors, with a living room below, and bedroom

and bathroom on the mezzanine. **€186**

Pesce d'Oro Via Troubetzkoy 136, Suna 📞0323 504 445, 🌐hotelpescedoro.it. A popular family-run hotel in Suna, a 10min walk west of Pallanza, that has been going strong for over three decades; rooms are simple and comfortable and prices affordable. There's also an annexe with self-catering apartments. **€54**

EATING

Estremadura Via Troubetzkoy 142 📞0323 504 282. This friendly bar owned by Cinzia Ferro, who won an Italian bar competition in 2014, is known for offering more than 250 cocktails (€6), along with beers and spirits, as well as light snacks and a few bites. Fortnightly art exhibitions brighten up the walls of the warm interior; there's also seating outside. **Daily 6pm–2am.**

Il Portale Via Sassello 3 📞0323 505 486, 🌐ristoranteilportale.it. Michelin-starred restaurant that

is one of the very best in town, serving delicious nouvelle-style cuisine with *primi* around €20. **Mon & Wed 7–10.30pm, Thurs–Sun noon–3pm & 7–10.30pm.**

Tacabutun Viale delle Magnolie 12 📞0323 503 450. This friendly lakefront restaurant serves a variety of risottos (€12), great hamburgers made with Piemontese beef (€16) and a range of crispy pizzas (€6) with all manner of toppings. **Fri–Wed noon–2.30pm & 7–10.30pm.**

Cannobio

CANNOBIO, 25km north of Pallanza (and 5km from the Swiss border), is one of Lake Maggiore's most appealing places to stay and a good base for exploring the lake. The village leads back from the water, its lakefront piazza of pastel-washed houses giving onto a tightly tangled web of stepped alleyways and stone houses. On Sunday mornings the local **market** takes over the waterfront selling everything from fresh produce to leather goods. The town's only sight is the **Santuario della Pietà**, a Bramante-inspired church beside the landing stage with a curious openwork cupola, built to house a painting of the pietà which supposedly bled in 1522. On the northern edge of the village is a blue-flag **beach**, backed by pleasant lawns with trees and picnic tables.

Inland along the Val Cannobina

Extending behind Cannobio, the wooded **Val Cannobina** offers beautiful views and little-visited stone-built hamlets. An easy **riverside cycle path** heads off into the valley to the **Orrido di Sant'Anna**, an impressive rocky gorge surrounded by wooded slopes that is a popular picnic spot. Beside the Roman bridge and the chapel is a small river beach and restaurant (see p.262). The Orrido is also accessible on the summer miniature train and by car off the Val Cannobina road.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

By bus Buses run approximately hourly from Verbania (35min): see timetables at 🌐vcotrasporti.it

By boat Cannobio has regular ferry links up and down the lake as well as a good service across to Luino (see p.262).

Tourist office Via A. Giovanola 25 (Mon–Sat 9am–noon

CANNOBIO

& 4–9pm, Sun 9am–noon; 📞0323 71 212); there's also an info kiosk at Piazza Martiri della Libertà (daily: mid-April to end May & early Oct 10am–2pm & 3–7pm; June & Sept 10am–9pm; July & Aug 10am–10pm; 📞0323 060 088).

GETTING AROUND

By bus Every 30min in summer, an evening shuttle bus (June–Aug 6.30pm–1am; €1) runs a 15min circular tour around town and up to the Orrido.

By bike Intra's Living Lake (📞329 569 2378, 🌐livinglake.it) delivers rental bikes to Cannobio (€18/day).

ACCOMMODATION

Antica Stallera Via P. Zacchero 7 📞0323 71 595, 🌐anticastallera.com. This family-run three-star village hotel has a vine-shaded garden restaurant overlooked by

simple, modern en-suite rooms. **€120**

Hotel Cannobio Piazza Vittorio Emanuele III 6 📞0323 739 639, 🌐hotelcannobio.com. Right on the waterfront,

this historic hotel has well-appointed rooms, some with lovely views. The staff are attentive and friendly, and there are a couple of restaurants. **€195**

★ **Hotel Pironi** Via Marconi 35 ☎ 0323 70 624, 🌐 pironihotel.it. This hotel is a real charmer, edged into a narrow fifteenth-century ex-convent on a cobbled lane in the village centre. Rooms are light, bright and attractive, and there's a cosy living area with sofas and armchairs

where you can while away a few hours on a rainy day. **€150**

★ **Park Hotel Villa Belvedere** Casali Cuserina 2 ☎ 0323 70 159, 🌐 villabelvederehotel.it. About 1km west of the village centre, this lovely hotel has spacious rooms, painted in warm colours. The walls are adorned with abstract art, and there are a couple of apartments plus a house with a kitchenette. The well-manicured gardens have deck chairs and hammocks, and there's an inviting swimming pool. **€140**

EATING AND DRINKING

La Streccia Via Merzagora 5 ☎ 0323 70 575, 🌐 ristorantelastreccia.it. Up a narrow alley behind the lakefront, this is a reliable choice in town for very good Piedmontese food – including home-made breads and pasta – in a rustic, low-ceilinged dining room. Expect to pay around €30 before wine for a three-course meal. **Fri–Wed noon–3pm & 6–10pm.**

Sant'Anna Via Sant'Anna 30, Traffume ☎ 0323 70 682. With stone tables perched outside above the gushing water of the gorge, this little country restaurant serves surprisingly creative pan-Italian food including very fancy

desserts. The wine list focuses on Piedmont's excellent wines, and there are artisan German beers too. **Tues–Sun noon–1.45pm & 7–9.45pm.**

Scurone Piazza Vittorio Emanuele III, Traversa Scurone 7 ☎ 348 888 1916, 🌐 scurone.it. Tucked away in a quaint little alleyway, this small wine bar and café with a vaulted ceiling was once a sailing boat workshop. Today, it's a great spot for an *aperitivo* or snack – there are cold platters of meats and cheeses (€12), plus light dishes including burrata cheese with anchovies (€12) and marinated vegetables (€7). **Daily 10am–11pm; Oct–June closed Wed.**

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Luino

On Maggiore's eastern shore, the commercial town and rail hub of **LUINO** is besieged every Wednesday by people pouring in for what is, purportedly, the largest weekly **market** in Europe – dodge the fake-label handbag and novelty stalls to seek out the tasty food section, piled high with salami and cheeses from all over Italy and Switzerland. Roads are jam-packed from 7am onwards and extra boats and buses serve Luino all day long. Outside market day, the town's attractions include a strollable *centro storico* and frescoes by Bernardino Luini, a follower of Leonardo, at the oratory of **SS Pietro e Paolo**.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

By bus Buses connect Luino with towns up and down the eastern shoreline: for more details see 🌐 trasporti.regione.lombardia.it.

By boat Boats from Luino head across to Cannobio as well as to other Italian towns and over the border to Locarno

and Ascona in Switzerland. On Wed there are extra sailings to service the market.

Tourist office Via della Vittoria 1 (Mon–Sat 9am–noon & 2.30–6pm; ☎ 0332 530 019, 🌐 vareselandoftourism.it).

ACCOMMODATION

Camin Hotel Colmegna Via Palazzi 1, 3km north of Luino ☎ 0332 510 855, 🌐 caminhotel.com. One of the best accommodation options on the eastern side of the lake, this eighteenth-century building is tucked into the rock just where the shore road enters a tunnel, so the

lakeside gardens are wonderfully tranquil and the swimming areas are difficult to beat. It's a friendly, family-orientated place, with light, bright and comfortable rooms and a moderately priced restaurant. **€175**

Laveno

Roughly 25km south of Luino, **LAVENO** is a significant transport hub with car-ferries shuttling over to the western shore at Verbania-Intra, plus various rail links with Milan. Its pleasant little centre, focused around Piazza Fontana, is worth a wander while you wait for your ferry. Just south of the centre on the lakefront in the neighbourhood of Cerro, a fine sixteenth-century porticoed former monastery houses the **Museo Internazionale Design Ceramico** at Via Lungolago Perabò 5 (Tues 10am–12.30pm, Wed–Sun 10.30am–12.30pm & 2.30–5.30pm; free; 🌐 midec.org), with its strong collection of mainly twentieth-century ceramics.

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION**LAVENO**

By train Laveno-Mombello Nord station is a terminus for trains from Milano Nord/Cadorna. The town's other station, Laveno-Mombello, 1km south of the centre, is served by trains from Luino to Milano Porta Garibaldi (change at Gallarate).

By boat Car ferries from Verbania-Intra (see p.260) dock directly in front of the Laveno-Mombello Nord train station.

Tourist office In the Albachiara Viaggi agency at Piazza Vittorio Veneto 10/A (Mon–Sat 9.30am–12.30pm & 3.30–7pm; ☎ 0332 626 111).

Santa Caterina del Sasso

Via Santa Caterina 13, off the main SP69 between Cellina and Reno • March daily 9am–noon & 2–5pm; April–Oct daily 8.30am–noon & 2.30–6pm; Nov–Feb Sat & Sun 9am–noon & 2–5pm • Free • 🌐 santacaterinadelsasso.com

One of the most popular sights on the lake, the hermitage of **Santa Caterina del Sasso** is a beautiful little cliffside **monastery** – visible only from the water – that is well worth a visit, though it can get crowded. It is most atmospherically reached by one of the many ferries from around the lake. The site dates back to 1170, when a local sailor was caught in a storm, invoked the help of St Catherine of Alexandria and survived; he withdrew to a cave, where local people began construction of a votive chapel. By 1620 fourteen monks lived here; today, it is still home to a small community of Benedictine monks.

The complex is tiny: you could walk from one end to the other in three minutes. Steep steps and a sparkling new lift take you down from the upper entrance or up from the jetty to the lovely entrance gallery (1624), with arches looking out over the lake, which leads to the South Convent. Inside is the Gothic Chapterhouse, decorated with a pristine fresco from 1439 of St Eligius healing a horse. Ahead, beneath the four Gothic arches of the Small Convent (1315) is the church, with its stubby Romanesque belltower and graceful Renaissance porch; a fresco of *God the Father*, dated 1610, adorns the Baroque vault above the high altar.

4

Lake Orta

The locals call **LAKE ORTA** (Lago d'Orta) “Cinderella”, capturing perfectly the reticent beauty of this small lake, with its deep blue waters and intriguing island. Lying west of Lake Maggiore, wholly within Piemonte, it is unmissable for **Orta San Giulio**, the most captivating medieval village on this – or, perhaps, any – Italian lake, with narrow, cobbled lanes snaking between the wrought-iron balconies of tall, pastel-washed *palazzi*. The village is unforgettably romantic, but consequently popular: on summer Sundays the approach roads are jammed with traffic (though the charm returns after dark). If you can, visit midweek or out of season.

Orta San Giulio

Occupying the tip of a peninsula on the lake's eastern shore, **ORTA SAN GIULIO** is a seductive little bolthole with charm and character in spades. The pace of life is slow, with everything revolving around the main waterside square, **Piazza Motta**, which is lined on three sides by faded butterscotch facades and open on the fourth to the lake and island. *Gelaterie*, terrace cafés and restaurants share space under the arcades with traditional shops and boutiques. Opposite the lake, Salita della Motta steps steeply upward towards the fifteenth-century Baroque church of **Santa Maria Assunta** and the **Sacro Monte** (see p.264) along a lovely wide lane where the Renaissance Palazzo Gemelli vies for your attention with Orta's oldest house, **Casa dei Nani**, named for its tiny windows. Back on Piazza Motta, head northward on the main street, Via Olina – cobbled, and barely 3m wide – through the village and out for a stroll or a sunbathe on the lakeside promenade. Lauded by UK Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy plus regulars from all over the world, the annual **Poetry on the Lake** festival (🌐 poetryonthelake.org) takes place here, with a plethora of events including readings, workshops and competitions on land and water.

Isola San Giulio

Basilica: April–Sept Mon noon–6.45pm, Tues–Sun 9.30am–6.45pm; Oct–March Mon 2–5pm, Tues–Sun 9.30am–noon & 2–5pm • Free Motorboats do the five-minute run more or less on demand out from Orta San Giulio to the **Isola San Giulio**, dominated by a white convent and the Romanesque tower of its basilica. According to legend, the island was the realm of dragons until 390 AD, when Julius, a Christian from Greece, crossed the lake using his staff as a rudder and his cloak as a sail, banished the monsters, founded a sanctuary and thus earned himself sainthood. The resulting **Basilica di San Giulio** has an impressively lofty interior. Much of its decoration, including the vaulting, dates from a Baroque eighteenth-century refit, but frescoes from as early as the fourteenth century survive. The fine **pulpit** was carved from local stone in the early twelfth century with symbols of the Four Evangelists and images of good winning over evil: note the crocodile/dragon locked in battle with the phoenix.

From the church, it takes twenty minutes to walk round the island on its one cobbled lane, past a shop, a restaurant and some enticingly scenic picnic spots.

Sacro Monte di San Francesco

Via Sacro Monte • Daily: summer 8.30am–6.30pm; winter 9am–4.30pm • www.sacromonte-orta.com

Above Orta, the **Sacro Monte di San Francesco** consists of 21 chapels containing life-size, painted terracotta statues acting out scenes from the Bible and the life of San Francesco. It winds around the wooded hillsides, making up a devotional route still followed by pilgrims, though as many visitors come simply to admire the breathtaking views of the lake and inhale the pine-scented air.

4

ARRIVAL AND INFORMATION

ORTA SAN GIULIO

By train Orta-Miasino train station – on the little-used Novara–Domodossola branch line (change at Novara from/to Milano Centrale) – is around 2km east of the historic centre: turn left out of the station and walk downhill for about 20min to reach Orta San Giulio.

By bus Three buses a day link Stresa (1hr; mid-June to early Sept) with Piazzale Prarondo just outside the pedestrianized part of the village.

By car The village and the island of San Giulio are

traffic-free: follow signs to the big car parks on the hillside above town. From here take the *trenino* (see below) or pick any of the footpaths heading downhill.

Tourist office The tourist office has two branches: one is in the car park on Via Panoramica (Wed–Sun 10am–1pm & 2–5pm; ☎ 0322 90 5163, www.distrettolaghi.it); the other is in the historic centre at Via Bossi 11 (Tues–Fri 11am–1pm & 1.30–5.30pm, Sat & Sun 10am–1pm & 1.30–5.30pm; ☎ 0322 90 155, www.comune.ortasangulio.no.it).

GETTING AROUND

By boat Motor launches depart frequently from Piazza Motta year round (9am–6pm; €4.50 return) to Isola San Giulio. From April to early Oct a cheaper public ferry crosses the lake to Pella (Mon–Fri hourly, Sat & Sun every 20min; 15min) and to Omegna (2 daily, 3 daily on Thurs for market day; 50min).

By trenino The village tourist train, the *trenino*, runs

between the minigolf centre (from where it's a short walk down to the pedestrianized centre) and the car park by Villa Crespi, then on to the Sacro Monte at peak times (March, April & Oct daily 9am–5.30pm; May–Sept daily 9am–7pm; Nov–Feb Sat & Sun plus hols 9.30am–5.30pm; €2.50 www.treninodiorta.it).

ACCOMMODATION

★ **B&B Al Dom** Via Giovanetti 57 ☎ 335 249 613, www.aldom57.com. Located in a pretty building on the lakefront, this lovely B&B has four welcoming rooms set on two floors; the entrance flooring is a handmade reproduction of eighteenth-century tiles, while the wrought-iron and wooden banister is original. There's a small leafy garden with camellias, maple and camphor trees, and a terrace with deckchairs right by the lake. **€150**

La Contrada dei Monti Via Contrada dei Monti 10 ☎ 0322 905 114, www.lacontradadeimonti.it. A cosy little

hotel in an eighteenth-century building. Each floor features arched balconies, and some rooms have a rustic style, with exposed beams and stone walls. There is no wi-fi. Pets welcome. **€110**

Hotel Aracoeli Piazza Motta 34 ☎ 0322 905 173, www.ortainfo.com. This small design hotel (pronounced *arachaylee*) on the main square features seven stylish rooms with modern fittings and walk-in showers. Check-in is at *Hotel Olina* down the street. **€140**

Leon d'Oro Piazza Motta 41 ☎ 0322 911 991, www.albergoleondoro.it. Historic *albergo* on the lakefront,

dating from 1815; each floor has a different colour scheme, and some rooms have wooden beams and stone walls, plus terraces with lake views. The hotel's popular restaurant serves tasty dishes beneath a vine-shaded terrace with stunning views of Orta San Giulio. **€110**

EATING AND DRINKING

Il Giardinetto Via Provinciale 1 ☎0323 89 118, giardinettohotel.com. Located 3.5km north of Orta San Giulio, this hotel restaurant serves creative local cuisine on a pleasant terrace overlooking the lake; the wine cellar has over four hundred wines. It's a great spot to get away from the crowds of Orta San Giulio and soak up the pretty lake views while enjoying good food at reasonable prices. *Primi* €12, *secondi* €16. **Tues–Sun 12.30–3pm & 7.30–10pm.**

Locanda di Orta Via Olina 18 ☎0322 905 188, locandaorta.com. This restaurant was awarded a Michelin star in 2014 for its innovative Mediterranean cuisine with a Ligurian influence; the menu is seasonal, with a range of fish dishes and *primi* and *secondi* starting at €22. There's a lovely peaceful terrace overlooking the rooftops of Orta San Giulio, where a more informal bistro-style cuisine is served. **Daily 12.30am–2.30pm & 7.30–9.30pm; Oct–May closed Tues.**

Olina Via Olina 40 ☎0322 905 656. Tasty local specialities are served at this restaurant on the main drag; the menu is

San Rocco Via Gippini 11 ☎0322 911 977, hotelsanrocco.it. In an unbeatable location on the edge of the village right on the water, this four-star hotel has recently refurbished rooms with lovely lake views, and an inviting lakeside swimming pool. **€230**

seasonal, with *primi* at €12, and *secondi* from €13. **Daily noon–3pm & 7–10pm.**

★ **Pan & Vino** Piazza Motta 37 ☎393 858 3293. This excellent deli and café is the best spot in town to grab some cheeses, cold cuts and bread for a picnic by the lake. Light dishes (€8) are served in the vaulted interior or at tables that spill onto the square, and the all-day *aperitivo* includes a platter of local cheese, salami and ham: there's English breakfast, too. **Thurs–Tues 10am–10pm.**

★ **Villa Crespi** Via Fava 18 ☎0322 911 902, villacrespi.it. MasterChef Italy judge Antonino Cannavacciuolo has won this world-class restaurant two Michelin stars. Located in a turreted Moorish villa dating from 1879, this ornate restaurant has decor as singular as its creative cooking. The €85 Carpe Diem tasting menu mixes the best of the chef's native Naples with his adoptive Piemonte cuisine. **Tues 7.30–9.30pm, Wed–Sun 12.30–1.45pm & 7.30–9.30pm.**

Lake Como

Of all the Italian Lakes, it's the forked **LAKE COMO** (Lago di Como) that comes most heavily praised: Wordsworth thought it “a treasure which the earth keeps to itself”. Today, despite huge visitor numbers, the lake is still surrounded by abundant vegetation: zigzagging slowly between shores by boat can seem impossibly romantic. As well as lakeside villas to visit, there is also some great walking to be done in the mountainous hinterland hereabouts. The principal towns – **Como** and **Lecco** – are at the southernmost tips of their own branches of the lake – Ramo di Como and Ramo di Lecco – while narrow winding roads follow the shoreline above and through erstwhile fishermen's villages past *belle époque* houses and Neoclassical villas up to the Centro Lago or centre of the lake. Here three small towns stand out as the highlight of the lakes: **Varenna** and **Bellagio** for unrepentant romantics, and **Menaggio** if you want a pleasant, affordable base for walking, swimming or cycling. To the north, the Ramo di Colico is less spectacular and much of the shoreline is marshy or occupied by campsites.

GETTING AROUND

By boat Boats stop at many villages on the lake, supplemented by car ferries shuttling from Cadenabbia and Menaggio across to Bellagio and Varenna.

By bus and train The #C10 bus (asfautolinee.it) runs northwards from Como, stopping everywhere on the

shoreline to Colico, from where the train takes you back to Lecco and the #C40 bus to Como. The #C30 links Como and Bellagio.

By car The lakeside roads are busy and narrow, and there are pay and display car parks on the edge of all the villages.

Como

Standing astride main routes to and from Switzerland, **COMO** is a comfortable, ancient town, much of its wealth coming from the factories dotted around the outskirts which produce luxury silk items for the fashion houses of Milan, Paris and New York. The town reaches around a small bay at the southernmost tip of the western fork of the lake, but