



David McGuffin's EXPLORING EUROPE

LAKE COMO DESTINATION GUIDE



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Overview and Orientation

“Is there a land of such supreme and perfect beauty anywhere?” wondered the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow after a visit to Lake Como. Set in the foothills of the Alps along the border with Switzerland, the lake is framed by snowcapped mountains. It sits virtually deserted in the winter, but by mid-March the wealthy, glitzy crowds begin to roll in. Visitors come to hike in the hills or go boating and of course, they come for the incomparable views of the Alps. The lake is shaped like a running man, head at the Alps and feet in Lombardy. Bellagio is in the “crotch”, Menaggio at his right (western) hip and Varenna at his left (eastern) hip.

You will need at least 2 nights to make your trip to Lake Como worthwhile. I’d skip stay-

ing in Como and go straight for Varenna or Bellagio in the mid-lake region. With 2 nights, you'll have a full day to explore, relax, and enjoy the lake and mountains. With more time, you can slowdown, rent a boat, venture farther up the lake or, with a car, even take a day trip to Switzerland.

Practical Information

Getting to and from Lake Como

Milan is the closest big city to Lake Como, so it makes sense to begin your journey from there. From Milan you can take a train, train and boat combo, taxi, private driver, or rental car to Lake Como. Bellagio and Varenna are about 40 miles from Milan's Centrale train station. The town of Como is about 30 miles.

Train Travel via Varenna

From Milano Centrale train station, take any train going north in the direction of Sondrio or Tirano. Departure boards may post trains as "Lecco/Tireno" as well. At any rate, all trains going to Sondrio stop in Varenna-Esino-Perledo (all the same stop). Departures from Milan at most often at :20 past the hour, almost every hour during the day.

I'd purchase a second-class ticket for the short hop because often these trains do not have first-class service or reserved seats. The ride will take about 1:20 and you'll have some fantastic scenery to look at once you get near the lake. Your train is likely to stop in Varenna for only

a couple of minutes, so be aware where you are by following its progress on your phone's map app or remembering that Lecco is the stop just before Varenna-Esino and it takes about 20 minutes from one to the other. The Varenna-Es-ino station is small and your train may not stop at the platform, your car may be beyond the platform, so be prepared to get off on the tracks if necessary and walk to the platform.

Also, keep in mind that doors often are broken and do not open. Your best plan is to get off the train by using the door where you got on. Finally, consider choosing a car in the middle of the train when you board in Milano. This way you'll have a better chance of landing on the platform in Varenna-Esino. This will cost about €6.80 one-way. See <http://www.treni-talia.com> for schedules, ticket purchases, and prices.

Train to Como

From Milano Centrale Station trains run twice an hour to Como San Giovanni station. The trip takes about 40 minutes with Monza being the only stop in between. This will cost about €4.80 one way. See <http://www.trenitalia.com> for schedules, ticket purchases, and prices.

Train to Como and Boat to mid-lake villages It is a 10-minute walk from Como S. Giovanni train station to the boat dock. Then board a slow boat or faster hydrofoil to Bellagio or Varenna. Slow boat (battello) takes 2.5 hours to

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get to the mid-lake region towns and departs about every 2 hours. The hydrofoil takes an hour. You can find complete information, prices and timetables at <http://www.navigazion-elaghi.it>.

Taxi from Milano Centrale Station

You can hire a taxi at the central train station to take you to Bellagio (€85 to €120) or Como (€60-€80).

Rent your own car

For about €80 a day, you can rent a car at one of the agencies around the central station.

Driving is fairly easy. Take the large 4-laned road out of Milan. Get on the autostrada SS36 toward Lecco and onward to Varenna or take the SP583 along the lake to Bellagio. It will take about 1.5 hours.

Getting around Lake Como

Public Transportation

The public boat service is operated by Navigazione Laghi. There are three options. The motorships (the blue line) run two main routes Como-Colico and Lecco-Bellagio (summer only). This route makes a lot of stops and gives you time to relax, admire the coastline and take a lot of pictures. The hydrofoils (the red line) run from Como to Colico. This is a faster route with fewer stops and slightly higher prices. The ferries (the yellow line) are larger than the other boats and only run in the central part of the lake connecting Bellagio, Varenna, Menaggio

and Cadenabbia.

You can purchase tickets at the ticket office near the dock at most towns. Tickets can be purchased onboard at no additional cost if the ticket office is closed. Prices vary depending on your destination and type of ticket. For example, a one-way ticket from Como to Colico is €12.60, a ticket for the day (get on and off unlimited times) is €28, a six-day ticket is €84. A supplement of €4.90 is required to take the faster service.

If staying in the mid-Lake region (Bellagio, Varenna, Menaggio) the fares are cheaper still. For example, Bellagio to Varenna, Menaggio, or Cadenabbia is €4.60. There is an all-day ticket/pass available for this mid-lake region selling for €15, but it only makes sense if taking four or more trips in one day.

There are trains that run from Lecco to Colico along the eastern side of the lake. However, the only train station on the western side of the lake is in Como.

ASF Autolinee runs the buses from Como along the western side of the lake. In Como, bus stops are located outside the two main train stations: Como S. Giovanni and Como Nord Lago. You can travel to any destination from Como to Colico and from Como to Bellagio. SAL Lecco operates the buses on the eastern side of the lake. Take the bus if you want to

travel from Lecco to Bellagio. If you want to travel along the eastern edge of the lake, take the train instead. Tickets can be purchased at tobacconists or newsstands and at bus ticket offices. You can also purchase tickets on board for an additional fee.

Private Boat

Speedboat Rentals – Be your own skipper and spend from one to six hours on the lake and surrounding villages. They provide 40-hp speedboat that can accommodate up to six people. Fully insured and no boating license required. You'll need to leave a €100 deposit and ID. €75-€300 depending on the duration of the rental. Boats are delivered to your home village at a specified time. +39 328 2920019. <http://www.lakebyboat.com>.

Taxi

You can find taxi stands in front of train and bus stations. You can also call to be picked up. Taxis can be expensive but are also the fastest way of travelling around the lake.

Here are some taxi companies operating in the area.

In Bellagio—Autopubbliche, Phone: +39 031 950 913 In Como—Taxi Como, Phone: +39 031 271 000 In Lecco—Radio taxi, Phone: +39 0341 1916

Tourist Information

Museum Pass

Abbonamento Musei Lombardia is a card that grants you free entrance to 80 museums and attractions around Lombardy. You can purchase it online at lombardia.abbonamentomusei.it/ or in Como at the Museo Archeologico “Paolo Giovio”, piazza Medaglie d’Oro 1. The card is valid for 365 days and costs €45.

Other Useful Information

Hospitals

Ospedale Valduce is in Como. Address: Via Dante Alighieri, 11, 22100 Como CO, Italy

Pharmacy

There are pharmacies peppered along the lake in every town.

Farmacia Centrale at Piazza Cavour.

Via Caio Plinio Secondo, 1

Como

Hours: Monday 15:00-19:30, other day 08:30-19:

[Farmacia Oberti](#)

[Via Roma, 8](#)

[Bellagio](#)

[031 950623](#)

Closed Saturday. Open other days
08:30-20:00.

Laundry

Lavanderia La Preferita

Via Borgo Vico, 113

Como

031 570731

Hours: Saturday 08:30-12:30, other days
08:30-12:30 & 14:30-17:30.

Drop off and collect later

Near the Santa Teresa bus stop

Lavanderia Self-Service

Via Luigi Cadorna, 30

Como

031 489 3707

Hours: Daily 07:00-22:00

Self-service

Near the XX Settembre bus stop

La Lavandera- Self Service

Salita Carlo Grandi, 21

Bellagio

339 410 6852

Hours: Daily 09:00-21:00

Bellagio

This small town is the perfect place to while away the afternoon with its breathtaking views of the lake, picturesque streets, classy boutiques and plethora of restaurants and bars.

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The town is laid out in a series of terraces ascending steeply from the lakefront up to via Garibaldi. There are several “lanes” consisting of hundreds of [lake-rock](#) cobbled stairs connecting the lake with via Garibaldi at the top.

[The TOURIST INFORMATION Office](#) is located at the boat dock for passenger boats and hydrofoil boats, not the car ferry dock. The office has free information, brochures, and maps of the lake. Here you can pick up information about walking and boat tours in Bellagio. Maps are available to purchase which feature hikes and biking routes.

031 950 204

<http://www.bellagiolakecomo.com> Hours: Sunday 10:30-12:30 & 13:30-17:30, other days 09:00-13:00 & 14:00-18:00.

David's Bellagio town walk

The main street [at the top of town](#), via Garibaldi, is lined with shops and cafés and leads to the main town square, Piazza della Chiesa. Here you will find the Romanesque Basilica di San Giacomo, with impressive frescoes, statues and bell tower. On the other side of the square is a medieval tower that was once part of the town's defenses but now serves [as a restaurant and fast food joint](#). The fountain in the center of the piazza is said to have been commissioned by a resident Englishman to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond Jubilee. If you leave the piazza and pass the church, you can follow the road out to the tip of Bella-

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Here there is a lookout, a park and a little harbor at Punta Spartivento.

If you follow via Garibaldi in the opposite direction from the Piazza della Chiesa, you will walk on a relatively flat road passing lots of shops selling scarves, fancy clothes, painting and photographs, and cooking tools. Along this route, you'll also find cafes, bars, and places selling Italian street food such as pizza, supli, sandwiches, and such. There are also a few alimentary selling deli items, wine, soda, beer, water, fruit, vegetables, cheese, and bread to assembly a picnic.

Continuing through town on via Garibaldi will bring you to the entrance of Villa Serbelloni, on the left. The villa's grounds encompass much of the wooded hill above town and offer panoramas that can't be seen from town. The villa itself is owned by the Rockefeller Foundation and is not open to the public. However, the outdoor gardens, fountains, and grotto can be toured on a guided tour. The walking tour lasts 1.5 hours and much of it is uphill walking. Join the tour at the old stone tower on Piazza della Chiesa about 15:00 before the scheduled departure.

Costs: €10. Hours: No tours on Monday. Other day 11:00 & 15:30. Closed if raining and Nov-March. T. 031 951 555

On your right, you'll see the yellow town hall building next to the small 11th-century Church

of San Giorgio. Across the street you'll see signs and a flight of stairs marking the paved footpath that heads towards Pescallo, a little fishing hamlet looking out over the eastern branch of Lake Como, about 10 minutes away.

Known as the Salida Cappuccini, this footpath goes up over the hill and back down to lake level and the return is the same. If you are not in for a hike, skip this walk. However, the trek does provide some beautiful vistas of the eastern leg of the lake and Pescallo is a charming village with a couple of good lake-side restaurants. In the 13th century, Pescallo featured one of the biggest fish markets on the lake.

Turn right (downhill) on the first road after passing the town hall and San Giorgio Church. Then swing down into the beautiful Par-co Matiri della Libertà, the town park, loaded with quiet paths, flora and fauna, benches, and a children's playground. Continue heading downhill will bring you back down to via Roma and the parking lot by the car ferry dock.

From the car ferry dock, turn left and stroll along the flat Lungolago Europa, a shady footpath paralleling the lakeside with grand views across the lake to the west. Soon, you will come to Lido di Bellagio, a public beach, bar, pier, and nightclub with enclosed swimming, diving boards, slides, sand, umbrellas and sunning beds. There is a fee for sunbed and umbrella rentals (€10-€15 per day). Boat rental are available here as well.

Just beyond the Lido, you'll find the entrance to gardens of Villa Melzi. The gardens deserve a couple of hours for a visit. In spring the gardens bloom with azaleas and rhododendrons, but the carefully sculpted trees and well-manicured grass are a delight in any season. There is a little museum in the orangery, and the garden also features a pavilion at the water's edge and a shady water garden.

The Villa Melzi was the first English-style park on the lake. It was commissioned in 1808 by Francesco Melzi d'Eril, an associate of Napoleon, and his descendants still occupy the house today. If the weather is good, bring a picnic and enjoy peace and tranquility (€ 6.50 per day or €8 for a 2-day pass. Closed Nov-March. Otherwise, open daily 09:30-18:30.

<http://www.gardinidivillamelzi.it>).

As you rejoin the main road (now via Valassi-na), you'll see a stretch of field used as a nursery, which is the most important source of income for Bellagio after tourism. At the end of the sidewalk on the left, you'll come to the empty Villa Giulia. A previous owner cleared the wide grassy path in front, known as the Vialone, so that he could have a view of both branches of the lake.

Take the Vialone all the way to the western side of the lake. Here you can admire a scenic view of the lake framed by cypress trees. If

you look up the hill to your left, you will see a 19th-century mausoleum, built for Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli, an art collector.

You can take the road to the left down to the suburb of San Giovanni, where local teens sun themselves on the harbor wall and the little town square is decorated with a grotto to honor the Madonna of Lourdes. This is also where the Museum of Navigational Instruments is located. If you continue to the water you will see the Church of San Giovanni on your right, the first church built in Bellagio dating back to the 10th century.

From the suburb of San Giovanni, walk back up the way you came and take Via Melzi d'Er-il on your left. Or, from the end of the Vialone, you can take the path behind Hotel Silvio to reach the suburb of Loppia. Over the wall you can see the Romanesque Church of Santa Maria di Loppia. At the dock, you can see two Larian gondolas from Lake Como, which were used until the end of the 19th century to ferry goods and animals.

Behind the white domed Capella di Melzi (the Melzi family chapel) stretch the Villa Melzi gardens.

Continue through the gardens along the lakeside walk, known as the Lungo Lario Europa, and you will find yourself once more in the center of Bellagio.

Como

In Piazza Cavour, you'll find the 14th-century Duomo with its green dome. It houses a nice collection of ancient tapestries and Renaissance-era paintings. I Tigli in Theoria, a tea room and restaurant in a renovated two-story palazzo, has a lovely courtyard garden. In Como, you can take the funicular up the mountain to Brunate, a small town perched 1,600 feet above the lake. Continue up the steep, rocky trail to Faro Voltiano, a remote lighthouse on a nearby peak. There won't be many visitors so you will be able to enjoy the breathtaking panorama across the lake and into Switzerland in relative solitude.

Tremezzo

Here you can visit the late-17th-century Villa Carlotta, which serves as a museum and botanical garden house. Be sure to visit the Italian gardens surrounding the villa, comprising nearly 20 acres of flowers and fruit trees (€10 for the villa, museum and gardens. Open daily, April to mid-October 09:00-19:30. Last tickets sold at 18:00. Shorter hours during the off-season).

The Grand Hotel Tremezzo, a luxury hotel, has created an artificial beach scene, with trucked-in sand and a pool floating in the lake.

Varenna

When you arrive in Varenna, head south to visit Villa Monastero, a former monastery and no-

ble's residence with lakeside gardens. From the north end of town, you can take a steep hike to Vezio to explore the 13th-century castle that was once part of a chain of early warning medieval watchtowers.

Menaggio

Menaggio features an attractive seafront promenade. The old town is comprised of mostly 19th-century buildings painted in muted tones, but as you walk up the streets, it takes on a more medieval feel with narrow alleys, steep stairs and stone buildings. Take a stroll through one of the numerous gardens, pop into one of the little churches or visit the ruins of a medieval castle above town. You can also explore the remnants of the medieval wall that used to surround the town.

Lenno

This is the boat stop for visiting Villa Balbi-anello, has a centuries-old hand-worked olive press which still produces the highest quality olive oil.

Villa Balbianello

The view of Lake Como from Villa Balbianello might look familiar; it was featured in Star Wars Episode II and the Bond remake Casino Royale. It was built by Cardinal Angelo Durini in 1787. When the villa was first completed visitors gained access via a steep staircase leading up from the lake. Guests were welcomed by the words engraved in the floor of the por-

tico: “Do what you want”, which embodied the spirit of the location, a place where people gathered to discuss literature and the arts. The villa juts out over the lake on a little peninsula, and the loggia provides beautiful views opening onto both sides of the lake. The interior remains decorated in the 1970s style chosen by the previous owner and hosts a rich collection of Chinese, African and pre-Columbian art alongside 18th-century English and French furniture. The gardens are not to be missed (€10 for gardens; €20 for gardens and guided tour of the house. Closed Monday and Wednesday; hours 10:00-18:00).

Brief History of Lake Como

Lake Como is Europe’s deepest lake and its third largest. A massive glacier carved out the gorge 10,000 years ago. While there is evidence that prehistoric man lived in the area, the first large settlement was established by the Romans under Julius Caesar. Como flourished under Roman rule, which led to invasions from the Goths and the Huns. It later changed hands between the Longobards, Milanese, the Holy Roman Empire, the French, Spanish and Austrians. In 1859, Lake Como became part of the Kingdom of Italy. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, villas were built along the lakeside and in the hills above. The region also attracted many artists who were inspired by the scenery.



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