

## LAKE COMO TRAVEL GUIDE

Lake Como also known as Lario, is a lake of glacial origin. The lake shaped much like the character "Y" is the third largest lake in Italy (145 km<sup>2</sup>), 46km long and at an altitude of 199m above sea level. It is surrounded by mountains – the highest, rising above Colico, is Mount Legnone (2609m) – with many rivers flowing into it, the Adda river being the most important and its only affluent followed by the river Mera.

Owing to its variety of landscapes which make the lake region extremely fascinating, it was in the past the theme of many Romantic poets. Lake Como offers innumerable shades of colours: the teal-blue of its waters, the intense green of the forest covered mountains, the pure white of its snow-capped peaks, the gay colours of the houses which skirt the shores or the grey of the stone houses at the foot of the mountains.

The whole territory surrounding Lake Como is characterized by steep slopes where it is easy to spot the distinctive forms of towns and villages as well as its historic villas and mansions. Unlike other areas, through the ages Lake Como has in fact always been a favourite destination not for normal tourism, but one of artists and aristocrats who would sojourn here in search of quiet moments to reflect and contemplate.

Despite its limited extension Lake Como is one of the few territories where it is possible to find such a variety of landscapes. In a short distance one can move from the lake to the mountains, from touristic towns to small hillside villages, from a natural oasis to ski-slopes. It is perhaps for this reason that travellers from Northern Europe cannot resist the beauty of such views and make it a point of stopping over.

Lake Como weather is generally mild: the Alps protect it from the north winds and its body of water reduces the temperature jump.

In winter, above all on the sunny side of the Altolario (the most northern part of the lake), temperatures are never rigid and the summer is never torrid thanks to a dense vegetation and the lake breeze.

The plant-life is varied: one can find camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons, magnolias, palm trees, cypress and conifer trees; going up the hills there are chestnut groves and oak woods; further up in the mountains beech trees, fir trees, larch and pine woods which lead up to the high altitude pastures.

Wildlife is also varied and copious: with a little luck it is easy to catch a glimpse at deer, roe deer, chamois antelope and groundhogs.

Travelling along the western and most visited side, setting off from Gera Lario, one reaches **Domaso**. Due to its position over a long and flat plain, this old fishing village offers a wide view over a vast area of Lake Como, as far as Bellagio where one can catch a glimpse of the two branches of the lake which separate.

Also thanks to its location and climate, Domaso is one of the lake villages which best lends itself to tourism; the “Breva” wind which blows from the south attracts yachtsmen and windsurfers from all over Europe. The particularity of this wind is given to the fact that it is constant and therefore ideal for windsurfing. It is mainly for this that the area offers several nautical centres with schools of windsurfing, water-skiing, kite-surfing, sailing, catamaran and canoeing.

The historic centre of Domaso is characterized by narrow and enchanting alleyways which, over the centuries, have maintained traits of their past. It is thanks to its temperate climate, its perceptible history and thriving plant-life that Domaso is the ideal holiday destination for visitors in need of relaxation, but at the same time it offers many alternatives for sport-lovers. In addition to traditional water sports close by there are tennis courts and football grounds, gyms and fitness centres. At just 10km from Domaso there is a horse-riding club and at 20 km an 18-hole golf-course.

The mountains and their fantastic trails which surround the village will not pass unnoticed to lovers of trekking and mountain-biking.

Above Domaso sits the typical village of **Vercana**: from here the Lake Como landscape can be admired in all its splendour. The main

characteristics of this village are its peace and quiet and the wonderful trails for nature-lovers: walking through woods and pastures one can reach the mountain slopes of Vercana and the hill-country of Graglio (1420mt).

Continuing southwards one comes to **Gravedona ed Uniti**, a cheerful littoral town where important examples of Lombard Romanic architecture can be seen at the Church of Santa Maria del Tiglio; then Dongo, where the final act of fascism took place with the capture of Benito Mussolini; and further along there are San Siro and Menaggio finally reaching the centre of the lake at Griante, Cadenabbia and Tremezzo. A must-see is the renowned Villa Carlotta with its splendid gardens and for excursionists a walk and visit to the small church of San Martino.

A little further down there is Lenno and the peninsular of Laveno stretching out to mark the Gulf of Venus (Golfo di Venere). Here one can visit Villa Balbianello built at the end of the 1700s, now owned by FAI (the National Trust of Italy). Directed towards Como one meets up with Brienno, one of the most ancient villages of Lake Como, Laglio – well known for being the summer residence of actor George Clooney – Moltrasio and finally Cernobbio with its splendid villas: Villa d'Este, now luxury hotel and Villa Erba congress and exhibition centre.

The only island in Lake Como is Isola Comacina. During the Middle Ages it was an independent stronghold, but in 1160 it was destroyed by the population of Como. From that moment on the island has been uninhabited and the only surviving buildings are the small church of St. Giovanni, the inn with its restaurant and other small buildings.

The island encloses a bay called “Zoca de l’Oli” so called for the calmness of its waters and the natural growth of olive trees.

To the northern extremity of Lake Como we find the protected natural oasis Pian di Spagna part of the Natural Reserve of Pian di Spagna, which also includes Lake Mezzola. This swampy area is an important nesting place for several species of birds, amphibians and reptiles which find their natural habitat amongst the silence of the reeds.

Travelling down the western side of Lake Como one goes through Colico past which an inlet forms the small Lake of Piona; at the tip of the peninsula called Olgiasca rises the homonymous Abbey of Piona.

Eventually at the centre of the lake there are Bellano and Varenna known for its Villa Monastero, events and congress centre, Villa Cipressi used as a hotel and Castello di Vezio, ancient Romanesque fortress.

Mandello del Lario, before Lecco, is home to the noted Moto Guzzi company.

From Varenna by car-ferry one can cross over to Bellagio, a very popular locality. It is situated at the tip of the promontory which divides the branches of Como and Lecco and is renowned for its monumental villas: Villa Melzi with its museum and gardens, Villa Serbelloni, prestigious hotel and Italian offices of the Rockefeller Foundation.

A navigation service line on Lake Como allows visitors to stop at various towns or enjoy short cruises with morning departures and evening arrivals.

All year round there are numerous recurrences, village feasts, sports events, and markets of all sorts.

Besides visiting Lake Como it is also a good idea to “get a taste” of it. The food culture is closely tied to its lake and mountain territory.

Many are the specialities of the lake which can be tried in local lakeside restaurants or in characteristic eating houses: “**missultin**” which are shad fish dried in the sun, later pressed and preserved for a few months then to be grilled; **soused shad and whitefish**, first fried and then marinated in vinegar, onions and laurel leaves; **marinated fish**; **mixed fried lake fish**, bleak and shad first floured and then pan-fried or breaded fillets of perch or whitefish then fried, **rice with fillets of perch**.

Among the mountain specialities is the well-known **polenta** which can be prepared “gialla” “taragna” or “uncia” and of course one cannot miss out on local **cheese, salami and wine** tasting.

## Domaso

Domaso is situated at the mouth of the river Livo which divides the village in two: on the right-hand shore of the river stands the historic centre while on the left lies the more recently built area. The hamlets Pozzolo and Gaggio overlook the old centre.

The Antica Regina road, along which the old village arose still has houses displaying votive frescos, stone portals and noble coats of arms. Characteristic of the village are also the colonnade houses along on the lake front with their arches that lead to the higher part of the village.

The “modern” area of Domaso on the other hand offers most of the tourist attractions: restaurants, pizzerias, bars, ice-cream parlours and pubs, sailing and windsurfing schools, boat and dinghy rentals for lake excursions, as well as tourist accommodation such as camp-sites and holiday apartments.

One can admire the beauty of the lake and discover its marvellous scenery while taking a long walk along the lake which starts out from the new tourist port as far as the mouth of the river Livo. It is interesting to notice how the views can each time alter the emotions we feel according to the change of season.

While walking through the village a visit to the church of St. Bartolomeo is worthwhile. It was built in the 16th century over the remains of a medieval church and despite the transformations which have practically removed all traces of its Romanesque style one can still find symbols of the Renaissance period such as the gold-plated silver Processional Cross, the wooden Crucifix of the high altar and the high relief showing the “Pietà” on the right-hand side portal.

There are two other churches in the village, the church of St. Antonio of Padua and the church of St. Giovanni Battista, both part of the old convent of the Capuchin Friars. Nothing is left of the convent; it was demolished

and in its place rose a parish inside which it is possible to note the architectural and decorative simplicity which was typical of the Order of the Capuchin Friars. The only decorations are those on the altar and they are all entirely in wood; instead the church of St. Giovanni is now privately owned except for the church tower which belongs to the local municipality. The small church of St. Maria delle Grazie is in the hamlet of Pozzolo. It is of recent origin and was built by the local population in thanks to the Madonna after their homes were saved from fascist retaliation at the end of the Second World War.

Amongst the villas of Domaso special mention is to be made to Villa Camilla; built around the mid-1600s by the aristocratic family Calderara; at the end of the 1800s, after many transfers of ownership, it became the property of the Sebregondi family.

Villa Camilla is currently the seat of the Local Council and apart from housing its offices it also hosts events of all kinds: art exhibitions, antique displays, concerts and local traditional feasts. It is surrounded by gardens covering an area of nearly 8000m<sup>2</sup> with paths and many types of plants such as camellias, magnolias, palm, larch, cedar and sequoia trees. Also distinctive are the artificial tuff stone grottos and a majestic entrance gate dated 1700.

## **Vercana**

Vercana is a cheerful village which rises above Domaso. It overlooks Lake Como and offers breathtaking views: the mouths of the rivers Adda and Mera and the oasis of Pian di Spagna looking westwards, Mount Legnone on the opposite side and the nearby towns Gravedona and Dongo looking eastwards. It includes several hamlets situated on the territory surrounding the parish church. Besides its calm atmosphere, the charm of the place is given by the typical alleyways that meander through each hamlet and cross the village revealing its age-old characteristics: an example are the old stone houses positioned against each other, often built up on several levels in order to have the animal sheds and a wine cellar included in the building.

Vercana is 2km away from Domaso, but reachable on foot along a cobblestone mule path which connect the two villages in little time.

For lovers of natural environments there is a splendid walk to the mountains of Vercana from which travellers can delight over the beauty of Lake Como from different perspectives. Walkers can then proceed across pastures and woods to the hill-country of Graglio where still today livestock graze in summer and local butter and cheese is produced.

The parish church of St. Salvatore is in the centre of the village and is one of the most important examples of Baroque architecture on Lake Como. The exact date of its construction is unknown but presumably it was built during the 1400s. However it stands out from other 15th century churches of the Altolario area as inside the church there are works of art dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries.

The church of St. Sebastiano is situated on a panoramic knoll in the hamlet of Caino. Despite its 17th century appearance it is believed to have been built further back in time and that before the current construction stood a completely different building. It is slightly outside the centre of the hamlet and is possible to reach along a short mule path. Its simple white external framework blends in marvellously with the surrounding green nature.

Another church worthy of notice is “**Madonna della Neve**” else named after the place it was built, “**Madonna della Caraa**” . Works began in 1631 around a votive chapel which already stood there. It was built in thanks to the Madonna for the end of the plague epidemic which by 1630 had caused many deaths in this already poor and desolate territory after having been passed through by the Lansquenets. The shrine can be reached via a short mule path which climbs up to Vercana from Domaso. The path which leads to the church is lined with majestic linden trees up to the entrance stairway. The left side of the building gives a striking effect as it is linked to the rock by an arch creating a portico under which the mule-path continues leading up to Vercana. Resting on a knoll and thanks to its front open space, it allows passer-by to rest and admire the inside of the

church through two large side windows and also to enjoy the breathtaking view of the surrounding landscape.

## **Gravedona**

Gravedona, which is part of Gravedona ed Uniti together with Consiglio di Rumo and Germasino, is of prehistoric origin. Its historic centre is composed of two housing clusters, Riva and Castello. The urban centres of the littoral towns on the western shore of Lake Como are characterized by the Via Antica Regina (a Roman road which linked Como to Chiavenna) which in fact passed through very near the area called “del Castello”. As in many other towns there are several places to visit here as well.

Il Castello includes many of the oldest houses in Gravedona, amongst which the house where Alessandro Volta sojourned and here is also the “Belvedere” panoramic viewpoint overlooking the lakeside and surrounding villages.

**Palazzo Gallio** is a Cardinal residence built where the no-longer existing ancient castle of the town used to stand at the end of the 1500s. Today it houses the offices of the mountain communities “Comunità Montana del Lario e del Ceresio” and is in the list of National Monuments. The garden of the “palazzo” which extends towards the mountain contains numerous camellias. Every year during the week coming up to Easter a camellia exhibition is organized. Besides this, Palazzo Gallio hosts many other shows and cultural events.

The church **of Santa Maria del Tiglio** is one of the most ancient churches in the province of Como and is also one of the most important examples of Romanic style. It was built in the 12th century using local stone: the white marble of Musso and the black stone of Olcio.

The church of **St. Vincenzo**, situated close to the church of Santa Maria del Tiglio, is the local parish and contains an ancient Roman crypt.



Travelling up towards the mountain from Gravedona one reaches **Livo**, a small village with a population of about 200 people. It has preserved all the architectural characteristics of a rural environment: houses built in stone with sculptured portals, emblems of the families who once lived there and votive frescos. Further out of the village, among the chestnut groves are the cemetery and the ancient church of St. Giacomo.

Proceeding further along the road which leads to the cemetery, one reaches the locality of Crotto Dangri which is the starting point for climbing up to Capanna Como, an alpine refuge which stands at 1790mt above sea level in the Darengo valley. The refuge, owned by CAI (the Italian Alpine Club), sits on a panoramic spot by Lake Darengo. These places are visited by hundreds of travellers and excursionists every year.