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Insider's Guide to the Italian Lakes

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Image courtesy of Passalacqua

The Italian Lakes region pairs dramatic mountain landscapes with idyllic lakeside retreats, making it a must-see for travelers who appreciate scenic beauty but don't want to sacrifice

luxury and fine dining. Not only can you relax beside mineral-blue glacial lakes, but you can discover historic villas and wander through charming villages.

Each area around the lakes has its own personality. On Lake Garda, head north to Riva del Garda for biking, hiking and easy access to the Dolomites. On the south shore, Sirmione is ideal for families who prefer a resort stay. Lake Como is known for romantic vistas and classic wooden boats, as well as high-end hotels to match its clientele.

Both lakes are busiest from late spring through early fall, when visitors can enjoy outdoor cafes and comfortable temperatures for water sports. The region's proximity to Milan makes it easy to combine a lake holiday with city exploration — ask me about how to customize an Italian Lakes trip for you.

Need to know

The Italian Lakes region is the type of destination you can return to year after year, but if you're heading there for the first time, here are some of the basics you'll need to know.

- **Currency:** The official currency is the Euro, and credit cards are widely accepted (although some may not take American Express). Consider bringing Euros for tipping and smaller shops.
- **Languages:** Italian, German (particularly in Lake Garda) and English
- **Airports:** Milan Malpensa Airport (MXP), Venice Marco Polo Airport (VCE)
- **Transportation:** The Italian train system is excellent and connects all the major cities with the lakes region. From the train stations, you can arrange a private transfer through hotel concierges or hire a rideshare or taxi. Keep in mind summer months mean lots of traffic around the lakes, so plan extra time.
- **Best time to visit:** The lakes are a seasonal destination best visited in late May, September and early October, as well as summer months, when the temperatures are comfortably in the 80s and the lake waters have warmed up. Most lakeside properties close for the season on November 1.
- **Ideal length of stay:** Seven days offers a balanced trip from Milan to Lake Como and Lake Garda, allowing you to experience the highlights without rushing. If time allows, consider extending your stay in locations such as Switzerland, Venice or Verona.
- **Signature dishes:** Risotto al Pesce Persico (creamy risotto topped with lightly fried lake perch), Missoltini (sun-dried lake fish served with polenta), Tortellini di Valeggio (meat-filled tortellini with butter and sage), Vitello Tonnato (thinly sliced veal served cold with a creamy, tangy tuna sauce).
- **Key phrases:** Buongiorno (good morning), Buonasera (good evening), Ciao (hello/goodbye, informal), Arrivederci (goodbye), Per favore (please), Grazie (thank you), Prego (you're welcome), Scusa/Scusi (excuse me, informal/formal), Mi scusi (I'm sorry)

- **What to wear:** Opt for stylish yet comfortable attire, including good walking shoes for city exploration and visits to lakeside towns. Dress modestly in churches and cultural sites, covering shoulders and knees, especially in Milan's Duomo. A smart-casual approach or fashionable flair, including a light jacket or scarf is useful for cooler lake evenings.

Where to stay

Whether choosing the elegance of Lake Como or the grandeur of Lake Garda, you'll find a variety of stylish hotels on their shores. And if you're flying internationally, most likely you'll begin your trip in Milan, the fashion capital of Italy. Here are some of the top picks for each destination.

Milan

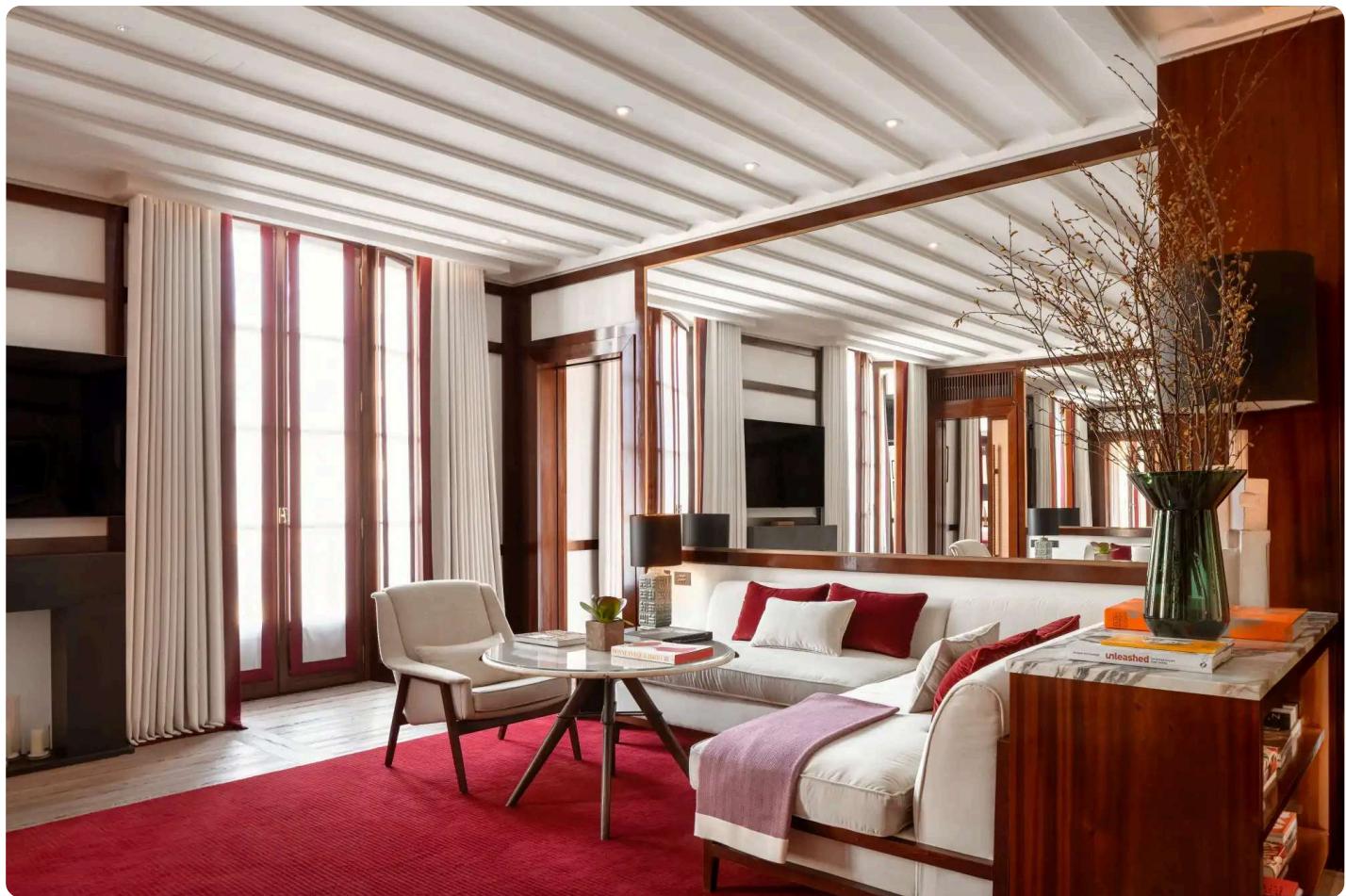


Image courtesy of Portrait Milano

Portrait Milano: A 16th-century former seminary turned luxury hotel (owned by the Ferragamo Family) in the center of Milan's fashion district, featuring a beautiful colonnaded courtyard and refined Italian design.

- **Fora Reserve** perks include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Palazzo Parigi Hotel & Grand Spa Milano: A palatial retreat blending French and Italian style with a spectacular 17,000-square-foot spa and a private garden oasis in the trendy Brera district.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Mandarin Oriental, Milan: Sophisticated hotel set in four elegant 18th-century buildings near La Scala opera house and featuring a two-star Michelin restaurant and an Asian-inspired spa.

- **Mandarin Oriental's Fan Club** perks include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast and an upgrade whenever possible.

Grand Hotel et de Milan: A historic 19th-century hotel steps from the Duomo and decorated with period furnishings and modern amenities.

- **Leading Hotels of the World** perks include daily breakfast and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Casa Baglioni - Milan: An art-centric boutique hotel in the Brera district that celebrates 1960s Italian design, featuring a restaurant by a Michelin-starred chef and museum-worthy contemporary art collection.

- **Leading Hotels of the World** perks include daily breakfast and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Lake Como



Image courtesy of Grand Hotel Tremezzo

Villa d'Este: A 16th-century former royal residence in Cernobbio, featuring 25 acres of magnificent gardens, a floating pool on Lake Como and rooms decorated with antique furnishings and silk fabrics.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Grand Hotel Tremezzo: An iconic Art Nouveau palace with three pools including a floating one on the lake, historic details like period furnishings and frescoed walls, and gorgeous views of Bellagio and the Grigne mountains.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

il Sereno: A contemporary architectural masterpiece designed by Patricia Urquiola, featuring sleek minimalist suites, a 60-foot lakefront infinity pool and vertical gardens.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Passalacqua: An 18th-century villa transformed into a luxury retreat with terraced gardens, a private dock and just 24 unique suites.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 food and beverage credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Lake Garda



Image courtesy of Lefay Resort & Spa Lago Di Garda

Grand Hotel Fasano: An elegant lakefront hotel that was a 19th-century hunting lodge of the Austrian imperial family and now features a world-class spa, private beach and a stunning botanical garden on Lake Garda's western shore.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 hotel credit, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

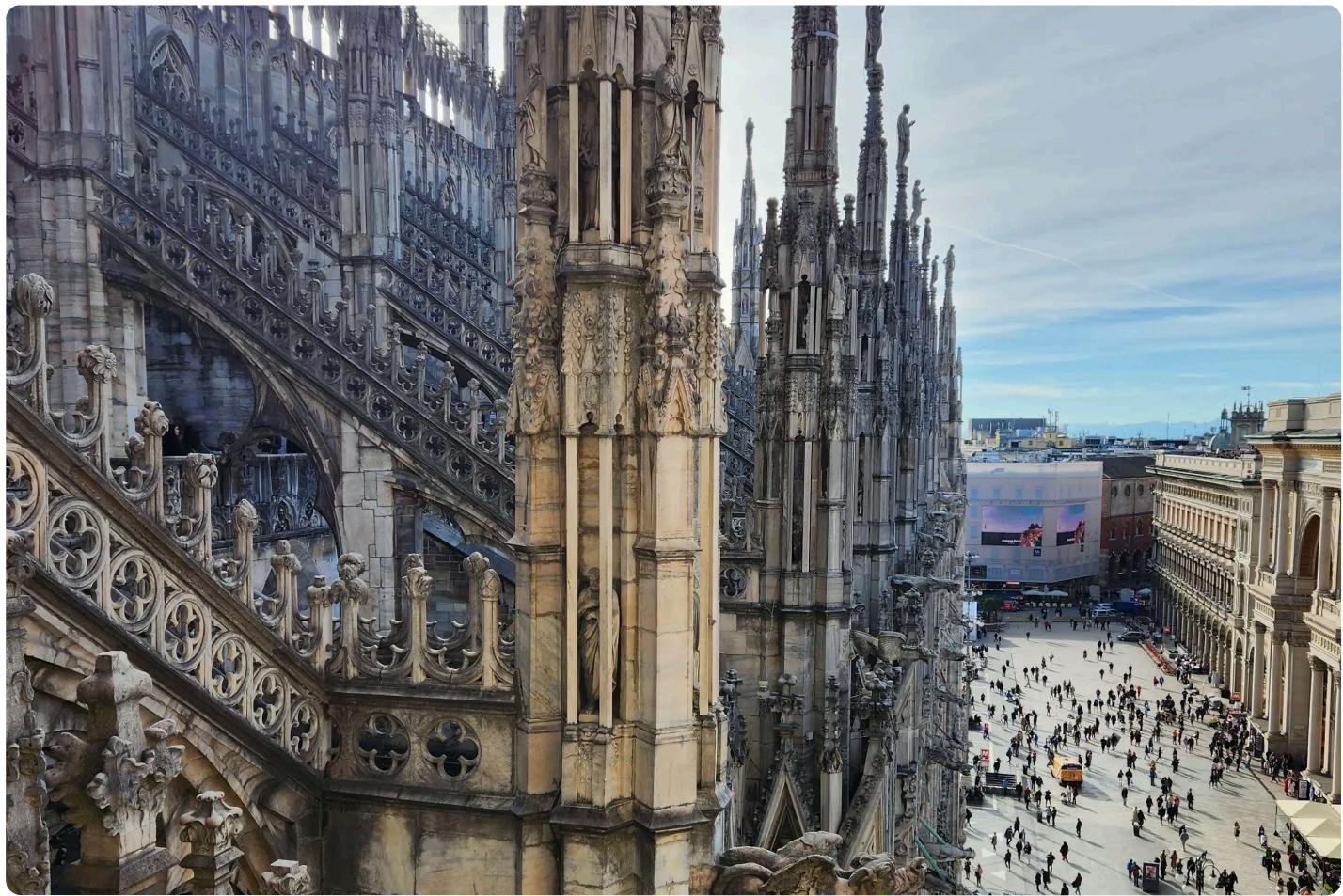
Lefay Resort & Spa Lago Di Garda: Set above Gargnano with panoramic lake views, an eco-conscious wellness resort with a huge spa and infinity pools.

- **Fora Perks** include a \$100 spa credit, complimentary lunch or dinner for up to two people/room once during stay, daily breakfast, an upgrade and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

Lido Palace: A Belle Époque hotel in Riva del Garda, combining original Art Nouveau architecture with contemporary design and offering a two-story spa, lakefront dining and spectacular views.

- **Leading Hotels of the World** perks include daily breakfast and extended check-in/out whenever possible.

History and culture



Northern Italy's history is intertwined with art, commerce and of course its incredible landscapes. Milan rose to prominence during the Roman Empire but truly flourished in the Medieval and Renaissance periods as a center of trade, art and fashion — a reputation it maintains today. The city's crowning jewel, the Gothic Milan Cathedral (Duomo), took nearly six centuries to complete and remains the spiritual heart of the city, where locals gather on the square to celebrate major events and holidays.

The region is also home to Lake Como and Lake Garda, which have attracted nobility, artists and travelers for millennia. Lake Como, shaped like an inverted Y, was a favorite retreat of Roman aristocrats, and later served as inspiration for Leonardo da Vinci, who featured its landscapes in his paintings. The lake's historic villas (particularly Villa Carlotta and Villa del Balbianello) are reminders of noble families.

Lake Garda, Italy's largest lake, was a strategic point between different regions and empires. On the southern shore, Sirmione is well known for its 13th-century castle rising from the water. The town was once a Roman resort destination where wealthy families built elaborate villas with heated pools and intricate mosaics. Today, locals maintain the tradition of the "Festa

del Nodo d'Amore" (Festival of the Love Knot) on the lake, celebrating an ancient legend with a mile-long dining table serving traditional tortellini — a perfect example of how history, food and community are deeply rooted in Northern Italian culture.

Activities



Milan

- Discover Milan's luxurious shopping scene and shop or fashion watch at the iconic **Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II**.
- Visit the **Duomo di Milano** for majestic architecture and panoramic views of the city from the rooftop, a must-see landmark.
- Make sure to book tickets ahead of time for Santa Maria delle Grazie, home to **Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper** — one of the world's most famous masterpieces.
- Take a private tour of the **Sforza Castle**, a historic fortress that houses an impressive Renaissance art collection.
- Stroll through **Brera District**, known for its creative charm, high-end galleries and stylish cafés.

- Unwind in **Parco Sempione**, a peaceful green space perfect for a quiet escape with scenic paths, art installations and views of the Arco della Pace.

Lake Como

- Discover Lake Como's **high-end dining scene**, featuring gourmet waterfront restaurants with lake views and lively nightlife for evening cocktails.
- Take a short trip to the Swiss border, roughly 20 minutes away depending on which part of the lake you're staying, to visit **Lugano** and check out more scenic views and Swiss-Italian delicacies.
- Tour one of the area's renowned **silk factories** to learn about Lake Como's interesting history in silk production.
- Make sure to **explore the lake by boat** — whether taking a guided tour or renting a self-drive boat — to experience seeing the gorgeous villas from the water.
- **Hike scenic trails** winding through small villages and peaceful forests for breathtaking views of the lake.

Lake Garda

- Explore Lake Garda's local art and culture at smaller galleries and artisan workshops in towns like **Sirmione** and **Desenzano**.
- Take a ferry to **Malcesine**, which is full of shops and outdoor dining, but also has a **gondola** that will take you up to **Monte Baldo**, where you can have a mountaintop lunch and witness incredible views of Lake Garda.
- Take an **e-bike tour** to venture into Lake Garda's scenic vineyards and olive groves, covering more ground with ease. And if you're a cyclist, you'll be in good company — the lake's bike paths attract serious cyclists from all over, often stopping over in Riva del Garda.
- For a more personal lake experience than the ferry, book a **private boat tour** to explore hidden coves. For adventurous types, **kite surfing lessons** are also popular.
- Visit the **Vittoriale degli Italiani**, a vast estate once home to poet Gabriele D'Annunzio. This historical site features beautiful gardens, an amphitheater and quirky collections.
- Visit the medieval **Scaliger Castle** (by boat or land) in **Sirmione**, an iconic landmark that looks as if it's floating on Lake Garda.

Add-on destinations



Because the Italian Lakes are in Northern Italy, add-on trips are popular and easily accessible. Crossing the border into Switzerland or Austria can extend your time in the mountains, and carving out time for other Italian cities like Venice and Florence is simple via train.

- **Verona:** Shakespeare's romantic city sits less than an hour from Lake Garda. After you've swooned at Juliet's balcony and caught an opera at the Roman arena, you can be sipping wine by the lake for sunset.
- **Venice:** Adding Venice to your lakes itinerary is a no-brainer since you're already in Northern Italy. The city of canals is just a 2.5-hour drive from Lake Garda, and you'll trade lake views for lagoon vistas and Byzantine architecture.
- **Dolomites:** These dramatic mountains are a natural next stop from Lake Garda, especially if you're visiting in summer for hiking or winter for skiing. The alpine scenery offers a complete change of pace from the Mediterranean feel of the lakes.
- **Lake Maggiore:** The westernmost of the major Italian lakes offers a different vibe from Como and Garda. Its Borromean Islands, with their baroque palaces and spectacular gardens, are a must-see. The lake's less touristy atmosphere is a nice contrast to its more famous siblings.
- **Swiss Alps:** Lake Como sits right near the Swiss border, making it easy to hop up to St. Moritz or Lugano. You can experience two countries' takes on alpine luxury and add some serious mountain adventures to your lake leisure.

For customized recommendations and expert planning, reach out to me to begin your Italian adventure.

Get in touch with Gregory

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*First Name

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