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About Stresa

The second largest lake in Italy, Lake Maggiore is situated in the north west and crosses the border into Switzerland. The Italian part of the lake lies within two regions: Piedmont and Lombardy, with the division from Sesto Calende northwards. The lake also contains 11 islands; the most famous being the Borromean Islands in the gulf between Stresa and Verbania.

The lake was formed by two glaciers which travelled down a fluvial valley from Mount Rosa and from the Saint Gotthard Pass area. The surrounding hills provide many important materials for construction. The pink granite from Baveno has been used for the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan and in structures from Paris to Bangkok. The Limestone form Caldé (near Castelvecchana) has been used for lime mortar in many buildings in Piedmont and Lombardy.

Around the lake Mediterranean species such as lemon, olive and bay will survive and the many gardens flourish with camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons and magnolias. Whilst in the lake there are numerous species of freshwater fish including whitefish, perch, pike, freshwater cod and eels; many of which can be sampled in the local restaurants.

In the Italian part of the lake one of the main tourist resorts is Stresa. Situated in an ideal position on the shores of the Borromean Gulf, Stresa overlooks the unique Isola Bella. Visiting Stresa today it is hard to believe it was once a tiny fishing hamlet (recorded for the first time in 998AD) occupying a narrow strip of land only accessible by a dusty old roman road. Yet it is from this narrow strip of land on the lakeside where Stresa got its name; its ancient name Strixia is thought to come from the Lombard word "strich" which means strip of land. Even today in Stresa dialect the word "strecia" means "strettoia" or narrow passage.

By the 14th century Stresa had grown enough to be granted the title of "Borgo" (village) and therefore the right to hold a weekly market. However during to epidemics and flooding the population dropped drastically and the market was suspended. It wasn't until 1854 that Stresa was once again granted the title of "Borgo" and the weekly market was reinstated.

In the 17th century the Borromean family initiated Stresa's transformation by starting work on Isola Bella and uniting the village. In the 15th century Stresa had been divided in half; the division was marked by the River Crée which was later covered over and now runs beneath Via Roma. To the left of the river the Borromean family ruled and to the right the Visconti family ruled (even today there is an annual friendly football match between the Borromean and Visconti teams). Stresa Visconti was made up of 22 families which in 1653 were offered to the Borromean family for 40 lire each and eventually sold for 600 lire in 1659.

However Stresa really began to grow in the 19th century with the opening of the Simplon Pass in 1806; tourists and merchants could now reach Stresa more easily. Increasing the traffic between Switzerland and Italy the first steam ferry "Verbanio" sailed from Magadino to Arona in 1826 taking one day to do the journey. Passengers and merchants could now travel the length of the lake and even though many towns lacked a landing stage, (Stresa Included) rowing boats were used to shuttle passengers and goods to and from the ferry. In fact ferries were only able to dock in Stresa from 1860 when the first landing stage was built.

An illustrious resident in the late 1800's put Stresa on the map for the rich and famous; the Duchess of Genoa bought the Villa Bolongaro (now the Villa Ducale) and along with her daughter, Margherita became summer residents of Stresa. It was Margherita who was later to become the first Queen of Italy when her husband, King Umberto I died in 1878. The Villa Ducale is now home to the International Centre for Rosminian Studies and houses a vast library.

Noblemen from Milan began to come to Stresa and build magnificent villas and the rich and famous began to visit Stresa. Some of the most well known guests include George Bernard Shaw, Rockefeller, Hemingway, Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin and Princess Margaret. Indeed, Hemingway visited twice and stayed at the Grand Hotel des Îles Borromées where a suite has been named after him; at 2,153 ft² (200 m²) it is the largest, most expensive, and most requested hotel room in Stresa!

The Grand Hotel des Îles Borromées was built in 1861 by four brothers; members of the Omarini family who owned the Hotel Delfino on Isola Bella and after buying some land along the lakefront in Stresa started work on the sumptuous hotel.

It was at the beginning of the 20th century that Stresa eventually took off as a tourist resort. In 1906 the Simplon rail tunnel opened and Stresa was instantly accessible; in fact it later became a stop on the Venice-Simplon Orient-Express service.

In an effort to entice more visitors the idea was had to open a Spa Centre and in



Stresa panorama



The Borromean Rings



Isola Bella and Isola Pescatori



Camelia



Stresa - Via Roma



Villa Ducale, Stresa



Stresa ferry station



Hotel Regina Palace



Grand Hotel des Îles Borromées



Stresa lakefront promenade

1910 this idea was realised with the opening of the Kursaal Spa Centre and casino were these days there is the cable car station. There was a skating ring, exhibitions, concerts, spa treatments and the casino. As there are only five licences for casinos in Italy, Stresa became well known. With a drop in tourism after World War I the Kursaal was demolished and the casino was given a new home at the Hotel Royal and then along the lakefront in the building where there are currently the offices of the Lake District Tourist Board.



Lake District Tourist Board / Ex Stresa Casino



Stresa lakefront concert at sunset

With the increase in tourism in the early 1900's came a boom in hotels and the next additions were the hotel Regina Palace and the Hotel Kaiserhof (Hotel Milan au Lac) in 1908. The Mottarone ski area was also seen as an attraction to tourists and in 1910 work began to cover over the River Crée and create Via Roma which made way for the Stresa to Mottarone railway. This electric rack and pinion railway was opened in 1911; it departed from the ferry station square, travelled up Via Roma to Stresa railway station and then made a stop in Vedasco before reaching the top of Mottarone. The total journey lasted one hour and in its heyday it carried 108,000 passengers in one year. Ski runs were opened up along with a bob sleigh run and one of Italy's first ski jumps was built in 1935. The railway finally closed in 1963 and seven years later the cable car was inaugurated carrying 40 passengers every 20 minutes.



Stresa - Mottarone cable car



A railway carriage from the old Stresa - Mottarone railway (photograph taken at the Transport Museum in Ranco)

Despite the rise in tourists, Stresa still did not have a lakeside promenade. In fact most of the land along the lakefront was occupied by gardens belonging to the hotels or the private villas that used to stand in place of the Hotels Astoria and La Palma. Slowly, however, work began on the promenade in 1922. It was completed in stages and was finally finished in 1930.

After World war II Stresa, once again, needed to make itself known and 1946 the first ever Miss Italia contest was held at the Hotel Regina Palace. This created a lot of media interest in Stresa and the competition went on to be held in Stresa until 1949. Among the future stars to grace the Stresa catwalk was Gina Lollobrigida who came second in 1947. The tradition of beauty contests was renewed when Stresa hosted the Miss Universe Italian final in 2002.

With the addition of three more grand four star hotels, Stresa's reputation as a top class resort has grown with approximately 152,901 visitors who spent at least one night in Stresa - with hundreds of thousands more visiting just for the day. There is now a modern Congress Palace which hosts many international conferences, an annual cinema festival, the Stresa Musical Weeks and many other concerts and events. Stresa is also home to the internationally renowned Hotel School "Istituto Professionale Alberghiero E. Maggia".

