

## Italy: Lake Como & the Italian Lake District

### Bike Vacation Only

While many claim to know the Italian lake district, few have visited Lake Iseo. Nestled between Lake Garda and Lake Como, this pristine lagoon is Lombardy's hidden gem—almost completely unknown to tourists. Here, you'll explore the lake's serene waters by boat, and its quiet shoreline by bike, before ferrying to charming Monte Isola to discover its 13th-century castle and hamlet. Our leaders will introduce you to the vineyards of Franciacorta, where you'll meet local vintners and sample their sparkling wines. Observe glaciers through the dome-windowed cars of the legendary Bernina Express en route to Switzerland's St. Moritz. After a glorious adventure in the opulent city of Bellagio, your knowledge (and enjoyment!) of the Italian lakes district will outshine that of mere tourists.

### Cultural Highlights

- Sample delicious sparkling wines at a cantina in Franciacorta, Italy's "Champagne" region.
- Cycle the scenic lakeside bike paths around Lake Iseo, made famous when the artist Christo installed his "floating piers" here.
- Marvel at breathtaking scenery when you ride the UNESCO-listed Bernina railway, then cycle among the splendid Bernina peaks.
- Ride the easy bike paths of the Valtellina valley, blanketed in vineyard terraces among miles of dry-stone walls.
- Taste delicious Pizzoccheri pasta and local cheeses only found in Valtellina.

### What to Expect

This tour offers easy terrain and is suitable for beginning cyclists who are comfortable with some easy uphill rides and riding on packed gravel paths. Unpaved terrain is approximately 10% of the entire cycling offered. The tour runs mostly on dedicated and well-marked bike paths as well as country roads. We recommend a hybrid bike or an E-bike for this tour. Road bikes are available, but riders should be aware that on land-package days 2, 4, and 5 there are some short stretches on unpaved paths or roads.

Our VBT support vehicle is always available for those who would like assistance with hills.

**Tour Duration:** 7 Days

**Average Daily Mileage:** 7-32 miles

**Average Cycling Time:** 1-5 hours

**Group size:** 14-20 max

## Climate Information

### Average High/Low Temperature (°F)

May 72°/49°, June 79°/56°, July 79°/59°, August 81°/61°, September 75°/55°, October 63°/47°

### Average Rainfall (in.)

May 2.8, June 2.5, July 1.5, August 2.6, September 2.2, October 2.7

## DAY 1: Travel to Sulzano on Lake Iseo / Warm-up ride / Welcome reception and dinner

Meet your fellow travelers and VBT trip leaders at 12:45 p.m. at the VBT hotel in Sirmione.

Please plan to have lunch before meeting the group in the hotel lobby. You can store your luggage at the reception desk and change into your biking clothes using the hotel facilities. Your trip leaders will hold a safety talk at the hotel for about 45 minutes. Afterwards you walk a short distance to board your private motorcoach. En route to Sulzano, scenically situated on Lake Iseo, you stop to enjoy a warm-up ride through the small lakeside town of Iseo. From there follow the lakeshore, taking advantage of a local bike path for part of the way.

In the afternoon, settle in your romantic lakeside hotel in the picturesque village of Sulzano. You might recognize the postcard-picture of Monte Isola within the lake, made famous in 2016 when artist Christo placed yellow floating piers to connect the island of Monte Isola and the private islet of San Paolo to the mainland. That summer, in only 16 days, 1,300,000 people walked these piers to discover this incredible place.

Tonight, enjoy a welcome cocktail reception on the hotel's lakeside manicured terrace and get to know your fellow travelers. Then board a private ferry to Monte Isola to enjoy your welcome dinner in a very special and scenic location.

### Today's Ride Choices

Afternoon: Warm-up — 12 km (7 miles)

### What to Expect:

Today's warm up-ride follows easy roads into the small town of Iseo. Your ride continues on flat terrain

along Lake Iseo, partly on a bike path, to Sulzano and your hotel. The roads are paved and you can find some pedestrian and car traffic along the way.

Cumulative Distance Range: 12 km (7 miles)

Included Meals: Dinner

## DAY 2: Ferry across the lake / Monte Isola / Lake Iseo loop

After breakfast, set off to explore the stunning shores of Lake Iseo by private boat and by bike. Also known as Sebino, the crystal-clear Lake Iseo is the fourth largest lake in Lombardy. Its shores are renowned for their lush mountains, medieval towns, and scenic roadways carved into the hillsides. A private boat whisks you to Monte Isola Island in just five minutes. Despite its size, it is one of Italy's official "most beautiful villages" and was ranked the third Best European Destination in 2019. Take time here to stroll its cobbled lanes and discovery its countless old-world charms. Then set off on a 6-mile loop around the entire island, before boarding your boat again. Journey across the lake and past the picturesque private island of Loreto and along the dramatic western side. Here, the road, carved out of the mountain, runs high up on a cliff, past a waterfall and through short tunnels. Soon you disembark and continue cycling to Pisogne where options for lunch on your own are numerous. Take time here if you wish to visit its cobbled alleys and piazza.

Later between Toline and Vello, you ride along the sheer and rocky side of the mountain, with sweeping views of the lake below and the alpine vistas beyond. In the distance, marvel at the vistas of several spurs, including the massive wall of the Bogn di Castro cliff.

Tonight, relax and enjoy your hotel's amenities before dining on the manicured terrace.

### Today's Ride Choices

Morning: Montisola Loop, Costa Volpino to Pisogne — 16 km (10 miles)

Afternoon: Pisogne to Sulzano — 16 km (10 miles)

### What to Expect:

Today's ride, except for a 2-mile climb on Monte Isola, follows an easy, relaxing, and well-paved route,

mostly on bike path, around Lake Iseo and the island of Montisola. You get to the start of the rides by two separate and scenic trips by private motorboat: one is just 5 minutes, the other about 50 minutes.

Cumulative Distance Range: 16 – 32 km (10 – 20 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

## DAY 3: Ride country roads in Franciacorta, the Italian ‘Champagne’ region

After breakfast, you head south into Franciacorta, affectionately known as the “Champagne” of Italy. This scenic region of rolling vineyards produces excellent sparkling wines from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes, including Berlucchi and Ca’del Bosco. The traditions of sparkling wine go back several centuries, about a year before the monk Dom Perignon arrived in French Champagne in 1570!

You follow a partially protected cycleway this morning passing quiet monasteries and manicured vineyards. Around lunch time, stop at a small local family-run winery. This lovely farm, with its own vegetable garden, livestock, olive oil, and honey, was founded around 1600; the grape harvest is still carried out exclusively by hand to control and guarantee the quality. As our guide Francesca – who runs the farm with her brother Gianluca – leads us on a tour of the cantina, she explains their classic method of winemaking and why the farm only sells its wines here, on property.

Your tour ends just in time for lunch on the sunny terrace. As an *aperitivo*, sample the house Brut and Satèn; each has rested 24 months before being opened and served fresh for us. Then savor hand-made *casoncelli*, a stuffed pasta, prepared and seasoned by Francesca’s mother Daniela with farm-fresh ingredients. After, follow a different route back to Iseo, weaving through quaint hamlets and past wineries. You have some time on the city lake promenade to scout a gelato shop or do some shopping, before enjoying another scenic trip back to your hotel by private boat.

This evening, dinner is on your own. Stroll the hamlet of Sulzano or ferry to Montisola, exploring its pedestrian-only cobbled streets and vaulted alleyways, and finding an ideal spot for dinner on an intimate back street or on the scenic marina.

Today's Ride Choices

Morning: Clusane to Al Rocol – 28 km (17 miles)

Afternoon: Al Rocol to Iseo — 16 km (10 miles)

What to Expect:

Today's ride is easy to moderate, following gently rolling hills mostly on country roads and bike paths. Your route is almost completely on paved terrain. Your rides include an initial and a final short trip by private motorboat on Lake Iseo, both very enjoyable.

Cumulative Distance Range: 16 — 44 km (10 — 27 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch

## **DAY 4: Cycle the Oglio River biking path in Valcamonica / Savor Valtellina specialties at dinner**

After breakfast, leave Lake Iseo by private boat to Marone to enjoy your final ride on the eastern bank. From here start cycling along its shores. You soon coast into the green park of the Oglio River, a roaring river whose source is in the Alps. Follow its banks on easy country roads by farms, tiny villages, and varied path. You pedal through Valcamonica, the largest valley of the central Alps and once the only trade route to the Republic of Venice and the sea.

In prehistoric times, this region was inhabited by the Camuni, an ancient people conquered by Rome in the 1st century. As you ride, you come upon relics of this population, like the mysterious sanctuary of Minerva and the picturesque town of Cividate Camuno—The most impressive remains are the rock engravings carved from the Neolithic to the Iron Ages, named the first UNESCO World Heritage site in Italy in 1979. You will see some examples along the way.

Later today, you travel via the Aprica mountain pass into the Valtellina valley. Your destination is the city of Tirano, nestled at the foot of the Bernina mountains and gateway to Switzerland. If you are familiar with the Giro d'Italia bicycle race, you might recognize the names of some of the peaks that surround you — Mortirolo, Gavia, Stelvio — all epic stages of the famous race with grades of up to 23%!

Settle in to the eco-friendly Curt di Clement and enjoy a delicious apple juice as a welcome drink from our hosts, while having a short presentation about this historical house. Tonight, dine at a local traditional restaurant, savoring the specialties of Valtellina, including buckwheat noodles, here called 'Pizzoccheri,' served with Casera cheese, and Bresaola, a dried cured meat.

## Today's Ride Choices

Morning: Marone to Oglio — 28 km (17 miles)

Afternoon: Oglio to Cerveno — 18 km (11 miles)

## What to Expect:

Today's route follows Lake Iseo's eastern bank for several well-paved, flat miles. Then you'll enter a valley and follow the Oglio Riverbanks, a stretch that is occasionally unpaved. You'll ride in sunny areas, then forested and shaded stretches, crossing the roaring river several times. It's never a dull ride today.

Cumulative Distance Range: 18 — 46 km (11 — 28 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Dinner

## DAY 5: Ride the Bernina Railway / Bike the Roseg Valley to St. Moritz, Switzerland

After a hearty breakfast, you leave Tirano on the famous Bernina Express train. This magnificent rail adventure crosses the border into Switzerland and climbs to the glistening Albula and Bernina glaciers. In total, the railway passes through 55 tunnels, crosses 196 bridges and ascends inclines of up to 7%. It is the highest railway crossing in all of Europe and in 2008 some segments of it were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site for its outstanding engineering prowess and for its early impact — it opened in 1904 — on the socioeconomics of the region. Sitting in dome-window panoramic cars, you marvel at sweeping alpine vistas en route to your next extraordinary cycling destination.

After a breathtaking journey, you get off in Pontresina. The Engadin region, a long alpine valley surrounded by soaring peaks offers spectacular views. From Pontresina, you cycle into the Roseg Valley, following a gradual ascending, unpaved road free from car traffic; only the crackle of your tires on the gravel and the whirl of horse sledges carrying passengers and goods to the lodge at the bottom of the valley break the silence. Your unbelievably scenic ride delivers you to the Roseggletscher Mountain Lodge, nestled at 6,000 feet. From here you may continue on foot toward the glacier. Savor a well-earned lunch here as you soak in the splendor and tranquility of nature. Back in Pontresina, you continue cycling in the shade of high spruce and larch trees on an unpaved scenic mountain path, along romantic Lake Staz to the outskirts of St. Moritz. Here your Bernina red train returns you to Tirano.

Once in Tirano, be sure to take time to stroll the alleys of the Old Town, admiring the medieval palaces and the city gates that are said to have been planned by Leonardo da Vinci in the 15th century. Visit the splendid Renaissance Basilica della Madonna di Tirano, where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared in 1504. Your trip leaders will have plenty of tantalizing suggestions for dinner on own.

#### Today's Ride Choices

Morning-Afternoon: Pontresina to Roseg Gletscher and St. Moritz — 20 km (13 miles)

#### What to Expect:

The ride today is mostly on unpaved well packed terrain, ideal for E-bikes and hybrid bikes. Roseg Valley ride is on a well-worn, there-and-back unpaved path. The first 4 miles to the lodge are uphill, and consequently the 4 miles back are downhill. The 5 mile ride to St. Moritz follows an undulating terrain, initially unpaved and in the forest, then on a large paved road till the town of St. Moritz and along its lakeshores. All together a memorable ride!

Cumulative Distance Range: 20 km (13 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast

## DAY 6: Cycle the Valtellina Valley bike path to Lake Como and Bellagio

Today you follow a flat and relaxing route along the Adda River from Tirano to the shores of Lake Como. You ride on the well-marked Adda River cycle path, traversing the Rhaetian and Orobic Alps south of the Swiss Canton of Grubünden. This is a beloved paradise for bikers of any ability and it has a long cycling tradition: The cycle tourist's guide of Valtellina, which describes more than 40 itineraries in this region of outstanding beauty, was first edited by the Italian Touring Club in 1906!

As you ride, marvel at castles and churches perched high up on the slopes. Pedal past terraced vineyards that stretch for miles as you cross the largest mountain terraced wine region in Europe. More than 1,500 miles of dry-stone walls demarcate the vineyards here in a unique configuration. Pedal alongside apple orchards and small farms and later pause for a picnic lunch with local specialties like spelt salad, cheeses matured in the mountain huts, and frittata made with fresh farm eggs.

Later, you arrive at the stunning shores of Lake Como and embark a ferry to Bellagio. As you cross these fabled waters, admire the picturesque villages hugging the water, lush green hills rising all around, and the unrivalled beauty of this dreamy corner of Italy. You settle in to your superbly located hotel in the center of Bellagio. Later, drink in the beauty of the lake during a festive farewell dinner on the shore.

#### Today's Ride Choices

Morning: Tirano to Picnic spot — 35 km (22 miles)

Afternoon: Picnic spot to Desco — 17 km (11 miles)

#### What to Expect:

Today's ride follows the Adda River on a well paved and easy bike path.

Cumulative Distance Range: 17 — 52 km (11 — 33 miles)

Included Meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

## DAY 7: VBT Bicycling Vacation ends

Your tour ends after breakfast. You can travel to the town of Como by ferry or hydrofoil, where a train can take you to Milan or other destinations. Or ferry to Varenna (15 minutes) and board a train to Milan's central railway station and Malpensa airport.

Included Meals: Breakfast

## Accommodations

May vary depending on departure date.

### Hotel Rivalago (Days 1-3)

Located in the charming village of Sulzano, Hotel Rivalago enjoys a serene location on the shores of Lake Iseo facing the island of Monte Isola. This romantic property is comfortable in every way, run by Antonella



Pastore since its opening in 2006. During your stay, relax in the garden or on the jetty, take your meals al fresco by the lake, and lounge by the swimming pool after a day of exploring. Each air-conditioned room is cozy and well-appointed with all the amenities you need. Savor locally sourced meals lovingly prepared at La Veranda restaurant and stroll into town to explore.

### **Hotel Curt di Clement (Days 4-5)**

Owned and operated by the noble Merizzi-Clement family, the Curt di Clement has been lovingly restored to its 16th-century beauty and transformed into an eco-friendly hotel. It is ideally located in the oldest part of Tirano, surrounded by the stone houses, chapels, wooden balconies and slate roofs that are typical of an Italian mountain village. Enjoy splendid views of the Bernina mountain range and relax on the sun terrace with a fresh breakfast sourced from local farms. Explore the berry and herb garden. And enjoy the local character and feel of a unique hotel designed with reclaimed natural material. Note that only rooms on the third floor provide air conditioning.

### **Hotel Florence Bellagio (Day 6)**

Built atop ancient fortifications on the promenade alongside beautiful Lake Como, the Hotel Florence Bellagio evolved from an inn dating to the mid-19th century. That long tradition of hospitality welcomes you today. Sip a cocktail at the bar, dine on seasonal fare in the main hall with vaulted ceilings and period décor, or enjoy alpine views from the garden overlooking the lake. Each private room is uniquely furnished and features the handiwork of local artisans. Air conditioning and free WiFi are available throughout the property.