

“Villas and Gardens of the Italian Lakes”

10-Day Tour – September 28 to October 7, 2026

This is a “Members Only” trip with a maximum of 15 paying guests.

£3,495 per person (based on minimum 12 paying guests)

£995 Single Room Supplement

MOBILITY Note – A good degree of mobility is required to get the most out of this holiday as there are a large number of steps at many of the gardens and to access the hotel in Lake Garda. We will be cruising by small boat to reach a variety of islands. These boats have easy on and off access and lake sailing should be calm and smooth. **If you have mobility or balance issues** (e.g., you walk slowly, have frequent joint pain, need walking aids, etc.), or are uncomfortable on boats, **you should not enroll on this trip**. If your mobility status worsens prior to the trip, you should withdraw from the trip and use your travel insurance to pursue a refund. The tour guide has the right and responsibility to exclude you from touring sites if he/she deems that you cannot safely traverse the planned sites.

Overview

On September 28, 2026, HPS/MAG will begin our tour of the outstanding villas and gardens of the Italian Lake District. All travelers will arrange their own air travel to Milan Malpensa Airport where we will meet our tour guide Kate Williamson at 11:00 AM and board our comfortable coach.

Over the next 9 days we will visit the villas and gardens along the lakeshores of Lake Como and Lake Garda; cruise by private boat to islands in Lake Maggiore and Lake Orta to view ornate palace gardens, romantic terrace gardens and extraordinary private gardens; visit private gardens including the President of the Italia Camellia Society; and end with a visit to the art-filled Heller Garden. In the evenings you are free to explore the lakeside towns of Como, Stresa and Garda. We will also enjoy lunch with a local champagne-type wine tasting and a visit to a local olive oil producer to learn more about the variety of olive oils and to do a little shopping.

On October 7, 2026, we will board our coach in Gardone Riviera to return to the Milan Malpensa Airport where we will continue on with our own travel arrangements.

Itinerary

Day 1 – Monday 28 September 2026



We meet our local guide Kate Williamson at the **Milan Malpensa Airport (at 1100 hrs)**, board our coach, and travel to the town of **Como** where we will check into our lakeside hotel, the **4-star Barchetta Excelsior** for the next two nights. The hotel is situated in the heart of Como within the pedestrian area and very close to the lakeshore. Lake Como is enchanting at any hour of the day, on any day of the year, and has been celebrated widely by poets and artists for its landscapes, historical villas and villages perched on the mountains. A quiet, relaxing and welcoming atmosphere will greet you at the Barchetta Excelsior Hotel with its easy access to the town centre and lakefront walks. On arrival our guide will give us a **walking tour of Como**. This evening, we will enjoy a **welcome dinner**.

Day 2 – Tuesday 29 September 2026



Today we have an enchanting day on **Lake Como**, so similar and yet so different from its larger neighbour, Maggiore. We drive up the lake to **Tremezzo** where we will have time to enjoy the elegant 18th century **Villa Carlotta**. Around the house the layout is formal with lemon arbours on the terraces and immaculate formal gardens. While further away from the villa we will discover a relaxed English-style garden in the woodland, dotted with unusual trees. The dell of tree ferns is certainly one of the best in Italy. Palms, Japanese maples and cactus add variety, and the newly recovered olive grove and farm estates can be discovered if you follow the paths uphill. The house itself has its own story to tell, full of neo-classical art treasures including paintings by Hayez and sculptures by Canova and his contemporaries.

After our visit to Villa Carlotta, we will have time in Tremezzo for lunch (not included). We then take a private boat to visit **Villa Balbianello** on the Lavedo point which, combined with the romantic arrival at the water gates landing stage, turns the expedition into an Arcadian delight. In a sylvan setting of pine, cypress and oak, with pollarded plane trees, manicured lawns and flowerbeds, the garden is maintained to an exceptionally high standard by the Italian National Trust or FAI (Fondo Ambiente Italiano). With unparalleled views over the lake, the villa itself tells many stories of its various owners and is a tribute to its last owner, the famous Italian explorer Guido Monzino.

Evening at leisure.

Day 3 – Wednesday 30 September 2026



Today, following breakfast, we check out of the hotel and head for [Villa Cicogna Mozzoni](#), situated in what were ancient hunting grounds for the nobility, in the foothills between Varese and Lake Lugano. Here we will be privileged to enjoy a **private guided tour** with the owner. The garden was established by Ascanio Mozzoni, a man of great culture who from his travels, including to Rome, brought back ideas for the arrangement of his garden over seven levels. In 1580 his only daughter was married to Giovan Pietro Cicogna, through whose descendants we arrive at today's owners. The most pleasant characteristic of the villa, apart from its surprisingly intact frescoes, is its merging with the garden. A two-flight stairway with a brook running in between leads directly to the halls of the villa. The walled garden is a typical example of a formal Italian garden with box hedges, water basins, fountains and a grotto. The visit raises the "who" and "how" questions relative to the conservation of historic buildings and should prove to be most illuminating.

We continue to Lake Maggiore stopping for lunch (not included) along the way to arrive in the early afternoon in the famous little resort town of Stresa. We check into our comfortable accommodation at the **4-star** [Hotel La Palma](#) situated directly on the lakefront in Stresa with picturesque views over Lake Maggiore. The Hotel La Palma welcomes and invites you to discover the romantic atmosphere and beauty of Lake Maggiore from the wonderful Isola Bella that houses the impressive 17th century Palazzo Borromeo to the impressive bordering mountains. Situated opposite the lakeside promenade with only a five-minute walk to the town centre of Stresa, the hotel offers state-of-the-art accommodation and easy access to the elegant lake front promenade.

Evening at leisure.

Day 4 – Thursday 1 October 2026

Today, after breakfast, we set off exploring the famous [Isola Madre](#), which in contrast to Isola Bella has a simple, unspoiled aspect, where tropical and Mediterranean plants, citrus fruits, crape myrtle, hibiscus, bougainvillea, protea and agaves all flourish according to the changing seasons. The English romantic feel is due to the re-working of the former Renaissance terraced gardens. Enjoy shaded and fragrant walks past gardenias, camellias, modern plantings including lantanas and Brugmansia, and be fascinated by the story of the salvage of the ancient Himalayan cypress!

We then continue to [Isola Pescatori](#), the 'island of fishermen', with its narrow-cobbled street and pretty harbour. The island was thought to be first inhabited in the 10th century and there are now only a handful of residents. Take time to visit the church on the island and there is a good choice of restaurants and snack bars for lunch (not included).



In the afternoon we cruise to [Isola Bella](#) to see the vast Baroque palace built from the island's rock and surrounded by terraced gardens that were inspired by the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Our visit will reveal the magnificent palace, which was constructed in the 17th century by Carlo III of the House of Borromeo and was the scene of sumptuous and lavish parties, attended by the cream of European nobility. Out into the gardens, we find an ornate parterre with low box hedges and brilliantly coloured flowers, a pond adorned with blue and pink water lilies and lush plantings of oranges, lemons, citrons, kumquats, pomelos and more.

Evening at leisure.

Day 5 – Friday 2 October 2026

Today, we drive towards the charming little **Lake of Orta** for a visit to an interesting **private garden**, situated on the hillside above the lake. The site is historic, but the vision is a blend of old and new, as the eye moves from all things botanical to the magnificent, natural landscape beyond. The curator, who boasts an illustrious career spanning over 40 years, as an expert of Lakeland gardens, has given us a garden rooted in the past which is looking to the future.

Later, we drive down to the picturesque old town of **Orta San Giulio**, nestled on a wooded headland, for free time for lunch (not included).

In the afternoon, we will take a short boat trip over to visit the tiny island of **San Giulio** with its ancient houses and Romanesque Basilica Church, before our return to Stresa.

Evening at leisure.

Day 6 – Saturday 3 October 2026

Today, following breakfast, we start with a real treat by visiting the **private garden** of the **President of the Italian Camellia Society**. The site is above the shores of Lake Maggiore surrounded by mountains and facing the southeast. Since the 1950s, due to the combination of acid ground, a mild climate and frequent rainfall, the garden has housed a remarkable collection of camellias, developed with great passion by Antonio Sevesi, the founder of the Italian Society of Camellias and the current President. The camellia collection includes 500 plants and 318 cultivars. The garden, of course, is in full bloom in spring with the japonicas but here you will also discover *Camellia sasanqua*, *sinensis* and the newer *Camellia azalea*, as well as the usual yellow camellia which gives the property its name '**La Camellia d'Oro**'. This garden is a delight to visit at any time of the year. **Lunch is included** here.

Later we visit the gardens of [Villa Taranto](#). Flourishing with rare botanical examples, the early 20th century concept of a garden as both an aesthetic experience and a scientific adventure reaches its height of perfection in the grounds of Villa Taranto. In 1931, Captain Neil McEachern, of Scottish origin but whose father had become rich through his entrepreneurial

skills in Australia, bought the estate through an advertisement which appeared in the Times. His intention was to create an English-style garden where he could grow plants from all over the world, to delight the eye and satisfy the curiosity of the horticulturalist. Today you can appreciate this very important botanical collection with a wide range of plants. Captain McEachern is buried in the grounds which are a true testament to his dedication, continual work and great love of nature, as well as to the generations of head gardeners that came after him.

We return to hotel where the evening is at leisure.

Day 7 – Sunday 4 October 2026



Today, following an early breakfast, we drive eastward into Lombardy to visit the remarkable house-museum of the [Fondazione Zani](#). Opened in 2020, following a notoriously difficult period for everyone, this was the home of a famous Lombardy industrialist and the result of years of passionate and eclectic collecting plus creative horticultural practice. The house-museum collection features over 1,200 works of Baroque and Rococo art, including paintings, sculptures, furniture, and decorative objects from the 17th and 18th centuries. The museum is complemented by an elegant Italian-style garden, conceived as an extension of the house itself. Sculptures, fountains, architectural elements, and carefully designed greenery create a harmonious dialogue between art and nature.



After our visit, we drive into the heart of the **Franciacorta** area of vineyards where the highest level of champagne-type wine is achieved (a totally different method to how Prosecco from the Veneto area is made). Our visit **includes lunch and tastings at a local winery**.

We continue to our comfortable hotel in **Gardone Riviera** where you are free to explore and dine this evening at leisure.

Day 8 – Monday 5 October 2026



After breakfast, we visit the award-winning garden park of [Sigurtà a Valeggio sul Mincio](#) – a property with a long history from being originally agricultural land centuries ago to its more modern garden and park today. It has what are considered to be exceptionally green lawns for Italy, Art Topiaries, landscaped elements like ponds, statues, towers, trees that are flowering throughout the year, and its amazing labyrinth designed by the famous maze-designer Adrian Fisher and inaugurated in 2011. Colourful plantings, inspired landscaping and careful maintenance make this property a joy to behold. Depending on the month, there are thousands of roses, dahlias, chrysanthemums, waterlilies, lotus, hydrangeas, various trees and summer to autumn borders dancing with butterflies and bees.

We will stop in a nearby town for some free time and an opportunity to get lunch (not included) before we continue to an interesting, **small, private garden** on the eastern shore of Lake Garda. With over 40 years of history and 800+ species of plants, the garden is a true botanical paradise. It is home to a broad variety of roses, shrubs, trees, grasses, citrus fruits, hydrangeas, irises, anemones, etc. in an interestingly landscaped context on a site where vineyards originally stood. We can admire both the romantic park and the Mediterranean garden and feel the love for nature and beauty passed on across the generations.



Our final stop en route back to the hotel will be at a **local olive oil producer** to discover the important Garda Bresciano DOP extra-virgin olive-oil. This is some of the finest EVO in Italy and, at this family run olive grove with its pressing rooms, we will learn about cultivation in the field, types of olives, production techniques and the gastronomic and cosmetic products available. There will be an opportunity to enjoy some tasting and buy some gifts from the shop if you desire.

Evening at leisure.

Day 9 – Tuesday 6 October 2026

This morning, following breakfast, we travel by private boat from near our hotel to visit [Isola del Garda](#) with a guided tour of its extraordinary garden and Venetian-style neo-Gothic Villa. Here we can admire the picturesque island setting, the lush vegetation, cypresses, trees, roses, box hedges, rare fruits like the jujuba (*ziziphus jujuba*) and other essences in a delightful garden setting on terraces boasting spectacular views to and across the waters of the lake.

We will enjoy some free time in **Gardone** to explore and have lunch (not included) before visiting the nearby [Heller Garden](#), with its delightful mix of modern plantings and sculptures. Heller was the designer for the Swarovski company; he remains the curator of the gardens, recently bought from him by the Porsche family. In the garden you can admire art works by Rodin, Roy Liechtenstein, Keith Haring, Niki de Saint Phalle, Renoir and many more, while immersed in vegetation with over 3000 plant species. There is something to admire all year round!

This evening, we enjoy a **farewell dinner** and an opportunity to discuss the highlights of our trip.

Day 10 – Wednesday 7 October 2026

This morning, following breakfast, we make our way back to Milan Malpensa Airport where the group will disperse on arrival and continue on with their own travel arrangements.

Trip Costs:

£3,495 per person (based on minimum 12 paying guests)

£995 Single Room Supplement

Included in the price:

- Nine nights' bed and breakfast; two nights at the four-star Hotel Barchetta Excelsior on Lake Como; four nights at the four-star Hotel La Palma on Lake Maggiore; three nights at the four-star Villa Sofia, Gardone Riviera (or similar)
- Welcome Dinner and Farewell Dinner
- Two lunches
- All visits as outlined in the itinerary
- Comfortable coach travel throughout
- Services of expert local tour manager Kate Williamson

Not included (per person):

- Single room supplement £995.00
- Flights

Questions: Please contact internationaltrips@hardyplant.org