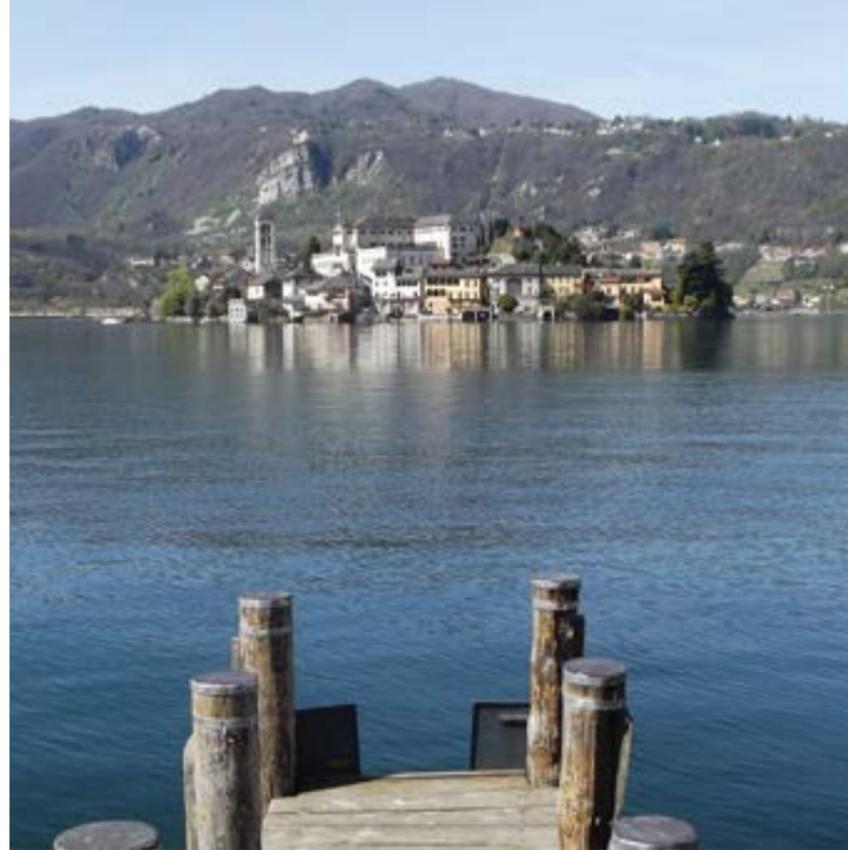




DISCOVER ITALIA!



Clockwise from top left: Arriving at Isola San Giulio; view from Piazza Motta; more of Isola San Giulio; terracotta figures in the chapel on Sacro Monte; the view from Madonna del Sasso; Piazza Motta; view of the island from Piazza Motta; Orta San Giulio; chapel on the Sacro Monte

Photography © Jane Keightley

48 HOURS IN...

# Lake Orta

Peaceful, quiet and smaller than some of the country's more famous lakes, Orta gave **Jane Keightley** the chance to consider the understated beauty of this sub-Alpine secret...

**D**escribed by Honoré de Balzac as “a pearl, enclosed by the green treasure chest of the Piemontese hills”, Orta is one of the smallest of the Italian lakes, and the only one to lie entirely in Piedmont. The main attractions, apart from the beautiful scenery, are the medieval village of Orta San Giulio and the island of San Giulio, which sits just opposite it. I had been inspired to visit Orta after reading a novel set there and, as I made my way down towards the village, it was certainly living up to my expectations.

As soon as I had unpacked I headed off towards the main square, Piazza Motta, where, after a long day's travelling, I sat and relaxed over a large glass of red wine and a delicious risotto made from saffron, rabbit and balsamic vinegar, whilst watching the sun go down over the island. Piazza Motta, which is known as the *salotto*, or drawing room, of Orta, is surrounded on three sides by ancient porticoed palazzos, some covered in frescoes, whilst the fourth side looks out towards the island. Behind a row of horse chestnut trees boats are moored, waiting to ferry you over to the island.

The most important building in the square is the Palazzotto, which was the old council chamber. Covered in frescoes, it has a *loggia* underneath it and is now used periodically for exhibitions. Now replete from both the food and the view I wandered back to my hotel, thankful that cars are not allowed into the narrow medieval streets.



## WHAT TO SEE AND DO

**BOAT TRIP TO ISOLA SAN GIULIO 1**

Piazza Motta 1, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 333 605 0288

[www.motoscafisti.com](http://www.motoscafisti.com)

Motoscafi Pubblici di Orta offer trips across to Isola San Giulio as well as other trips around the lake. You will find them moored up in Piazza Motta just waiting for the opportunity to ferry you across this beautiful lake.

**SACRO MONTE DI ORTA 2**

Via al Sacro Monte, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 0322 911960

[www.sacrimonti.net](http://www.sacrimonti.net)

Spectacularly set on a wooded hillside above Orta San Giulio, with fantastic views of the lake and the island, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is a devotional path which follows a series of frescoed chapels illustrating the life of St Francis of Assisi. The 21 chapels, which were erected between 1591 and 1750, are built in the baroque and Renaissance styles and have in total 376 terracotta sculptures and 900 frescoes, all depicting various stories about the life of St Francis.

**MADONNA DEL SASSO SANCTUARY 3**

Via al Santuario, Madonna del Sasso

☎ +39 0322 981156

[www.comune.madonnadelsasso.vb.it](http://www.comune.madonnadelsasso.vb.it)

This sanctuary, which includes a baroque church, bell tower and hermitage, was built in the 18th century. Inside the buildings are some interesting frescoes and outside there is a Bocca della Verità, or Mouth of Truth. However, the highlight of the trip has to be the magnificent view of the whole of the lake.

**THE TAP MUSEUM 4**

Piazza Martiri 1, San Maurizio d'Opaglio

☎ +39 0323 89622

[www.museodelrubinetto.it](http://www.museodelrubinetto.it)

This surprisingly interesting museum shows the importance of the tap industry to the local area and explains about the technological development of taps and water supply in general. Free to go in, it is open from Tuesday to Sunday between 3pm and 6pm.

**THE KITCHENWARE MUSEUM 5**

Parco Pasquale Maulini 1, Omegna

☎ +39 0323 866141

[www.forumomegna.org](http://www.forumomegna.org)

The *comune* of Omegna is famous in Italy, and beyond, for being home to several companies that produce stylish kitchenware. These include Alessi, Lagostina, Bialetti, Piazza and Calderoni. This museum showcases their products and how they developed. It is open between 9.30am and 5.30pm on weekdays.



View of the island from the Sacro Monte

## DON'T MISS

## THE PINOCCHIO INDUSTRY

Woodworking was a popular occupation in the Valstrona area at the north of the lake.

Production once concentrated on kitchen articles, but now focuses on Pinocchio, the famous wooden puppet. One of the best-known workshops to see this is Mastro Geppetto.

► The next morning I was eager to explore more thoroughly and I started off by looking round the village. Off the Piazza Motta a wide street leads uphill to the parish church of Santa Maria Assunta, a pale peach baroque building founded in the 15th century. On either side of the street are various palazzos, including the Palazzo Gemelli and the Casa dei Nanni (house of dwarves) which takes its name from its dwarf-sized windows. Down the hill I explored the rest of

*Legend has it that the island was the home of dragons and serpents until 390 AD*

Orta's narrow medieval streets, which are lined with restaurants and gift shops, and I also visited the gardens of Casa Bossi, which overlook the lake. I now headed across to Isola San Giulio, which is dominated by its large white convent and the tower of the medieval basilica. Legend has it that the island was the home of dragons and serpents until 390 AD, when Julius, a Christian from Greece, arrived. He wanted to cross over to the island but

nobody would volunteer to row him across, so he calmly used his cloak as a boat and his staff as a rudder and sailed across and vanquished the monsters. He built himself a church and was laid to rest there in 392 AD. He now lies in the crypt of the 11th century church which replaced it. This has a very impressive interior, some well preserved frescoes and a magnificent pulpit made from black serpentine stone quarried from nearby Oira, with carvings denoting Good

winning over Evil. Look out for the crocodile fighting with the phoenix.

Before you walk around the island make time to visit the only shop on the island, which is full of local products, some of them made by the nuns. A narrow cobbled lane leads round the island and the nuns have tried to maintain the tranquillity of the place by putting up signs advocating silence and meditation, though these are largely ignored...

Back on dry land I enjoyed a delicious lunch before heading off to the Sacro Monte. The Sacro Monte di San Francisco is a UNESCO World Heritage Site which consists of a hill dotted with 20 chapels all illustrating the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. This lies just behind Orta San Giulio. Not feeling particularly energetic after my lunch I was pleased to find out that once you get to the top of the hill the chapels are pretty much on the same level. The chapels were all built at different times, in different styles, between 1591 and 1788 and are decorated with frescoes and terracotta figures depicting the life of St Francis. The chapels are all numbered and a finger on each one points you in the direction of the next. It is well worth spending an hour or two wandering around this peaceful place where, as well as being able to enjoy the chapels, you can get beautiful views of the lake and the island. Of all the Sacri Monti in Italy this is the only one dedicated to Saint Francis – all the others are devoted to Christ.

As I sat having a *gelato* back down in the village I noticed a tiny white building high up on a rocky

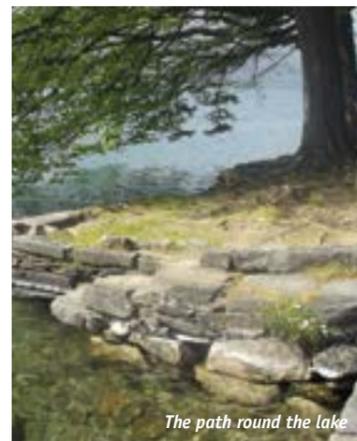
outcrop on the opposite side of the lake. I found out that it was the Madonna del Sasso Sanctuary and that from up there you could view the whole lake – and even see Milan on a clear day. I decided to see this for myself. After a tortuous journey up the mountainside, round numerous hairpin bends, I finally got there and it was certainly worth the effort. The brilliant blue lake shimmered below, surrounded by the snow-capped mountains and, as promised, I could see Milan far away in the distance.

Unfortunately, by the time I got there the pretty baroque church was closed. On the outside of the church, however, there is a version of Rome's Bocca della Verità (Mouth of Truth) where, legend says, you are liable to lose your hand if you put it in the stone lion's mouth and tell a lie. By now I was tired and hungry and I headed back to Orta San Giulio looking forward to a relaxing evening and more good food.

The next morning I decided to head off to explore the rest of the lake. My first stop was San Maurizio d'Opaglio, where I found the Museo del Rubinetto – the tap museum. ►



Villa Crespi



The path round the lake



Isola San Giulio

## WHERE TO STAY

**VILLA CRESPI 6**

Via G. Fava 18, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 0322 911902

[www.villacrespi.it](http://www.villacrespi.it)

Staying at Villa Crespi is a wonderfully unique experience. A Moorish style villa, complete with its own minaret, it offers 14 ornate rooms with sumptuous four poster beds, antique furniture and decadently luxurious bathrooms. Staff are helpful, polite and courteous and there is ample car parking in the grounds around the hotel. Rooms cost from €300 per night including your breakfast.

**HOTEL GIARDINETTO 7**

Via Provinciale 1, Pettenasco, Lago d'Orta

☎ +39 0323 89118

[www.giardinettotel.com](http://www.giardinettotel.com)

Hotel Giardinetto enjoys a marvellous position on the side of the lake in Pettenasco. Most of the bedrooms have their own balconies overlooking the lake and these have absolutely stunning views. The staff are very friendly and helpful and it has its own small beach and pool for guests to use. There is also free parking. Rooms cost from €184 with breakfast included in the price.

**HOTEL LEON D'ORO 8**

Piazza Motta 42, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 0322 911991

[www.albergoleondoro.it](http://www.albergoleondoro.it)

A centuries old building on Piazza Motta, this hotel looks directly across to Isola San Giulio. Bedrooms are bright and airy and some have jacuzzi style baths. Family run and very friendly. Rooms cost from €110 including breakfast.

**LA CONTRADA DEI MONTI 9**

Via Contrada dei Monti 10, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 0322 905114

[www.lacontradademonti.it](http://www.lacontradademonti.it)

A small, family run hotel in the centre of Orta, very well located as it is not far from the restaurants and shops. It has comfortable, stylish rooms, many of them overlooking the pretty and small courtyard where breakfast is served in the summer months. Rooms cost from €110 including your breakfast.

**LOCANDA DI ORTA 10**

Via Olina 18, Orta San Giulio

☎ +39 0322 905188

[www.locandaorta.com](http://www.locandaorta.com)

Locanda di Orta is a very good value hotel right in the centre of Orta. The rooms combine medieval touches with contemporary design. The restaurant is on a rooftop terrace, and dining there means you can enjoy some amazing views. Rooms cost from €75 including breakfast with a view, too.

## DON'T MISS

## IL TRENINO DI ORTA

Between March and October, a little tourist train – il Trenino di Orta – shuttles between the town centre, the Sacro Monte, and the train station, approximately every half hour. It is invaluable for conquering Orta's steep slopes and navigating its narrow streets.

WHERE TO EAT

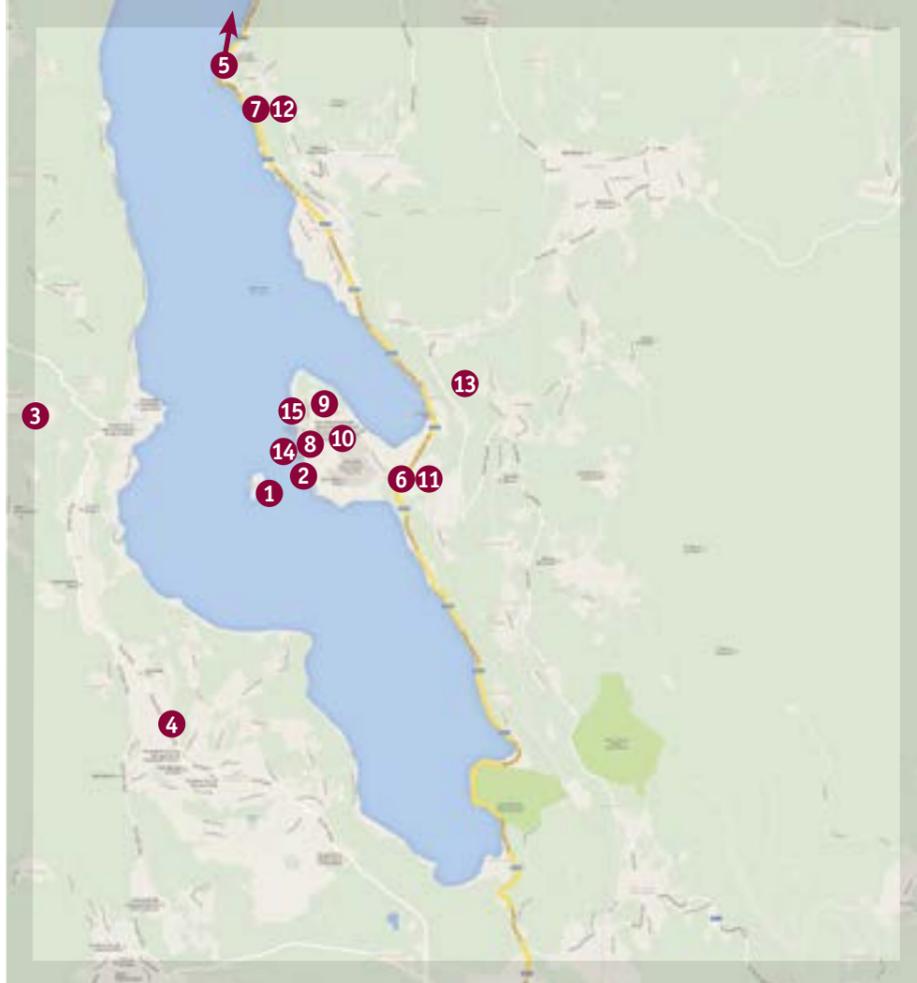
**HOTEL CRESPI 11**  
 Via G. Fava 18, Orta San Giulio  
 ☎ +39 0322 911902  
 www.villacrespi.it  
 Orta's finest hotel is also home to a quite superb restaurant. Antonino Cannavacciuolo's gourmet dishes have earned him two Michelin stars over the years. Set in extravagant, exotic surroundings, dining here is an experience not to be missed. A meal for two with wine will cost from €200.  
**Price range** € € €

**HOTEL GIARDINETTO 12**  
 Via Provinciale 1, Pettenasco  
 ☎ +39 0323 89118  
 www.giardinettohotel.com  
 The Giardinetto's light and airy restaurant looks directly out over the lake and, while you are enjoying the wonderful views, you can have a truly great meal too. The staff are very friendly and helpful, and there is a very good selection of wine to choose from to accompany your dishes. A meal for two with wine will cost from €90.  
**Price range** € €

**TAVERNA ANTICO AGNELLO 13**  
 Via Solaroli 5, Miasino  
 ☎ +39 0322 980527  
 www.anticoagnello.it  
 A very friendly family run restaurant located up in the hills above Orta in Miasino. Set in the grounds of the Villa Nigra, the food is delicious and well worth the journey. The lady who runs it speaks excellent English and is very welcoming. Make sure you save some room for the desserts. A meal for two with wine costs from €85.  
**Price range** € €

**RISTORANTE VENUS 14**  
 Piazza Motta 50, Orta San Giulio  
 ☎ +39 0322 90 362  
 www.venusorta.it  
 Situated in Piazza Motta with magnificent views of the Lake and the island, you can either sit inside, or choose to eat on a table out on the piazza. The food is good and there is a varied and interesting menu on offer. A meal for two with wine costs from €80.  
**Price range** € €

**ENOTECA AL BOUEC 15**  
 Via Bersani 28, Orta San Giulio  
 ☎ +39 339 584 0039  
 www.alboeuc.beepworld.it  
 Don't miss this cosy little wine bar situated in a very old building, and the perfect place to linger for an atmospheric glass or two. They serve light meals to accompany their wonderful wines.  
**Price range** € €



DON'T MISS

**ORTA'S OWN MIAMI BEACH**  
 On the south-eastern shore of the lake lies Spiaggia Miami, Orta's own Miami Beach. Not far from Orta San Giulio, it offers all the usual beach facilities and has a bar and a restaurant. Enjoy a taste of the seaside surrounded by the beautiful scenery of the hills and mountains.

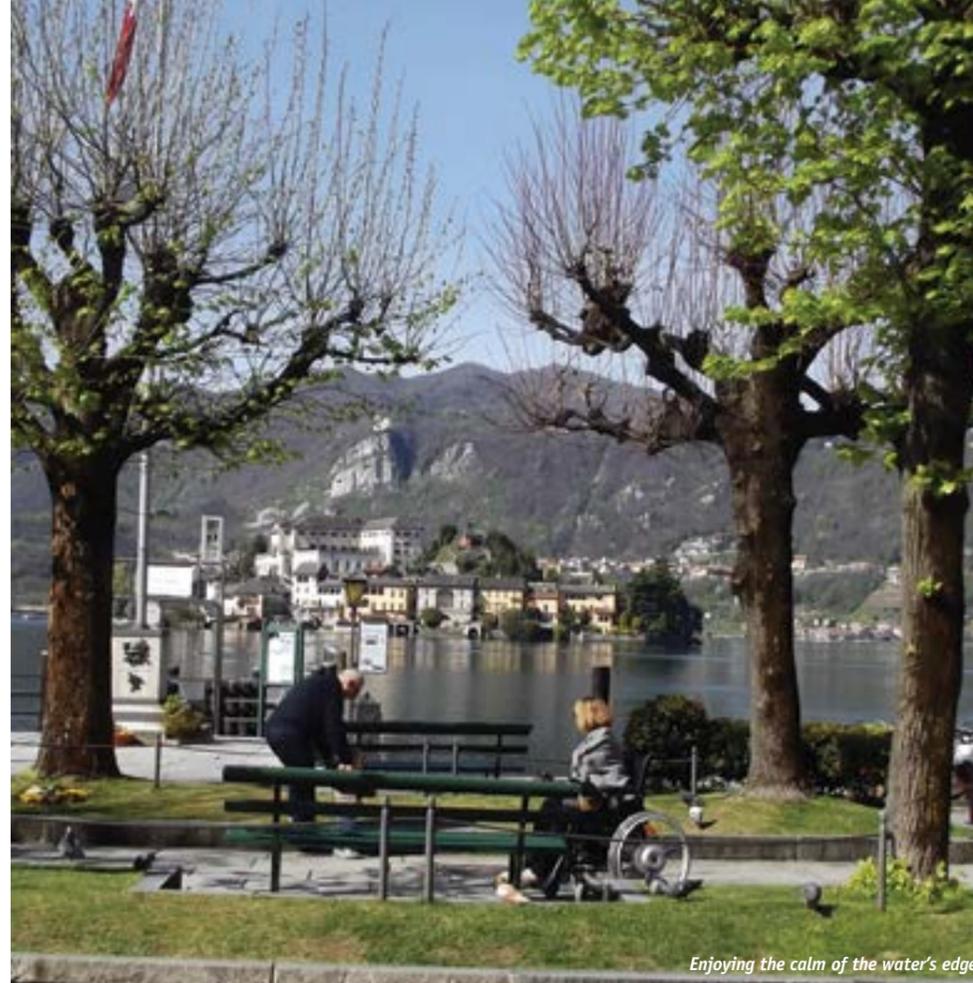
➤ I wondered how interesting a whole museum about taps could be but I was pleasantly surprised. I was shown round by S. Del Duca from the Ecomuseo del Lago d'Orta Association, who explained the history of tap making in the local area. It was fascinating. I'll never look at taps in the same way again! I then went on to Omegna which, although not as obviously picturesque as Orta San Giulio, is a pleasant town. Omegna is famous for being the home of the Italian kitchenware industry and being the headquarters of Alessi and Bialetti and has several factory outlets selling their wares. In the centre of the town is a fascinating museum showcasing the history of kitchenware produced in this region. An interesting fact about the river that flows through Omegna is that it flows north, unlike the other rivers of the Italian Lakes, which all flow south. This has given rise to a saying in the local dialect, "La Nigoglia la va in su e la legge la femo nu!" which means, "The Nigoglia runs upwards and we make our own laws!"

As I returned back to Orta San Giulio I passed through the village of

Legro, which has become famous for the frescoes painted onto the houses, inspired by the work of the local poet and writer Gianni Rodari and by films made in the Lake Orta area.

Back in Orta, I decided I would walk round the whole of the peninsula that Orta is situated on. This path, called the Lungolago 11 Settembre 2001, gives many different viewpoints of the lake. As I walked I admired Orta's most distinctive hotel, Villa Crespi, which is located away from the lake in its own grounds. This amazing building, which resembles a Moorish palace with its minaret, dates from 1879, when Cristoforo Crespi, a cotton trader who made his fortune in Baghdad, returned to Orta and built a palace to remind him of the East. It is now a four-star hotel with a two Michelin starred restaurant.

My stay in this peaceful place was now drawing to a close and although I had managed to fit in a great deal, 48 hours was not long enough and I would love to return and have time to try some of the beautiful and scenic walks in the area and visit Lake Orta's own sandy beach, Spiaggia Miami. ■



Enjoying the calm of the water's edge



Santa Maria Assunta

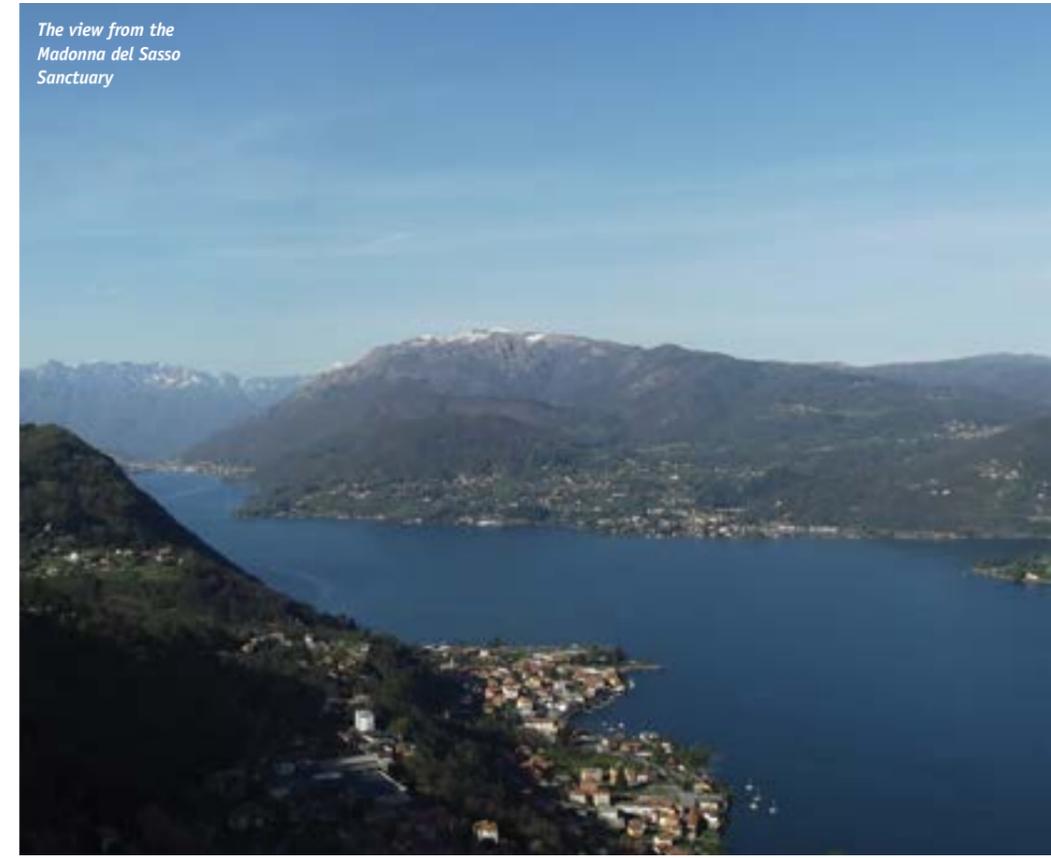


Terracotta figures

GETTING THERE

- **BY PLANE**  
 Fly to Bergamo (Orio al Serio) airport with Ryanair from nine UK & Ireland airports. Get a bus to Milan Centrale Station and travel the rest of the way by train.
- **TRAIN**  
 Travel from Milan Centrale to Orta-Miasino station, changing at Novara. The station is about a 20-minute walk down to Orta San Giulio, or take a taxi, or use the Trenino (the little tourist train).
- **BY CAR**  
 The most direct way to reach Orta from Milan is to follow the A26 tollway and exit at Meina, for the south end of the lake, or Gravelona Toca for the north end of the lake.

➤ **KEY TO RESTAURANT PRICES**  
 (full meal per person, not including wine)  
 € Up to €25  
 € € € €26-€50  
 € € € € More than €50



The view from the Madonna del Sasso Sanctuary