





Unforgettable Trips on Steamship

he growth of tourism on Lake Maggiore during the Belle Époque period (about 1875–1914) was strongly connected to the simultaneous development of communication routes that, enhanced on land (roads, railways, alpine tunnels) and water, eventually built an extended, coordinated network, profitable for transport companies and cheaper for travellers. The "Verbano", the first steamship equipped with a steam engine with paddle wheels, made in the Soho (Birmingham) factories run by James Watt, was launched in Locarno in February 1826. The boat, made of wood and about thirty metres long, was solid against the elements, well-furnished and decorated, and equipped with "trattoria e caffé". The first class was at the stern, the second at the bow. The maiden voyage from Magadino to Arona attracted a praising crowd on the Swiss, Austrian and Piedmontese coasts. The "Verbano", once in service, connected Magadino to Sesto Calende and the other way round, with daily runs of six hours each, which initially didn't call at Stresa.

In the following decades more powerful, comfortable, and spacious iron boats were built, which made several stopovers and offered customs service on board. Alongside special vessels for the transport of goods, the modern steamships allowed hundreds of passengers the possibility of sailing the whole Verbano area; passengers could also enjoy a lunch menu and choose schedules, fares (which could be combined with train tickets, in addition to group discounts, for several days of travel) and destinations – the most loved were Stresa, the Borromeo Islands, and the castles of Cannero, Intra and Pallanza, but also churches and sanctuaries were sought-after spots. At the outbreak of the First World War, about ten wheeled steamships and five, more modern, screw-propelled boats were in service. In the first class, at the stern, you could find large, luxuriously furnished rooms for leisure and refreshment; they were located on the deck in the "saloon" boats, while in "half-saloon" boats they were under deck, with windows in the hull. All passengers, though, could access the panoramic upper deck, next to the cockpit, covered and equipped with tables and benches. On exceptional occasions, steamships and boats were festively lit up and offered an extraordinary night show. In 1904, the "Regina Madre" – that later was to become the "Piemonte" – came into service: renovated and restored, it still glides elegantly on the waters of the lake. The current fleet consists of more than 90 vessels.







