



A STRETCH OF WATER SITUATED A FEW KILOMETRES FROM LAKE MAGGIORE

MERGOZZO AND ITS LAKE

Lying by the side of the lake with the same name, Mergozzo offers you a surprising and unforgettable spectacle. The natural charm of the landscape together with the evidence of its history, thousands of years long, make your visit to Mergozzo pleasant and undoubtedly interesting.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Pre-historical relics, found on the terraces overlooking the town, have given evidence of the man's presence in this territory since at least 5000 years ago. Its name is certified since 829 (Marogozio and Muregocio, whose roots may be the pre-Latin word "mara" or "maro" meaning marsh), and seems to confirm the presence of Celtic populations in the plain of the River Toce, a location quite favourable for controlling the lowest area of the valley. In the hamlet of Candoglia, an altar dedicated to Jupiter bears witness to the devoutness of the local populations (Celti Leponzi) to pagan divinities. In Roman times Mergozzo became important as a crucial crossroads for trade and, most of all, a main route for the troop movements across the Alps. You can see the evidence of the Imperial Roman age at Mergozzo, the setting of a castrum or a villa with two necropolises whose finds are now on display at the "Antiquarium". There are also artistic and architectural remains of a Pieve (Parish Church) coming from the

Christian epoch. In the second half of the 13th century, the village was raised to the status of Borgo and was fortified with defensive walls and with a castle and a tower (Motto) built in the upper part. At that time the hamlet used to host chivalric orders, as shown by a tablet engraved with the coat of arms of the Knights of Malta, dating back to 1383. It flourished as a free Commune but, in 1603, Mergozzo too was afflicted by the plague, reminded by a column built outside the city walls, now piazza Marconi. Later the town became part of the Regno di Sardegna and then was absorbed into the monarchic and republican history of Italy. However Mergozzo's history, since medieval times onwards, was influenced by its stonemasons and the extractions of the white marble of Candoglia and the white or green granite of Montorfano, valuable rock materials requested worldwide. Worth remembering is that, in 1506, the twelve columns of the portico of the Lazzaretto in Milan were erected with the white granite of Montorfano and in 1830 was extracted the marble for the 82 columns of the Basilica di S. Paolo Fuori le Mura in Roma.

THE LAKESIDE AND THE ANCIENT "BORGO DEL SASSO"

When you enter in the village of Mergozzo, along the peaceful lakeside, you can stop in the square nearby the centuries-old elm tree reminding you of the Medieval times, which was recently enlisted amongst the "monumental trees of the Piemonte region. The village, lying at the foot of Monte Orfano, is mirrored in the blue water of the lake, together with the peaks of the surrounding mountains, often covered with snow.

Not far away, at the beginning of the central Via Ruga, there stands the small Romanesque Church of S. Marta, built in 1100 as refuge for pilgrims and dedicated to S. Quirico and S. Giuditta. The building still preserves its original aisle-less structure with a semicircular apse.

A little further ahead, enriched with a large flight of steps and a splendid pronaos, the Parish Church dedicated to the Beata Vergine Assunta forms a sacred complex of remarkable architectural interest.

Attached to the building there is a portico, home to the chapels of the Way of the Cross, dating back to 1700, while the Baroque interior hosts a wooden pulpit of 1629 and the Cross of Jerusalem (1625) made with olive-wood and mother-of-pearl.

If you climb the "scarpia" steps, you will arrive at the upper part of Mergozzo, called "Sasso", where you will see the castle and, a little further up, the massive medieval tower. In the ancient centre of the village, interspersed with lanes and alleys sometimes leading to charming small squares, you can admire old main entrances, characteristic windows, balconies and other architectural elements made with the local stone.

There is evidence of past times in the faded signs of old inns and other abandoned activities, as well as in the frescoed images of saints, as protectors of the houses and their inhabitants. On the occasion of the events celebrated throughout the year, the narrow lanes and the small squares are livened up with enthusiast crowds of local people and tourists.

The Commune, Pro Loco, Parish Church, local Associations and Committees, all work together to organize the rich and varied calendar of the events.

Not to be missed the festivals of Santa Elisabetta and the Croce Rossa, held in July, accompanied with delicious food, music and folklore, as well as the feast of Santa Marta (this year the date falls on 3rd August) taking place nearby the 12th century Oratory of S. Marta, with people enjoying the delicious risotto prepared in a big copper cauldron, while colourful fireworks explode all around.

Summertime at Mergozzo is also brightened up by a variety of performances: dancing evenings, jazz, classic and pop music, painting exhibitions, sport races in the square, antique flea markets and even parades with ancient cars and motorbikes.

During the autumnal Festa del Borgo Antico, the inhabitants of the hamlet of Sasso re-enhance the past wearing old costumes and showing ancient crafts and skills.

THE MOUNTAINS AND THE LAKES

The chain of the Corni di Nibbio, at high altitudes covered with wonderful woods of beech trees, borders the vastest wild area in Italy: the Valgranda, which became National Park in April 1992. At Mergozzo the mountains have always been the setting of the inhabitants' activities meaning hard work, sweat and sacrifice, all devoted to the exploitation of the natural resources.

They were stonemasons, woodcutters, charcoal burners and mountaineers. There are proofs of the ancient jobs everywhere, but most of all in the various abandoned quarries, where you can happen to see unfinished sculptures marked by time. In the first half of 1900, the wood of the Corni and the marble blocks of the Cave di Candoglia, used for building the Duomo of Milano, were transported along the River Toce, then on Lake Maggiore, on the River Ticino and, finally, along the Navigli canals. Involved in the same kind of life, even the surrounding villages, forming the Comune Ossolano, deserve to be visited for their characteristics and charm: Candoglia, Bracchio, Albo, Bettola and Nibbio feature the same typical stone houses and interesting religious edifices, some of which are built in the Romanesque style. Thanks to the continuous and skilful restorations, the Alpe Vercio is now the most important and best preserved mountain pasture on the chain of the Corni di Nibbio. Amongst the most appreciated celebrations at Mergozzo, there is the country festival held at the Alpe Vercio, on 4th July, also offering the participants the opportunity of enjoying an incomparable panorama embracing five lakes (Orta, Varese, Monate, Maggiore and Mergozzo).

THE LAKES

In ancient times Lake Mergozzo was the westernmost part of Lake Maggiore, the so-called Sinus Mergotianus.

Thereafter the continuous floods of the Toce, the river that still flows through the land of Mergozzo and forms its borders for long stretches, has created a delta barrier, the plain of Fondotoce, a strip of land that still now divides the two lakes.

Lake Mergozzo, whose circumference is 6 km long, is fed by two tributaries: the Rio Rascina and the Rio Valle dei Noci, and is still connected to Lake Maggiore through a canal 2,7 m long.

For many years the pure waters of the lake have deserved the Blue Flag to Mergozzo and last year the village itself won the Orange Flag. Thanks to the mild climate and the crystal clear waters of the lake, Mergozzo is considered to be the ideal place for those who are fond of sun-bathing on the beach, diving, canoeing and fishing.

There are various species of fish in the lake such as the trout, pike, pike perca, whitefish, chubs, twaite shad, perch, carp, tench and, thanks to the pureness of the water, also the char. Here sport lovers can have the opportunity of participating in various national and international competitions: canoeing and triathlon, that in September animate the life of the country, judo and martial arts, swimming, beach volleyball, football, paragliding, windsurfing and cycling. Nearby there are also golf courses and tracks for horse-riding.

MONTORFANO, AN ARTISTIC AND ARCHITECTURAL GEM

Montorfano is an isolated mount, a guardian of the Valle Ossola, characterized by sides with different vegetation: towards the lake, the slopes are gentle and covered with woods of locust-trees, chestnut trees, birches and sessile oaks, while towards the river Toce and the Cusio the slopes are hard with bare rocks striking in their majesty.

If you want to reach the small hamlet of Montorfano, which rises on a spur dominating the Verbano area, you can follow the route that starts by the lakeside of Mergozzo and gently climbs like a spiral along the verdant sides of the mountain, up to destination. Montorfano can also be reached by car, along a pleasant road flanked by trees and starting from Fondolago.

Indeed the hamlet of Montorfano has a remarkable historical and architectural importance. This small village, today only inhabited by a small community of about 20 people, but most populated in the past since home to the stonecutters working in the surrounding quarries, is famous thanks to the Church of San Giovanni Battista (12th century), a valuable example of Romanesque architecture, with very ancient origins and extraordinarily well preserved.

The building dates back to the period of the first Christianization of the territory and lies on the site where between the end of the 5th century and the beginning of the 6th centuries, it used to lie an Early Christian complex that hosted the most ancient font for baptism by immersion. It consists of a font deep-set in the floor, octagonal in shape, which became a point of reference for the next Christianization throughout the surrounding territory. On the site, at the end of the 8th century, it was erected a basilica with three apses and a nave, Carolingian in style, while in the 12th century another alteration gave the church the current look in Romanesque style.

THE CIVIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Civic Archaeological Museum set up at Mergozzo in 2004, is divided into two sections: one, located on the first floor and dedicated to the tradition of the local stone, hosts some artefacts and tools of the stonecutters that used to work in the granite quarries of Montorfano and the marble quarries of Candoglia. Both in the open air quarries on the Montorfano and in the tunnels of Candoglia, for generations the stone has been the only occupation of the local people, the "picasass".

On the second floor, archaeological findings are displayed according to a chronological order.

The most ancient relics, from the end of the Stone age to the Bronze age, are mainly local: among them we can admire the famous bronze dagger of the Arbola and the flint dagger found at Mergozzo-Pravillano, going back to the Cultura di Remedello (3500-2200 B.C.), while the well known Celtic iron sword with a bronze sheath and rings of the sword holder from Mozzio di Crodo dates back to the late Iron age (end of the 2nd century - beginning of the 1st century B.C.). The Roman age, besides the find of the Necropolis of Carcegna, is represented by objects coming from various excavations carried out at Mergozzo, among which there are some remarkable glass containers from the local necropolises (1st-2nd centuries A.D.).

CIVICO MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO

Via Roma, 8
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Cuisine

The typical sweet speciality of Mergozzo, coming from tradition, is the "fugascina". The priest Don Ernesto Colli, in the book *"Mergozzo e la sua storia"* of 1935, tells: "For the population of the hamlet of Sasso, S. Elisabetta is the greatest feast throughout the year, celebrated on the Sunday following the 2nd of July. For a week there are preparations for decorating the houses. An oven, placed at the top of the "scarpia" steps, works without stop for the whole time of the celebration. Every family must have at least two "fugascine" to accomplish the meal. This speciality is rich in local colours and taste. Nobody can leave the relatives and friends' houses without a piece of "fugascina" as a reminder of S. Elisabetta's feast". The local bakers-confectioners have managed to keep alive this tradition and the typical recipe, offering, always fresh, this unique speciality that represents not only the feast but also the local history and hospitality.

Getting to Lake mergozzo

By car: from Milano and Torino A26 Motorway Voltri-Gravellona Toce, exit Verbania

By train: Verbania station. FS railway Milano-Domodossola, Mergozzo station or Torino-Milano up to Novara, then Novara-Arona, FS railway Arona-Domodossola

By plane: Milano Malpensa Airport.

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