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The 5 best lake trips in Europe

From natural beauty to mega water sports, here are the best spots on the continent for lakeside stays



Written by [Kiki Deere](#) Friday 20 October 2023



There’s something quite special about holidaying by a lake. The scenic beauty may be the most obvious, but it’s also the peace and tranquillity that comes with the lakeshore, providing a calming and serene escape from everyday life. When you want a break from calm, there’s water-based activities to get stuck into too, from paddleboarding and sailing to hiking and cycling, making the lakes prime destinations for the outdoorsy amongst us.

From the lush expanses of forests in Finland to Germany’s natural beauty, and from water sports in Italy to a lakeside French foodie scene, lake trip possibilities are endless in Europe. On our list we’ve got the very best of lake life, from the most famous of all – we’re looking at you, [Lake Garda](#) – to lesser-known gems. Oh, and we’ve included where to stay and eat in them too. Whatever your plans (and budget), here are the best lake trips in [Europe](#).

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The best lake trips in Europe



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1. Lake Garda, Italy

Touching three of Italy's regions – Lombardy, Trentino Alto Adige and Veneto – Lake Garda is Italy's largest lake, a huge expanse of water offering Mediterranean vistas of lemons, olive groves and vineyards at the foot of the Alps. Its sheer size makes it the most diverse of the Italian Lakes; to the south, gentle hills are covered in olive groves and vineyards, and to the north the scenery becomes more dramatic, with villages wedged onto rocky shorelines and cliffs sticking out of deep blue waters. This is one of Italy's premier destinations for water sports – sail, windsurf and kitesurf to your heart's content.

EAT: For something a bit special, make a reservation at [Peter Brunel's](#) (literally 1km from Lake Garda), a Michelin-starred spot with Scandinavian influence. In all its glory, it manages to feel unpretentious – you can even expect a warm welcome by the chef himself, who seamlessly flits between the kitchen and the tables.

DO: Walk or cycle the Strada del Ponale, a spectacular stretch of road carved into the mountainside high above the water with sheer cliffs plummeting below. The road offers some of the most dramatic views of anywhere on Lake Garda.

STAY: Run by the Briarava family, [Locanda del Benaco](#) is a stylish boutique hotel with a minimalist design. The atmosphere is unfussy and laid back, and there's an excellent restaurant where Gianni and his son Federico rustle up seriously good seasonal dishes.

📌 Check out our [local's guide to Lake Garda](#)

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Photograph: Visit Saimaa

2. Saimaa, Finland

Located in southeast Finland, Lake Saimaa is a labyrinth of interconnected water bodies, with narrow straits and thousands of islands full of flora and fauna. The vendace fish, a mainstay of the Finnish diet, thrives in the lake's clean waters, while the endangered Saimaa ringed seal (of which around 400 remain) has adapted to the lake environment, making this the world's only freshwater seal. This is Finland at its most authentic, with dense wooden forests full of mushrooms and berries and cosy wooden lakeshore cabins complete with a sauna and private jetty to fully embrace the country's most loved ritual.

EAT: At [Uhkua](#), professional chef Ilkka and nature guide Asta provide a range of all-immersive culinary experiences. In summer, they put on an island dinner cooked on an open fire; in autumn you'll scour the forest floor foraging for mushrooms. In winter, you can catch your own turbot on a snowshoe walk on ice.

DO: The [Savonlinna Opera Festival](#) is held annually in July in Olavinlinna Castle, the world's northernmost medieval castle, in its beautiful courtyard.

STAY: For a relaxed break immersed in nature, try one of the [Okkolan Lomamökit](#) private cottages in the Puumala Archipelago. Each comes with its own private stretch of beach, wood-heated sauna and rowing boat.

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3. Lake Annecy, France

In the Haute Savoie region of south-eastern France lies Lake Annecy, with turquoise waters and tons of outdoor activities, from canoeing to kayaking and paddle boarding. This is one of the world's top destinations for paragliding, and if you're feeling daring, you can take in a bird's eye view. Nearby town Annecy is well worth a visit, made up of a web of medieval streets and tangling canals (they don't call it the 'Venice of France' for nothing).

EAT: A newcomer on the Annecy dining scene, [Ravigote](#) has already won plaudits for its homemade cuisine and top-quality ingredients sourced from local trusted producers. The menu, bien sûr, changes with the seasons.

DO: One of the best ways to discover the lake is on two wheels, cycling 40-km or so along the perimeter route in about three hours. You can make a day of it, stopping off at beaches or refuelling for lunch at a traditional restaurant along the way.

STAY: Right on the water in the heart of Annecy, [Auberge Du Lyonnais](#) offers a contemporary look and laidback vibes, with rooms decked out in shades of industrial grey and chocolate brown. The restaurant there is great too.

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4. Lake Constance, Germany

Known as Bodensee in German, Lake Constance is one of Central Europe's largest lakes, bordering Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It comprises the Untersee (Lower Lake) and the Obersee (Upper Lake), with picturesque villages studding the shoreline and a ton of vineyards and orchards in the surrounding landscapes. Windsurfing and sailing are popular here, but you'll also find plenty of cultural attractions, including [Bregenzer Festspiele](#), a performing arts festival held in summer, and the [Zeppelin Museum](#) in Friedrichshafen, which houses the world's most important collection of airship aviation. You can even take to the skies on a sightseeing flight aboard a Zeppelin NT. Our top tip: get hold of a [Bodensee Card Plus](#).

EAT: Run by a father and daughter team, [Seeblick](#) in Hagnau is a breezy restaurant with seating on a panoramic lakeside terrace. Ingredients are sourced from Upper Swabia and the food has an international twist.

DO: The [Pfänderbahn](#) and the [Säntisbahn](#) cable cars whisk you up the mountainside to offer some of the best lake and mountain views around. On the summits, you'll find walking trails and restaurants where you can sit back and soak up the panorama as you savour local specialities.

STAY: Recent renovations at the historic lakefront [Seehotel Am Kaiserstrand](#) in Lochau have given the interiors a distinctly modern vibe, with a wellness centre with a heated swimming pool, a steam room and saunas.

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5. Lake Ohrid, North Macedonia

Tucked away in landlocked Macedonia on the border with Albania, Lake Ohrid is a glittering deep sliver of blue, and one of the world's oldest lakes. It's set against a picturesque backdrop of mountains, offering jaw-dropping vistas and a decidedly laid back vibe that draws visitors seeking a slice of tranquillity well off the beaten path. The eponymous capital is home to a beautifully preserved medieval town, with steep lanes home to a plethora of ancient churches – the surrounding area once counted a whopping 365 of them.

EAT: Facing the church of St. John Kaneo, [Kaneo Letna Bavcha](#) serves traditional Macedonian cuisine in a lovely lakefront setting. The speciality here is plashica, small fish that are endemic to the lake, traditionally enjoyed fried.

DO: Among the area's most beautiful churches is the Sveti Naum Monastery, which sits majestically on a steep cliff a short walk from the Albanian border. See 19th century frescoes and majestic grounds, and post visit you can cool off with a swim at one of the sandy beaches below.

STAY: [Aleksandar Villa](#) is a boutique hotel south of Ohrid with an open-air swimming pool nestled within the grounds. Plus you're a skip and a hop away from the beach.

 **Eat your way around [North Macedonia](#)**

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