Lake Garda (Lago di Garda) is the largest lake in Italy (52km long by 17km wide): it’s so big that it alters the local climate, which is milder and – thanks to a complex pattern of lake breezes – sunnier than might be expected. It’s also the most popular of the lakes, attracting around seven percent of all tourists to Italy and acting as a bridge between the Alps and the rest of the country. The narrow north of the lake is tightly enclosed by mountains that drop sheer into the water with villages wedged into gaps in the cliffs. Further south, the lake spreads out comfortably, flanked by gentle hills and lined by placid holiday resorts.

In the south, Desenzano is a cheery spot with the advantage of good transport links, plus proximity to the very popular and scenically impressive Sirmione. On the western shore are the old Venetian town of Salò and Gargnano, the lake’s best destination, a small village that remains largely unspoilt. The mountainous scenery is spectacular on the approach to the genteel resort of Riva del Garda at the head of the lake. It’s a handsome town with a long history and is a focal point for sports and water activities.

Overlooked by the ridges of Monte Baldo, which tops 2100m, the main resorts of Lake Garda’s eastern shore struggle to match the charm of the villages opposite. Aim for Torbole if you’re an outdoors enthusiast. To the south, the very popular resort of Malcesine has direct access up to Monte Baldo, as does Brenzone, comprising a string of attractive little harbours and a good base for walks and mountain-bike rides into Monte Baldo behind. Torri del Benaco, a little to the south, is an attractive corner that has avoided the worst of the crowds.