



Montecrestese and Agarina



Route to discover the ancient **rural hamlets of Montecrestese** and the wild **Isorno Valley**. In the lower part, you can make a loop tour: each hamlet reveals admirable examples of stone architecture, frescoes, churches, oratories, and artifacts of peasant culture (wine presses, washing ovens, water wells). The second part of the route leads to the discovery of the sunken and uninhabited Isorno Valley, which retains the charm of a wild and inaccessible territory. To access it, take the only consortium access road that reaches the Agarina huts. With **gravel or mtb bikes**, you can continue for about 3.5 kilometers more to the **Merlata pond**.

The point of departure (and arrival) is the **parking lot located at the Montecrestese / Crevoladossola exit** of the SS 33. From the parking lot, take the road to the left in the direction of Montecrestese, where a long straight road leads to the **frazione Pontetto** and, just before the road bridge over the Isorno River, the road to the hamlet of Chiesa di Montecrestese (main town) begins on the left. The road climbs with a constant gradient that is not too steep, touching the low hamlets. In **Roldo**, the **Lepontian temple** is worth a visit, which has an architectural structure typical of cultural buildings of the 1st century AD. The only example of prealpine pagan religious architecture that has survived to the present day, the small temple is probably dedicated to a solar deity.

Past the hamlet of Roldo, a long straight road takes us to the vicinity of the **Shrine of the Madonna of Viganale**, built in 1657 on the site of a primitive chapel dating from 1516. The chapel's devotional fortunes were increased immensely by a miraculous event on June 11, 1651, during which a trickle of blood repeatedly gushed from the image painted by Cagnoli. Following this miraculous event, it was decided to build the shrine.

Immediately before the shrine, turn right in the direction of **Giosio-Naviledo**. The road continues uphill through beautiful hamlets, chestnut woods, vine-grown glades and mowed meadows. You pass through the intermediate hamlets of Cardone, Giosio, Prata, Oro and Naviledo.

Oro (gold) is a frequent toponym in Ossola, but not related to the precious metal. In fact, the toponym derives from the mispronunciation of the dialect name "l'Ör," which means "the edge," thus indicating places positioned on the edge of a steep escarpment. The oldest core of this hamlet consists of buildings that have the structure and configuration of strong houses or castles.

In fact, nobles related to the De Castello lords, who boasted ownership of many mountain pastures in the Isorno and Vigezzo valleys, lived there.

Naviledo, thanks to its excellent exposure to the sun, is situated amid a vast cultivation of vines; its place name has precisely the meaning of planting new vines, called *novelle*. Among the hamlets of Montecrestese, it is one of the most architecturally interesting: several nearly intact medieval buildings are preserved, including stone houses from the 13th-14th centuries, with structures characteristic of local architecture. There are also old houses with wide sun-exposed attics, the typical *astric*, where it was not uncommon at one time to see large quantities of grapes laid out to dry, rye and corn to dry.

A couple more hairpin bends uphill and you reach a crossroads, take a right and with one last uphill straight stretch you reach **Altoggio**, the highest and once the most inhabited of Montecrestese hamlets, located on a wide flat terrace once cultivated with rye and grassland. The place name derives from "elevated field" and recalls the very nature of the area, which historically constituted a hiding place for people and livestock in times of danger. Some historic buildings in the village have frescoes dating back to the 15th century. After visiting the village of Altoggio, head back to the village entrance where the consortium road to Agarina and Coipo starts. The road climbs very steeply in the first section until it reaches the first hairpin bend. From here the track is closed to ordinary traffic, but care should still be taken because it is frequented by consortium members and entitled persons.

After a second hairpin bend, a further fork is reached: left to Coipo with a very nice but very steep climb (5 km and 550 m elevation gain); instead, continue straight on towards Agarina. The road continues along the hillside as it enters more and more of the wild Isorno Valley. The stream at first flows at the bottom of the valley, sunken among the rocks. Then, with a series of narrow hairpin bends, it comes down and descends slightly toward **Corte Sapa** where, on the right, we notice a small reservoir (Cippata dam). The road continues keeping close to the stream until it reaches **Piedelpiaggio**. Here begins a series of steep hairpin bends that passes a massive debris accumulation now colonized by forest (ancient landslide). You reach a first nucleus of Agarina huts with a peaty area in front, then continue on to reach the other groups of huts that collectively make up **Agarina**. Here the paved road ends and a wide dirt track serving a private power station continues. From here on, the trail is not recommended for road bikes but is suitable only for gravel bikes and MTBs. The road continues halfway uphill, reaches **Ponte Faugiol** where we cross the Rio Nocca and after a few hairpin bends reach the small artificial lake and the **Merlata dam**, the highest point of our route.

For the return, follow the same road as on the way up to Altoggio then continue further until you reach the fork (already reached on the way up) but this time take a right. The road descends touching **Nava** and finally reaches the hamlet of **Chiesa**, the main town of the municipality.

The Romanesque church of Santa Maria Assunta was erected in the early 12th century, most likely on the remains of a preexisting church. In the 15th century the nave was enlarged with the addition of two side aisles, which rest, with round arches on eight columns of local stone. Over the years the chapels and altars multiplied to make room for all popular devotional forms. The baptistery was frescoed in 1583 by Giacomo da Cardone. Inside are reproduced "The Last Judgment" and "The Crucifixion," where a self-portrait of the painter can also be seen. The church vaults were initially frescoed by the Florentine Luigi Reali with the help of Francesco Negri di Mozio in 1655 and later by C. Mellerio (late 17th century) and G. M. Borgnis in 1738.

The bell tower, built shortly after the Romanesque church of St. Mary of the Assumption in the 12th century, was elevated in a very different position with the clear intent of serving as a visual and sonorous reminder to the entire parish community. It was in fact built on a rocky hump rounded by the erosive action of the ancient Ossola glacier. The bell tower of Montecrestese, at 67 m high, is the tallest in the Ossola and has a singular prerogative: what we see rising skyward with its pointed spire is the outer casing added in the 16th and 17th centuries to the Romanesque bell tower. The ancient bell tower was not destroyed but is preserved inside the newer structure up to the height of the ancient belfry, and by climbing the internal staircase it is possible to see all its features: it has a square base of about 4 meters on a side and rises about 24 m; the openings develop from the bottom to the top in crescendo and each floor has its own characteristic.

After visiting the church and bell tower, continue by taking the narrow road down to the hamlets of **Lomese** and Croppomarcio.

Lomese first appears in a document from 910 with the toponym "Longomiso"; the present name may derive from the Germanic root met (=meadow), meaning "long meadow," for this hamlet lies on the edge of an undulating terrain planted with vines and meadows, in a sheltered, sun-exposed basin. Together with Chezzo, Croppomarcio, Torriono and Seggio, it formed a single property, the royal court, which was confirmed in 910 by Emperor Berengar to Viscount Gariard. A few noble dwellings in the form of castles or strong houses can be recognized in Lomese. With a short detour it is also worth visiting the nearby hamlet of Chezzo, located on the rocky rim that bounds the vast basin of Lomese to the northwest. The place name derives from the Lombard "chinzia," meaning swamp.

At the beginning of the village of Lomese, one then continues downhill (hairpin bend) to the small village of **Roledo**, lying on the sunny rocky spur that, descending toward the Toce, looks toward Crevoladosola. The place name, with the variants "Revoledo" (1330), "Rovoledo" (1346) and "Rogoledo," probably derives from "robur" = oak and recalls the tree essence that is still widespread in the hamlet's territory. Roledo repeats the housing structures of the other hamlets with buildings dating back to the 13th century and later, clinging to the rock. Some of them have all the appearance of forts with narrow alleys interconnected by passages that are often covered. From Roledo three hairpin bends quickly take us to the valley floor, and we continue flat along the road into the meadows. Shortly after the Gallo Nero restaurant the road crosses the freeway junction, turn right and you reach the parking lot from which you started.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

The route, while not particularly difficult, if tackled with a muscle bike requires good athletic preparation. Recommended agile ratios (52/26, 50/28) to tackle the uphill sections with the steepest gradients without difficulty.

POINTS OF ATTENTION

1. The tour of the hamlets of Montecrestese is done on **ordinary roads**.
2. The road from Altoggio to Agarina is **consortium road** closed to ordinary traffic but care should still be taken because it may be traveled by consortium vehicles. Be especially **careful on downhill sections** because the road is narrow and in places without a barrier.
3. **From Agarina to the Merlata Dam**, the trail becomes **dirt**, suitable only for gravel bikes or mtb.

TECHNICAL DATA

Relevant geographical area:	Verbano Cusio Ossola / Isorno Valley
Place of departure and arrival:	Parking area Lake Den at the exit Montecrestese/Crevoladossola of SS 33
Number of legs:	1
Length:	39.0 km
Height difference:	1146 m
Total ascent:	1450 m indicative
Total descent:	1450 m indicative
Difficulty:	MEDIUM
Average duration:	4 hours 30 minutes
Minimum altitude:	304 m.a.s.l.
Highest altitude reached:	1446 m.a.s.l. (Lago della Merlata)
Degree of cyclability:	total
Recommended period:	April-October
Presence of dedicated signage:	no
Target audience:	amateur cyclist / mtb lover / bicycle tourist

EATERIES

Montecrestese Fraz. Pontetto, Fraz. Piaggino, Fraz. Roledo, Fraz. Altoggio.

PLACES OF INTEREST

Along the route

Fraz. Pontetto: Old Washhouse, Museum of the Ancient Bread Oven

Hamlet of Roldo: Lepontian Temple (1st century A.D.), Oratory of San Lorenzo al Pozzo

Fraz. Cardone: home of painter Giacomo da Cardone, old grape press, old dairy turnaria

Fraz. Giosio: Oratory of the Beata Vergine Annunciata, ancient bread oven, ancient grape press

Fraz. Prata: ancient washhouse

Fraz. Oro: Old washhouse, old grape press, old well

Hamlet of Naviledo: Oratory of S. Rocco, medieval stone buildings (13th-14th centuries), ancient well, ancient bread oven

Hamlet of Altoggio: Old washhouse, Oratory of St. John the Baptist, old well, stone architecture

Fraz. Nava: Antique crush

Fraz. Church: Parish church of St. Mary of the Assumption, highest bell tower in the province, Oratory of Saints Fabian and Sebastian, frescoes

Fraz. Lomese: 17th-century houses, Frescoes, Bread oven, traditional architecture

Fraz. Roledo: Palazzo Azari (18th cent.), Oratory of St. Anthony of Padua

Nearby

Lake Tana Nature Area

ENEL hydroelectric power plant in Crevoladossola (arch. Piero Portaluppi).

Crevoladossola parish church Santi Pietro and Paolo

Standards of behavior

1. Stay on the trails

Respect the trail and any prohibitions on access. Respect private property.

2. Leave no trace

Respect the land. Wet and muddy trails are more vulnerable than dry trails. Stay on existing trails and do not create new ones. Don't take shortcuts by cutting corners. Take any litter with you.

3. Drive carefully

A moment's distraction can endanger both yourself and others. Abide by speed limits and ride in such a way that you are always in control of your bicycle. Always wear a helmet.

4. Don't scare the animals

Animals are easily startled by an abrupt approach, a sudden movement or a loud noise. Allow them enough space and time to adjust to your presence.

5. Give right of way properly

These trails are not for bicycle use only but are also shared by hikers on foot. So, especially downhill, speed should be moderated: around a bend there may be someone coming up. Let other trail users know you are about to overtake them through a friendly greeting or use of a bell. Bikers must give way to all non-motorized trail users. Bikers proceeding downhill should give right of way to those going uphill. Make any overtaking as safe and polite as possible.



REMINDER:

BIKERS MUST ALWAYS GIVE WAY TO OTHER USERS

RULES OF CONDUCT FOR BIKERS

Since the appearance of the first mountain bikes, the N.O.R.B.A. (National Off Road Bicycle Association) drew up a code of conduct intended to regulate off-road activity with full respect for nature and other frequenters of the mountains and trails.

The N.O.R.B.A. Code has been adopted by many clubs, organizations, associations and schools throughout Italy. It consists of a series of general tips that, if followed carefully, can help make this sporting and hiking practice so much in vogue today more enjoyable for everyone.

N.O.R.B.A. Code.

1. Always give right of way to hikers on foot.
2. Slow down and use caution when approaching and overtaking hikers on foot or other cycle walkers, always making sure to signal your arrival well in advance; avoid cackling or shouting, rather apologize and greet politely.
3. Keep mountain bike speed under control at all times and approach turns with extreme caution, anticipating sudden obstacles. The pace should be commensurate with the type of terrain, the type of trail and each person's experience.
4. Always stay within the marked route, thus minimizing environmental impact (permanent damage to surrounding vegetation and subsequent soil erosion).
5. Do not disturb or frighten animals, whether domestic or wild; give them time to move away and off the path.
6. Do not, for any reason, leave garbage as a result of your passage; you should collect your own and, when possible, also those abandoned by other "distracted" hikers.
7. Always respect private and public property, leaving gates, moving barriers or bars as they are found. In any case, if possible, go directly to the landowners to ask for permission to pass. "No trespassing" often just means "Please ask permission if you want to pass."
8. During cycle hiking it is always advisable to be self-sufficient. The destination to be reached and the speed at which one moves should be proportionate to the psychophysical fitness and ability of the driver, the equipment, the environment, the terrain and, above all, the weather conditions.
9. Never undertake a cycle excursion alone, except in cases of force majeure. Do not pass through isolated areas far from major roads and always leave clear directions regarding the route to be taken and the estimated time of return.

10. Minimize impact with nature: steal only images and memories, and leave, at most, the barely perceptible imprint of the wheels of your vehicle.