



BACKGROUND

♥ HISTORY

People have been holidaying on the Italian lakes since Roman times but powerhouse Milan and nearby cities have attracted as much trouble as prosperity. (p232)

♥ FINE ARTS

Florence is far away but Renaissance ripples washed across Milan and the lakes region. (p244)

♥ FROM ROMANESQUE TO RENAISSANCE

Like the Renaissance did later on, the 11th-century Romanesque building revival took inspiration from classical models. (p250)

♥ VILLAS & GARDENS

Throughout the centuries, the great and good have lavished wealth on lakeside pleasure domes. (p255)

♥ OUTDOOR PURSUITS

Break out your hiking boots or get on your bike, boat or (water)skis for some physical effort. (p260)

♥ SMOOTH AS SILK

Como is Europe's last bastion of quality silk production. (p265)

♥ WINE

Wine lovers will celebrate drops from Valpolicella to Valtellina. (p270)

♥ FOOD

From *pizzoccheri* (buckwheat pasta) to polenta and lake perch, Lombard and lake cooking (p274) has a flavour all its own. We've included a food glossary (p283) with everything you need to know to eat like a local.

HISTORY

AN ANCIENT PRESENCE

The Po plains that make up the southern half of Lombardy were, hundreds of thousands of years ago, awash with the Mediterranean. As the waters ebbed, leaving behind highly fertile land that today produces oodles of rice, prehistoric clans began to move into the area.

Evidence of a human presence reaches back about 10,000 to 12,000 years. As Alpine glaciers of the last ice age retreated north, late Early Stone Age families began to settle mountain valleys and caves along the shores of the main lakes. The most remarkable testament to Stone Age cultures is to be found in the Valle Camonica in the north of Brescia province (see p162). Here, more than 150,000 rock-art petroglyphs testify to the lively imagination of people living in or around this valley as long ago as 8000 BC. More engravings are being discovered all the time and the entire collection was recognised as a World Heritage treasure in 1979. The ancient engravings depict figures hunting, farming, making magic and indulging in wild sexual antics. The art is a record of the passing millennia, with items dating to various eras including Roman times and the Middle Ages.

GAULS & ROMANS

Archaeological evidence and the accounts of Roman historian Titus Livius point to the invasion of the Lombard plains and Po valley by Celtic tribes from southern France as early as the 10th century BC. The Celts mixed with other tribes in the area, such as the Liguri, an ancient people (going back as far as 25,000 BC) who had emerged in Liguria and spread across parts of Italy and Western Europe.

Further Celtic invasions are hinted at around the 7th century BC. It appears that the Etruscans, moving north from Etruria (present-day Tuscany), also established settlements in the Po valley. Some historians claim that the Etruscans founded Mantua.

Among the Celtic tribes were the Insubres (or Insubri), who, it appears, occupied an area between the Ticino and Adda rivers and either conquered or founded the town of Mediolanum ('Middle of the Plain', later changed to 'Milan'). Just when this happened is unclear.

» 11,000 BC

Small groups of Mesolithic tribes settle in caves around the shores of Lake Como, Lake Maggiore and Lake Garda.

» C 600 BC

The Insubres (or Insubri), a migrating Celtic tribe, settle in the Po plain between the Ticino and Adda rivers and, it is thought, found what will one day be Milan.

» 388 BC

A coalition of Gallic tribes swarms into northern Italy and spreads Celtic-Gallic control of the Po valley to the Adriatic coast. A year later a band of them sacks Rome.