



Lombardy & the Lakes

Sprawling between the Alps and the river Po's plains, Lombardy (Lombardia) has one of Italy's most varied landscapes. Industrious cities, medieval hill towns and lakeside resorts are interspersed with powdered slopes, lemon groves, crop fields, vineyards and rice paddies.

Dominating it all is Lombardy's capital and Italy's economic powerhouse, Milan. Home to the nation's prime stock exchange, one of Europe's biggest trade-fair grounds and international fashion hub, it is Italy's second-largest metropolis after Rome.

Sparkling lakes are strung along the north of the region like a glittering necklace. Wedding-cake villas set in tiered gardens adorn elegant towns and coquettish villages along the shores. Further north still, the Valtellina and the wall of Alpine mountains abutting Switzerland are home to national parks and good skiing around Bormio.

South of the main chain of lakes, cities steeped in history include medieval Bergamo, Roman Brescia, the age-old violin-making centre of Cremona and the Renaissance city of Mantua.

Fresh lake fish grace Lombardy's tables, along with risotto and polenta from the plains. Alpine butter, cream and cheese from the Valtellina are prized, as are the dry Valtellina red wines and fizzy Franciacorta, produced using the same double-fermentation method as Champagne.

The catch? Lombardy's style comes at a price. Milan could be loosely compared with London. It's a frenetic place that 'enjoys' a climate reminiscent of London. The region's industry and agriculture make it one of the most affluent parts of Italy and one of the most expensive. There are ways to keep the costs down – but this region rewards you when you splash out.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a ferry at twilight for mesmerising views of **Lago di Como** (p299)
- Try to control overtly salivating over the gourmet treasures at Milan's 19th-century food emporium, **Peck** (see boxed text, p274)
- Go back centuries amid the medieval beauty of Bergamo's **Piazza Vecchia** (p281)
- Spend 15 minutes face to face with Leonardo's famous mural, **The Last Supper** (p265)
- Stroll among the peacocks in the palace gardens on Lago Maggiore's prettiest island, **Isola Bella** (p297)
- Ride Lago di Garda's winds at the home of the World Windsurf Championships, **Nago-Torbole** (p310)



■ POPULATION: 9.64 MILLION

■ AREA: 23,835 SQ KM



MILAN

pop 1.3 million

At first glance, Milan (Milano) can appear like one of the models gracing its catwalks: great bone structure (in the shape of historic and striking new architecture), extravagant taste and no obvious soul. But Milan's style and, yes, substance, are more than skin deep.

Milan is the engine room of the country's economy. Treasures that survived damage from Allied bombing during WWII include its elaborate cathedral, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and the Castello Sforzesco. The La Scala opera house also scraped through. What really sets Milan apart, however, is its creative streak and high-speed cosmopolitan feel.

Armani, Versace, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci and many more took off on Milan's runways (although many, like Gucci, first came to the world's attention in Florence). Fashionistas make a pilgrimage here to shop at the designers' flagship stores in the Quadrilatero d'Oro (Golden Quad).

By night, the Milanese know how to enjoy themselves. They start with the *aperitivo*, a kind of extended happy hour in which the city's best bars offer a cornucopia of free bar food to go with wine and cocktails. Some head later for the many bars lining canals in the Navigli area.

Fashion and finance aside, Milan's other religion is *calcio* (football). The city is home to both AC Milan and Inter, two of Italy's top teams (the latter won the national champion-