



# Milan & the Lakes

POP 9.83 MILLION / AREA 23,835 SQ KM

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## Why Go?

Sprawling between the Alps and the Po valley, Lombardy (Lombardia) has a varied landscape: industrious cities, medieval hill towns and lakeside resorts are interspersed with powdered slopes, lemon groves, vineyards and rice paddies.

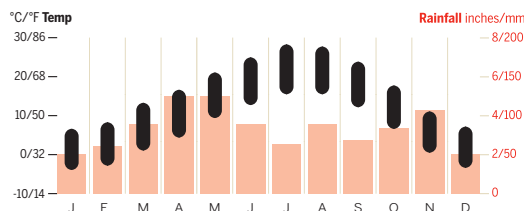
Dominating it all is Lombardy's capital and Italy's economic powerhouse, Milan. Home to the nation's prime stock exchange, one of Europe's biggest trade-fair grounds and an international fashion hub, it is Italy's second-largest metropolis.

Sparkling, glacial 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 Orobie Alps stretch into dramatic national parks, which hide sharp-sided valleys and wildly wooded mountain slopes.

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

## When to Go

### Milan



**May & Jun** Spring flowers, mild weather and concerts in Cremona herald the start of summer.

**Sep** As many as 350 vessels turn out for the Centomiglia, Lago di Garda's prestigious regatta.

**Dec** Winter warmers include the Feast of St Ambrogio and opera at La Scala.

# MILAN

## POP 1.3 MILLION

Milan is Italy's city of the future, a fast-paced metropolis with New World qualities: ambition, aspiration and a highly individualistic, creative culture. In Milan appearances really do matter and materialism requires no apology. The Milanese love beautiful things, luxurious things, and it is for that reason perhaps that Italian fashion and design maintain their global position.

But like the models that stalk the catwalks, many consider Milan to be vain, distant and dull. And it is true the city makes little effort to seduce visitors. But this superficial lack of charm disguises a city of ancient roots and many treasures, that, unlike in the rest of Italy, you'll quite often get to experience without the queues or expectations. A warren of cobbled streets fans out from the Duomo while historic neighbourhoods like Brera and Navigli have character worthy of any tourist brochure. And, although many visitors to the city are likely to know its golden shopping triangle, few realise the varied ways that Milanese buyers select goods in colours, styles and materials seldom seen at outposts any place else.

So while the Milanese may not have time to always play nice, jump in and join them in their intoxicating round of pursuits, be that precision shopping, browsing edgy contemporary galleries or loading up a plate with local delicacies while downing an expertly mixed Negroni at *aperitivo* hour. *Cin-cin!*

## History

Celtic tribes settled along the Po river in the 7th century BC, and the area encompassing modern-day Milan has remained inhabited since. In AD 313, Emperor Constantine made his momentous edict granting Christians freedom of worship here. The city had already replaced Rome as the capital of the empire in 286, a role it kept until 402.

A *comune* (town council) was formed by all social classes in the 11th century, and, from the mid-13th century, government passed to a succession of dynasties – the Torrianis, Viscontis and, finally, the Sforzas. It fell under Spanish rule in 1525 and Austrian in 1713. Milan became part of the nascent Kingdom of Italy in 1860.

Benito Mussolini, one-time editor of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*, founded the Fascist Party in Milan in 1919. He was eventually strung up here by partisans after he

sought to escape to Switzerland in 1945. Mussolini had dragged Italy into WWII on Hitler's side in 1940. By early 1945, Allied bombings during WWII had destroyed much of central Milan.

At the vanguard of two 20th-century economic booms, Milan's postwar architect-designers sought to rebuild society, 'from the spoon to the city', as Ernesto Rogers famously put it. As Milan cemented its role as Italy's financial and industrial capital, immigrants poured in from the south and were later joined by others from China, Africa, Latin America, India and Eastern Europe, making for one of the least homogenous cities in Italy. Culturally, the city was the centre of early Italian film production, and in the 1980s and '90s it ruled the world as the capital of design innovation and production. Milan's self-made big shot and media mogul, Silvio Berlusconi, made the move into politics in the 1990s and has since been elected prime minister three times, most recently in 2008.

The city's next big date with destiny is Expo2015, a world exhibition.

## Sights

Milan's runway-flat terrain and monumental buildings are defined by concentric ring roads that trace the path of the city's original defensive walls. Although very little remains of the walls, ancient gates – *porta* – act as clear compass points. Almost everything you want to see, do or buy is contained within these city gates.

## Duomo

CATHEDRAL

(Map p242; [www.duomomilano.it](http://www.duomomilano.it); Piazza del Duomo) A vision in pink Candoglia marble, Milan's cathedral aptly reflects the city's creative brio and ambition. Begun by Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1387, its design was originally considered unfeasible. Canals had to be dug to transport the vast quantities of marble to the centre of the city and new technologies were invented to cater for the never-before-attempted scale. There was also that small matter of style. The Gothic lines went out of fashion – *c'è brutta!* (how hideous!) – and were considered 'too French', so it took on several looks as the years, then centuries, dragged on. Its slow construction became the byword for an impossible task (*fabrica del Dom* in the Milanese dialect). Indeed, much of its ornament is 19th-century neo-Gothic, with the final touches only applied in the 1960s.