



# Milan & the Lakes

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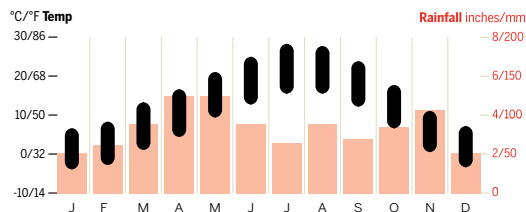
## Why Go?

Wedged between the Alps and the Po valley, the glacial lakes of Lombardy (Lombardia) were formed at the end of the last ice age, and have been a popular holiday spot since Roman times. At the region's heart is Milan, capital of the north and Italy's second-largest metropolis. Home to the nation's stock exchange, one of Europe's biggest trade-fair grounds and an international fashion hub, it is also Italy's economic powerhouse.

Beyond Milan pretty countryside unfolds, dotted with patrician towns including Pavia, Monza, Bergamo, Cremona and Mantua; all are steeped in history, hiding fabulous Unesco monuments and world-class museums. To the north a burst of Mediterranean colour and a balmy microclimate awaits around lakes Orta, Maggiore, Como, Garda and Iseo. Ringed by hot-pink oleanders in luxurious tiered gardens, the lakes are powerfully seductive. No wonder George Clooney is smitten.

## 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 streak. 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 esteemed global position.

But like the models that work the catwalks, Milan is considered by many to be vain, distant and dull. And it is true that the city makes little effort to seduce visitors. However, this superficial lack of charm disguises a city of ancient roots and many treasures, which, unlike in the rest of Italy, you'll often get to experience without the queues. So while the Milanese may not always play nice, jump in and join them regardless in their intoxicating round of pursuits, whether that means precision-shopping, browsing edgy contemporary galleries or loading up a plate with local delicacies while downing an expertly mixed negroni cocktail.

### History

Celtic tribes settled along the Po 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 rule 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 joined Italy with Germany in WWII in 1940. By early 1945, Allied bombings had destroyed much of central Milan. Mussolini was eventually strung up here by partisans after he sought to escape to Switzerland in 1945.

At the vanguard of two 20th-century economic booms, 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, Af-

rica, Latin America, India and Eastern Europe, making for one of the most diverse 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 was then elected prime minister three more times – scandal and economic armageddon finally forced him from office in 2011.

Determined not to be consigned to the economic doldrums of the *crisi* (crisis), Milan staged the multibillion euro world Expo in 2015. Although riddled with controversy over corruption and overspending, the Expo has given Milan the gleaming new Porta Nuova district, a rehabilitated dock and canal system, miles of new cycle routes, expanded bike- and car-sharing schemes, a clutch of new museums and a much-needed injection of international interest.

### 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 *porta* (gates) act as clear compass points. Almost everything you want to see, do or buy is contained within these city gates.

### Duomo

CATHEDRAL

(Map p246; [www.duomomilano.it](http://www.duomomilano.it); Piazza del Duomo; roof terraces adult/reduced via stairs €8/4, lift €13/7, Battistero di San Giovanni €4/2; ☺ duomo 7am-6.40pm, roof terraces 9am-6.30pm, battistero 10am-6pm Tue-Sun; 🗺 Duomo) A vision in pink Candoglia marble, Milan's extravagant Gothic cathedral, 600 years in the making, aptly reflects the city's creativity and ambition. Its pearly white facade, adorned with 135 spires and 3400 statues rises like the filigree of a fairy-tale tiara, wowing the crowds with its extravagant detail. The interior is no less impressive, punctuated by the largest stained-glass windows in Christendom, while in the crypt saintly Carlo Borromeo is interred in a rock-crystal casket.

Begun by Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1386, the cathedral's 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