



Lombardy & the Lakes

Sprawled 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. But one element defines this diverse region: style. Lombardy's capital, Milan, is the country's fashion and finance powerhouse, and is its second-largest metropolis after Rome. The empires of Armani, Prada, Gucci and dozens of others reside in Milan's 'Golden Quad', while cutting-edge homewares and furniture designers such as Kartell and Alessi also call Milan home.

Sparkling lakes are strung along the north of the region like a necklace and are the real jewels. Wedding-cake villas set in tiered gardens adorn elegant towns and intimate villages along the shores. Yet despite the lakes' beauty, many areas retain an authenticity untainted by tourism. South of the main chain of lakes, history-steeped cities include medieval Bergamo; Roman Brescia; the age-old violin-making centre of Cremona; and the Renaissance city of Mantua, on the banks of the river Mincio, which has been widened to create more lakes.

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

The catch? Lombardy's style comes at a price. Its industry and agriculture make it one of the most affluent regions in Italy, and hence one of the most expensive. Still, there are ways to keep the costs down – and this region rewards you when you splash out.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take a ferry at twilight for mesmerising views of **Lago di Como** (p289)
- Deliberate over 3200 varieties of Parmesan alone at Milan's 19th-century food emporium, **Peck** (see boxed text, p265)
- Ride Lago di Garda's winds from the home of the World Windsurf Championships, **Nago-Torbole** (p300)
- Be blown away by the preserved medieval architecture surrounding Bergamo's **Piazza Vecchia** (p272)
- Spend 15 minutes face-to-face with Leonardo's famous mural, **The Last Supper** (p259)
- Stroll among the peacocks in the palace gardens on Lago Maggiore's prettiest island, **Isola Bella** (p288)



■ POPULATION: 9.1 million

■ AREA: 23,835 sq km



MILAN

pop 1.3 million / elev 122m

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 and home of its stock exchange, yet it isn't driven by tourism. Treasures that survived WWII's extensive damage include its elaborate cathedral, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, La Scala opera house and

Castello Sforzesco. What really sets Milan apart, though, is its creative streak.

Armani, Versace, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Pucci, Gucci and many more took off on Milan's runways. Fashionistas make a pilgrimage here to shop at the designers' flagship stores in the Quadrilatero d'Oro (Golden Square). Boutiques stocking emerging labels, and chic concept shops also line the city's streets, while discount outlets selling samples, seconds and last season's cast-offs are a bargain-hunter's Holy Grail. Milan is also the world capital of furniture and homewares (the beanbag is a Milanese brainchild), and a hub for risk-taking contemporary art. By night there's an avant-garde theatre scene, a fabulous *aperitivi* scene (extended 'happy