

A Hedonist's guide to...

Milan

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Milan

The most over-used words in this guide are – unapologetically – chic and elegant. As Italy's fashion capital (spawning the likes of Giorgio Armani, Prada, Versace and Dolce & Gabbana), Milan is serried with sleek boutiques, smart bars, swanky restaurants and glamorous clubs. Its inhabitants' discerning tastes have pushed the envelope on design, vetoing foreign chains in favour of independent businesses. Milan is also a gateway to New York, Paris and London, and sets the pace for the rest of Italy. Residents compare it to New York's Upper East Side, with which it shares a similar sense of sophistication, decadence, snobbery and vanity, and a love of lounge bars, partying and Sunday brunches.

All year round, Milan is one big catwalk show and its residents pay punctilious attention to this season's fashions. A Milanese souvenir is most likely to be a pair of Prada shoes. However, the city remains notoriously provincial and conservative as it clings to its traditions and conventions: its fashion designers have thankfully filled a void by branching out with hip new bars, spas, restaurants and clubs.

Predictably, budget is not a familiar word in Italy's richest city (and second largest, with a population of 1.3 million). Milan is also Italy's financial capital and home to Italy's stock exchange; its media capital, home to the country's main advertising agencies, four national daily newspapers, major publishing houses and Berlusconi's media empire; and design capital: with its annual furniture fair, the Salone del Mobile, plus a heritage of eminent architects, Milan has staked out its position as a world-class design centre.

While Milan is dismissed as a cultural destination (buffs would head first to Rome, Florence or Venice), its relatively low count of highlights makes them perfectly manageable in a weekend, and its compact size makes it easily negotiable by foot. Aesthetically it's an eclectic city – some say ugly, because of a heavy industrial influence and arguably ill-judged rapid post-war expansion. Its architecture is a veritable timeline from the Roman Empire to the present, via Romanesque, Renaissance, neoclassical, belle époque and Fascist eras. And Milan certainly has charm, thanks to its canals, cobbled streets and antique tram system, but it also has a dire pollution problem because of its positioning in the wind-free Po Valley and its proliferation of industrial plants.

An ancestry of wealth predates Milan's rather snobbish manner, where social strata are regarded as importantly as fashion labels. Thus, *Milanese* is a byword for the middle-class (since that's the majority in Milan); then there's the *borghesi* (bourgeois) and the *fighetti*, the idle rich offspring of old Milanese money. The Hinterland are those in surrounding suburbia and are treated as second-class citizens (as indeed are tourists and Milan's immigrant community from China, Senegal, Sri Lanka, etc.). Of course, willowy international models, imported architects and fashion designers are considered great assets to the city.

Geographically, Milan lends itself well to a lifestyle of country retreats, weekend skiing, and summertime watersports. During the summer, high humidity and temperatures effect a centrifugal force on its residents and the whole city heads out to its border attractions to relax with an *aperitivo* – another word that repeatedly crops up throughout this book. *Aperitivo* – or Milan's daily ritual of after-work drinks and free food – suggests in a word the kind of quality of life that is enjoyed in Milan.

sleep...

In a city powered by fashion and design, it's surprising to discover that boutique hotels took a long time to catch on. It's even more peculiar considering Milan's abundance of accomplished architects and reputation for discerning style. Although most hotels still cater for dark-suited businessmen and merchant bankers, these options are generally huddled around Stazione Centrale, away from the downtown glitz.

Fortunately, Milan has been under the developer's spotlight since the new millennium, thanks to public demand for hip hotels and designer add-ons, and over the past decade big brands such as Bvlgari and Moschino have chosen Milan for their first forays into the lucrative hospitality game. The design-heavy Expo 2015 and CityLife skyscraper project – due for completion in 2014 – have given hoteliers something to aim for. Relieved fashionistas can now opt for the colourful eccentricity of the Gray, Hotel Straf, Petit Palais and über-chic sensation Town House Galleria.

'Haute hotels', like the Park Hyatt Milano and Westin Palace, have sprung up all over Milan like a winning game of Monopoly, taking their lead from erstwhile *numero uno*, super-luxe The Four Seasons. The chic/business crossover market has been amply filled by the slick but stylish nhow and The Chedi, and will be a step further along in 2010 as the new W and Armani hotels open for business.

Another trend is the *antica locanda* (or old-fashioned inn) – in chic Milan this equates to a boutique-style bed-and-breakfast. *Antiche locande* Leonardo, Solferino and Mercanti – situated in historic townhouses – are charmingly and sympathetically styled, and all give the feeling of being a guest in someone's home. Staff retire when guests do, so receptions are only manned during the day; some offer night porters, others provide keys. Mod-cons are not a given in these more modest establishments, often because their landlords are resolute Luddites. Variations on the theme include business B&B Foresteria Monforte, Hanoi-esque *locanda* Vietnammomour and the boutique suites of 3Rooms.

Some of the most important hotels in Milan are the oldest; here, guests can most easily assimilate into real Milanese culture. Grand Hotel et de Milan and Hotel Principe di Savoia both compete for the crown of grandeur. Others have forsaken modern improvements for conservation reasons (the Liberty-style Sheraton Diana Majestic is one such behemoth).

Visitors can assume a four-star-plus hotel room will come equipped with a safe, fridge/minibar, air con, noise insulation, satellite- and pay-TV, direct phone, laun-



dry services, WiFi internet access and conference facilities. Milan's high season is during its world-famous *Salone del Mobile* furniture fair in late April, when bookings need to be made well in advance. Nevertheless, don't be deterred by the human traffic – this is Milan at its most animated. In August – Milan's low season – room prices plummet, but be warned that during this month the city becomes a ghost town as the Milanese vacate to the beach, and most restaurants, bars and clubs close. The only people left are tourists, having bagged a suspiciously good deal through their travel agent.

The rates quoted here are for a standard double in low season and a one-bedroom suite in high season. All hotels are scored for style, atmosphere and location (highest scorers are near the Duomo, Milan's nucleus). If it seems that many don't seem to offer much atmosphere, it's probably because of the relative weighting of corporate clients. Generally, Milan's hotels have also been slow – unlike Paris, London and New York – to catch onto the hip hotel bar, and some of these are not made for hanging out in.



the best hotels

Top ten:

1. Town House Galleria
2. The Bvlgari Hotel
3. The Gray
4. Hotel Straf
5. Grand Hotel et de Milan
6. Park Hyatt Milano
7. The Four Seasons
8. Hotel Principe di Savoia
9. Maison Moschino
10. 3Rooms

Style:

1. nhow
2. 3Rooms
3. Hotel Straf
4. Maison Moschino
5. Town House Galleria

Atmosphere:

1. Town House Galleria
2. Antica Locanda Leonardo
3. Petit Palais
4. Town House 31
5. Hotel Spadari

Location:

1. Town House Galleria
2. Park Hyatt Milano
3. The Four Seasons
4. Hotel Straf
5. The Gray

Moschino's sexy debut in the hotel world. Under the direct creative direction of label boss Rossella Jardini, the interiors offer a surreal elegance, kooky yet minimal and very 'unhotel'. Each of the 15 suites and 54 rooms are vibrant one-offs although the signature Moschino blur of colour is muted allowing for a graceful interpretation of this oh-so-sexy brand. The high lobby ceilings hint at the building's original use: it was once the Milan to Monza railway station, and comes complete with 1840s neo-classical lines. But Maison Moschino's location wasn't chosen for the building alone. The new Città della Moda next door seals this *zona's* status as the urban chic answer to via della Spiga's studied cool. Catch visiting fashionistas in the spa or the editorial board of Condé Nast Milano in the bar.

Style 9, Atmosphere 8, Location 7

nhow (top)
via Tortona, 35, Navigli
Tel: 02 489 8861
www.nhow-hotels.com
Rates: €152–582

Blink and you'll miss the big red letter 'n' which marks nhow's entrance and Spanish hotelier NH's first foray into design-led hospitality. The foyer is through the military hangar-style car park. Bold oranges and reds in the form of plastic partitions and drapes are set against a starker than stark concrete floor. To park a hotel in Milan's old General Electrics building in an area known for its industrial design the statement has to be bold from the

outset. nhow has managed to source the entire range of furniture dotted around the communal areas from Milan's most celebrated stores, including Edra, Dilmos and Zanotta – a top blag if ever there was. What's more, their showcase revolves every six months and is all for sale, no doubt appealing to the style-hound audience who've booked this hotel over The Straf or the Anderson since its inception in 2006. The 246 rooms are practical and modern, with WiFi connectivity and colour-therapy showers throughout. Despite the hotel's size, the brand new spa and glass-ceilinged restaurant are surprisingly quiet outside Milan's conference season – the guests perhaps cosied up with Design Week on an Arik Ben Simon armchair instead.

Style 9, Atmosphere 7, Location 7

Hotel Principe di Savoia (bottom)
Piazza della Repubblica 17,
Porta Venezia
Tel: 02 62 301
www.hotelprincipedisavoia.com
Rates: €350–510

Since it's owned by the Sultan of Brunei, it comes as no surprise that the design philosophy for the Principe is 'more is more'. It calls itself the *grande dame* of Milan's hotels, and with 401 rooms (132 of them suites), it takes the gold for size – and indeed for volume of gilt in the extravagant ground floor with its turn-of-the-century 'eclecticism' (the hotel was built in 1863). You don't get many square metres for your euro, but certainly the fuss doesn't stop



Sleep...



eat...

It's no surprise that fashion exerts a huge influence on food in Milan and its most important restaurants are equally fashion- and foodie-orientated – style versus substance, often mutually exclusive. But eating is the not most important thing to the style mafia: it's more about seeing and being seen (notice the proliferation of mirrors in restaurants for inward-sitting folk to check their rear view). And, as is the nature of fashion, fast trends die young: just as soon as new restaurants become the flavour of the month, they can just as quickly fall out of favour again. Milan's fashion restaurants with promise of staying power and a bridge to good food are Eda, Trussardi alla Scala, Quattrocento and Sempione 42.

Milan shares a nationwide pride in its cuisine and believes that the Italian way is the best way – food is usually quite purist (for example, there is a prevalent belief that the only point of a creamy sauce is to conceal poor ingredients). Certainly there's an excellent standard of ingredients available in Milan (be sure to indulge in the white truffle season – between mid-November and mid-January – if you can be here at the time). Generally, Italians are happiest eating and drinking Italian produce; international wine lists really only exist for tourists. The Milanese are very proud of their traditional dishes – most places offer *ossobucco* (veal shank), *risotto alla milanese* (with saffron and bone marrow) and *cotoletta* (veal cutlet). Leaning on the stodgy side, these dishes may not be to everyone's taste, and there are plenty of restaurants that specialize in other cuisines of Italy. Highly recommended are Giulio Pane e Ojo (Roman), 13 Giugno and Da Giacomo (both Sicilian). A handful of Milan's restaurants have been rewarded with Michelin stars, namely Joia with one star, and Cracco, Aimò e Nadia, Trussardi alla Scala and Sadler each with two.

Cosmopolites are welcoming the rise of international imports, although these are often a very sanitized version of the original. The Milanese worry about the hygiene standards of foreign kitchens, so for an ethnic restaurant to work, there's an assumption that it needs to be presented as a theme restaurant, often ending up rather over-the-top and artificial; strong tastes are often diluted and the food can be insipid. However, the Milanese do get Japanese food (Low in fat! High in design! So cosmopolitan!), so it's easy to get good sushi here. Our favourite ethnic restaurants are Fingers (Japanese), Shambala (Thai/Vietnamese) and Don Juan (Argentine).

Milanese xenophobia extends to service and there's a prevailing prejudice – especially in the more traditional establishments – that foreigners are ignorant about food (especially the English because they apparently put up with such terrible food). A virtually nonexistent tipping culture offers Milan's waiters little incentive



Just Cavalli Cafè

to remember their manners, and tourists are given short shrift in any case because they are not expected to return. Fashion restaurants are generally much more tuned in to an international set, but even in informal restaurants, no waiter will stomach downbeat dressing. It's usual for chefs to roam the floor to meet and greet and accept compliments.

Booking is essential for any restaurant in Milan, especially at rush hour (from 8.30pm, but later in the summer). Most restaurants close for much of August and many for two weeks from Christmas to Epiphany (6 January).

Restaurants are rated in three categories: food (quality of ingredients, cooking and presentation), service (efficiency and warmth) and atmosphere. The price is calculated on the cost of three courses for one, half a bottle of wine and the ubiquitous cover charge (normally up to €5, but more expensive spots may charge up to €12).

dining. The main draw here is the food: the safe, modern décor, punctuated by business diners and paramours who are happy to trade ambience for privacy at generously spaced tables, makes for a rather staid atmosphere. But executive chef Sergio Mei, with a swathe of cookery books to his name, uses adventurous ingredients to reinterpret traditional cuisine with a northern Italian slant; creations include lime-cooked scallops, chestnut *ragout* and Barolo stewed beef. The comprehensive Italian-based wine list is surprisingly exotic, and is best discussed with the knowledgeable sommelier. For an extra dose of theatre (a theme taken from the restaurant's name) guests can choose to partake in a private Prosecco-fuelled buffet of *antipasti* with one of the chefs in the bustling kitchen. This bespoke volley of seafood mono-portions, fresh *funghi* and *prosciutto di San Daniele* is best booked ahead, as is the best table in the house – the black leather banquette in the frescoed alcove. Signor Mei also presides over the €70 per head Sunday Brunch – a gluttonously lazy entry into the local social calendar; Victoria Beckham marked her Milanese debut here in January 2009 accompanied by Dolce and Gabbana.

Food 9, Service 9, Atmosphere 8

**Trussardi alla
Scala Ristorante** *(Opposite)*

Piazza della Scala 5, Centro

Tel: 02 806 882 01

www.trussardiallascala.com

Open: 12.30–2.30pm, 8–11pm. Closed Saturday lunch, Sundays, two weeks in August and three weeks at Christmas.

Modern Italian €110

Quietly racking up Michelin stars, pocketing one in 2008 and another in the guide's 2009 edition, chef Andrea Berton began his professional career studying under the famous Gualtiero Marchesi (see *Il Marchesino*, pxx). Following stints alongside Carlo Cracco (see Cracco, page 74) and at Alain Ducasse's Louis XV in Monte Carlo foreshadowed Berton's selection as head chef, overseeing Trussardi alla Scala's inauguration in 2006. The menu is experimental yet not too out there – Breton says his most essential ingredient is rice – and the ingredients fresh: Sicilian red prawns are served with *Taggiasca* olive oil and beetroot sorbet, and pumpkin ravioli are doused in a delicate smoked tea sauce. Décor is formal yet fun, with red-tinged parquet and deep red leather armchairs flanking crisp white table settings and a more laid-back café on the ground floor below. Snag a spot by the window for views over Piazza della Scala and the opera house itself.

Food 10, Service 9, Atmosphere 8



eat...