The dynamo behind the country’s “economic miracle” in the 1950s, Milan is an Italian city like no other. It’s foggy in winter, muggy and mosquito-ridden in summer, and is closer in outlook, as well as distance, to London than to Palermo. It’s a historic city, with a spectacular cathedral and enough ancient churches and galleries to keep you busy for a week, but there are also bars and cafés to relax in, and the contemporary aspects of the place represent the cutting edge of Italy’s fashion and design industry. Milan wears its history on its well-tailored sleeve: medieval buildings nestle next to nineteenth-century splendour, rickety trams trundle past overgrown bombsites left from World War II and Fascist-era bombastic facades. But the Milanese keep the best for themselves: peep through a doorway into one of Milan’s fabulous courtyards and you will be smitten. Continue reading to find out more about... Places to visit in Milan. The Duomo. Milan’s canals. Santa Maria delle Grazie. Calcio crazy. Shopping. Places to visit in Milan. The obvious focal point of central Milan is Piazza del Duomo, which, as well as being home to the city’s iconic Duomo, leads on to the elegant Galleria Vittorio Emanuele and Piazza della Scala, home to the world-famous opera house. Heading northwest from Piazza del Duomo along the shopping street of Via Dante takes you to the imperious Castello Sforzesco and the extensive Parco Sempione beyond. North, the well-heeled neighbourhoods of Brera and Moscova are the haunt of Milan’s most style-conscious citizens. Here you’ll find the fine-art collection of the Pinacoteca di Brera and, nearby, the so-called Quadrilatero d’Oro (Golden Quadrangle), a concentration of top designer fashion boutiques. Slightly further north is Milan’s most pleasant park, the Giardini Pubblici. Southwest of the Duomo, the shopping streets of Via Torino take you to the Ticinese district, a focal point at aperitivo time, and home to a couple of the city’s most beautiful ancient churches. Continuing south to the Navigli leads to the bar and restaurant area around the city’s remaining canals. West of the cathedral, the Museo Archeologico gives a taste of Roman Milan, while the basilica of Milan’s Christian father, Sant’Ambrogio, is a couple of blocks away. A little further west stands the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie and the adjacent refectory building, holding Leonardo da Vinci’s The Last Supper. Brief history of Milan. Milan first stepped into the historical limelight in 313 AD when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, granting Christians throughout the Roman Empire the freedom to worship for the first time. The city, under its charismatic bishop, Ambrogio (Ambrose), swiftly became a major centre of Christianity; many of today’s churches stand on the sites, or even retain parts, of fourth-century predecessors. Medieval Milan rose to prominence under the Visconti dynasty, who founded the florid late-Gothic Duomo, and built the nucleus of the Castello – which, under their successors, the Sforza, was extended to house what became one of the most luxurious courts of the Renaissance. The last Sforza, Lodovico, commissioned Leonardo da Vinci in 1495 to paint The Last Supper. Milan fell to the French in 1499, marking the beginning of almost four centuries of foreign rule, which included the Spanish, Napoleon and the Austrian Habsburgs. Mussolini made his mark on the city, too: arrive by train and you emerge into the massive white Stazione Centrale, built on the dictator’s orders. And it was on the innocuous roundabout of Piazzale Loreto that the dictator’s corpse was strung up for display in April 1945 as proof of his demise. Milan’s postwar development was characterized by the boom periods of the 1950s and 1980s: the city’s wealth also comes from banking and its position at the top of the world’s fashion and design industries. Politically, too, Milan has been key to Italy’s postwar history. A bomb in Piazza Fontana in 1969 that killed sixteen people signalled the beginning of the dark and bloody period known as the Anni di piombo, when secret-service machinations led to over a hundred deaths from bomb attacks. In the 1980s, corruption and political scandal once again focused attention on Milan, which gained the nickname Tangentopoli (“Bribesville”). The self-promoting media magnate Silvio Berlusconi – Italy’s longest serving prime minister since World War II – is also Milan born and bred. And despite having lost his political weight he maintains his power base in the city’s media conglomerates as well as owning the football club AC Milan. In 2015, Milan hosted Expo Milano 2015, which attracted an estimated twenty million visitors to the city and surrounding area. In preparation for the exhibition, the city centre was spruced up, with a number of new restaurants, museums and hotels opening. The Duomo Milan’s vast Duomo was begun in 1386 under the Viscontis, but not completed until the finishing touches to the facade were added in 1938. It is characterized by a hotchpotch of styles that range from Gothic to Neoclassical. From the outside at least it’s incredible, notable as much for its strange confection of Baroque and Gothic decoration as its sheer size. The marble, chosen by the Viscontis in preference to the usual material of brick, was brought on specially built canals from the quarries of Candoglia, near Lake Maggiore, and continues to be used in renovation today. The interior. The interior is striking for its dimension and atmosphere. The five aisles are separated by 52 towering piers, while an almost subterranean half-light filters through the stained-glass windows, lending the marble columns a bone-like hue that led the French writer Suarez to compare the interior to “the hollow of a colossal beast”. By the entrance, the narrow brass strip embedded in the pavement with the signs of the zodiac alongside is Europe’s largest sundial, laid out in 1786. A beam of light still falls on it through a hole in the ceiling, though changes in the Earth’s axis mean that it’s no longer accurate. To the right of the entrance a door leads down to the remains of the fourth-century Battistero San Giovanni alle Fonti, where the city’s patron saint, Ambrogio, baptized St Augustine in 387 AD. At the far end of the church, the large crucifix suspended high above the chancel contains the most important of the Duomo’s holy relics – a nail from Christ’s cross, which was also crafted into the bit for the bridle of Emperor Constantine’s horse. The cross is lowered once a year, on September 14, the Feast of the Cross, by a device invented by Leonardo da Vinci. Close by, the Scurolo di San Carlo crypt houses the remains of San Carlo Borromeo, the zealous sixteenth-century cardinal who was canonized for his work among the poor of the city, especially during the Plague of 1630. He lies here in a glass coffin, clothed, bejewelled, masked and gloved, wearing a gold crown attributed to Cellini. Borromeo was also responsible for the large altar in the north transept, erected to close off a door that was used by locals as a shortcut to the market. To the right of the chancel, by the door to the Palazzo Reale, the sixteenth-century statue of St Bartholomew, with his flayed skin thrown like a toga over his shoulder, is one of the church’s more gruesome statues, its veins, muscles and bones sculpted with anatomical accuracy and the draped skin retaining the form of knee, foot, toes and toenails. The roof. Outside, from the northeast end of the cathedral you can access the cathedral roof, where you can stroll around the forest of tracery, pinnacles and statues while enjoying fine views of the city and, on clear days, even the Alps. The highlight is the central spire, its lacy marble crowned by a gilded statue of the Madonna – the Madonnina, the city’s guardian – in summer looking out over the rooftop sunbathers. Milan’s canals. Improbable though it may seem, less than fifty years ago Milan was still a viable port – and less than a hundred years ago several of its main arteries – including Via Senato and Via San Marco – were busy waterways. In the twelfth century, the first canals linked irrigation channels and the various defensive moats of the city. Later, in 1386, the Naviglio Grande was opened, linking the city to the River Ticino and thus Lake Maggiore. It was Gian Galeazzo Visconti, however, who was really responsible for the development of the system, in the fourteenth century to transport the building materials for the Duomo, especially marble from Lake Maggiore. Travellers were also seen on the canals: the ruling families of the north used them to visit one another, Prospero and Miranda escaped along the Navigli in The Tempest, and they were still plied by the Grand Tourists in the eighteenth century – Goethe, for example, describes the hazards of journeying by canal. A number of rivers and canals were added to the system over the centuries. The Spanish developed the Darsena to the south in 1603 and under Napoleon’s regime the Naviglio Pavese was made navigable all the way to Pavia and down to the River Po, and so to the Adriatic. During the Industrial Revolution, raw materials like coal, iron and silk were brought into the city, and handmade products transported out with an efficiency that ensured Milan’s commercial and economic dominance of the region. The process of covering over the canals began in the 1930s, to make way for the city’s trams and trolley buses. In the 1950s, desperately needed materials were floated in for reconstructing the badly bombed city but by the mid-1970s, only a handful of canals were left uncovered; the last working boat plied the waters in 1977. The best way to explore Milan’s waterways is on a relaxing boat trip. These run between April and mid-September when the canals are not being dredged or cleaned; for more information ask at the tourist office. Santa Maria delle Grazie. Due west from the Duomo, on Corso Magenta, stands the attraction that brings most visitors to Milan – the beautiful terracotta-and-brick church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, famous for its mural of The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. More ancient exhibits are on display at the city's Museo Archeologico, while the nearby Sant'Ambrogio is one of the city's loveliest churches. Santa Maria delle Grazie. The beautiful terracotta-and-brick church of Santa Maria delle Grazie was first built in Gothic style by the fifteenth-century architect Guiniforte Solari. It was part of the Dominican monastery that headed the Inquisition for over one hundred years in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Soon after its completion, Lodovico Sforza commissioned Bramante to rework and model the Gothic structure into a grand dynastic mausoleum. Bramante promptly tore down the existing chancel and replaced it with a massive dome supported by an airy Renaissance cube. Lodovico also intended to replace the nave and facade, but was unable to do so before Milan fell to the French, leaving an odd combination of styles – Gothic vaults, decorated in powdery blues, reds and ochre, illuminated by the light that floods through the windows of Bramante’s dome. A side door leads into Bramante’s cool and tranquil cloisters, from where there’s a good view of the sixteen-sided drum the architect placed around his dome. The Last Supper. Leonardo’s The Last Supper – signposted Cenacolo Vinciano – is one of the world’s great paintings and most resonant images. Henry James likened the painting to an “illustrious invalid” that people visited with “leave-taking sighs and almost death-bed or tip-toe precautions”; certainly it’s hard, when you visit the fragile painting, not to feel that it’s the last time you’ll see it. A twenty-year restoration has re-established the original colours using contemporary descriptions and copies, but that the work survived at all is something of a miracle. Leonardo’s decision to use oil paint rather than the more usual faster-drying – and longer-lasting – fresco technique with watercolours led to the painting disintegrating within five years of its completion. A couple of centuries later Napoleonic troops billeted here used the wall for target practice. And, in 1943, an Allied bomb destroyed the building, amazingly leaving only The Last Supper’s wall standing. A Last Supper was a conventional theme for refectory walls, but Leonardo’s decision to capture the moment when Christ announces that one of his disciples will betray him imbues the work with an unprecedented sense of drama. Goethe commented on how very Italian the painting was in that so much is conveyed through the expressions of the characters’ hands; the group of Matthew, Thaddaeus and Simon on the far right of the mural could be discussing a football match or the latest government scandal in any bar in Italy today. The only disciple not gesticulating or protesting in some way is the recoiling Judas who has one hand clenched while a bread roll has just dropped dramatically out of the other. Christ is calmly reaching out to share his bread with him while his other hand falls open in a gesture of sacrifice. If you feel you need any confirmation of the emotional tenor or accomplishment of the painting, take a look at the contemporary Crucifixion by Montorfano on the wall at other end of the refectory: not a bad fresco in itself, but destined always to pale in comparison with Leonardo’s masterpiece. Calcio crazy. Milan has two rival football teams – Inter Milan and AC Milan – which share the G. Meazza or San Siro stadium, playing on alternate Sundays. In 1899 AC (Associazione Calcio or Football Association) Milan was founded by players from the Milan Cricket and Football Club. Eight years later, a splinter group broke away to form Inter in reaction to a ruling banning foreigners playing in the championships. Inter – or the Internationals – were traditionally supported by the middle classes, while AC Milan, with its socialist red stripe, claimed the loyalty of the city’s working class. This distinction was blown apart in the mid-1980s when the ardent capitalist Silvio Berlusconi bought the ailing AC and revived its fortunes, leaving many an AC fan with a moral quandary. Their twice-yearly derbies are a highlight of the city’s calendar and well worth experiencing live. Shopping. Milan is synonymous with shopping. If your pockets are not deep enough to tackle the big-name designer boutiques you could always rummage through last season’s leftovers at the many factory outlets around town, or check out the city’s wide range of medium- and budget-range clothes shops. Milan also excels in furniture and design, with showrooms from the world’s top companies, plus a handful of shops offering a selection of brands and labels under one roof.