



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

hour' with platters of bar food laid on) and hip, hot clubs.

The city is at its hottest – weather-wise – in August, when locals take holidays, and many places close; though it can provide a tranquil alternative to the crowded coast.

Fashion and finance aside, Milan's other religion is, of course, *calcio* (football). The city is home to both AC Milan and Inter, two of Italy's top teams, and passionate crowds pack San Siro stadium on Sunday in season.

The city also harbours some lesser-known attractions such as the Navigli's canal-side cafés and old-fashioned gelaterie (ice-cream shops) and the funky design district of Isola.

If you take the time to get under Milan's skin, chances are you'll find it will get under yours too.

HISTORY

Celtic tribes settled along the river Po in the 7th century BC, and the area encompassing modern-day Milan has remained inhabited since.

In 222 BC Roman legions marched into the territory, defeated the Gallic Insubres tribe and occupied the town, which they called Mediolanum (Middle of the Plain). Mediolanum's key position on the trade routes between Rome and northwestern Europe ensured its continued prosperity and it was here in AD 313 that Emperor Constantine made his momentous edict granting Christians freedom of worship. By the end of the 4th century, Rome had been abandoned by the imperial court in favour of Mediolanum, and it functioned as the capital city of the collapsing Western empire.

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, the Viscontis and finally the Sforzas. It fell under Spanish rule in 1535 and Austrian in 1713.

Napoleon made Milan the capital of his Cisalpine Republic in 1797 and, five years later, of his Italian Republic, crowning himself king of Italy in 1805. Austria returned in 1814 but troops under Vittorio Emanuele II and Napoleon III crushed the Austrian forces in 1859 and Milan became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

After WWI Mussolini, in Milan as editor of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*, founded the Fascist Party here in 1919. WWII was the city's darkest hour: allied bombings during WWII destroyed much of central Milan. Al-

though postwar economic recovery was rapid, corruption quickly infiltrated the city.

In 1992 the *Tangentopoli* scandal broke, implicating thousands of Milanese politicians, officials and businesspeople, fashion designers Gianni Versace and Giorgio Armani among them. A year later a Sicilian Mafia terrorist bomb exploded outside Milan's contemporary art museum and in 1995 fashion tycoon Maurizio Gucci was shot dead outside his office on the same street.

Milan's self-made big shot, Silvio Berlusconi, was elected Italian prime minister in 2001. Despite his legal and financial wrangles he became Italy's longest-serving postwar leader until he was narrowly ousted by centrist Romano Prodi in 2006. The city's mayoral race that year was also close, obliging new centre-right mayor, Letizia Moratti (the city's first female mayor), to form a coalition government with the left.

ORIENTATION

Central Milan's spider's web of streets radiates from the city's geographical and spiritual heart, the Duomo (Cathedral).

Immediately north of the Duomo is the Quadrilatero d'Oro (Golden Quad), Milan's designer shopping precinct. Northwest is the gentrified, former bohemian quarter of Brera, with narrow cobblestone streets, upmarket antique shops and alfresco cafés. The city's best nightlife is on and around Corso Como, further northwest, beyond which is the edgy Isola design district. Northeast of the Duomo is the Stazione Centrale (Central Train Station; though it's not quite as central its name suggests). To the Duomo's south lies the Navigli canal district. West of the Duomo is the Castello Sforzesco and Parco Sempione.

Crisscrossing the city are Milan's four underground metro lines, and an extensive network of buses and trams. Milan's catwalk-flat terrain, however, makes it easy to cover the centre on foot.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

American Bookstore (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 87 89 20; Via M Camperio 16; ☹ 1-7pm Mon, 10am-7pm Tue-Sat) English-language novels and nonfiction, including art books and Lonely Planet guides.

English Bookshop (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 469 44 68; www.englishbookshop.it; Via Mascheroni 12) New and secondhand English-language titles.

Rizzoli (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 61 071; Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II) Unbeatable range of translated works by Italian writers, and Italy-inspired travel literature, along with English- and French-language novels.

Touring Club Italiano (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 535 99 71; Corso Italia 10) Outstanding range of guidebooks and walking maps.

Emergency

Foreigners police office (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 622 65 58; Via Montebello 26)

Police station (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 6 22 61; Via Fatebenefratelli 11)

Internet Access

Internet access is thin on the ground.

Etnoland Shop (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 720 99 239; Via Giardino 2; per 15min €1.20; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm) The most central place to log on.

Internet Enjoy (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 835 72 25; Alzaia Naviglio Pavese 2; per hr €3; ☎ 9am-midnight Mon-Sat, 2pm-midnight Sun)

Laundry

Washing costs around €3.50/6 per 7/16kg.

Lavanderia self service (Map pp254-5; Via Tadino 4; ☎ 8am-9pm)

Onda Blu (Map pp256-7; Via Savona 1; ☎ 9am-10pm)

Left Luggage

Stazione Centrale (first 12hr €3; ☎ 6am-1.30am)

Stazione Nord (☎ 800 55 77 30; 24hr €4; ☎ 5.15am-11.30pm) Next to the Malpensa Express ticket office.

Medical Services

24-hour pharmacy (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 669 09 35; Stazione Centrale)

Farmacia Carlo Erba (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 87 86 68; Piazza del Duomo 21; ☎ 8pm-8.30am daily, plus 2-7pm Mon, 9.30am-1.45pm & 3-7pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Sat)

Milan Clinic (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 760 16 047; www.milanclic.com; Via Cerva 25) One of several private clinics with English-speaking doctors.

Ospedale Maggiore Policlinico (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 5 50 31, foreigners 02 550 33 171; Via Francesco Sforza 35) Hospital.

Money

There are currency-exchange offices at both airports and a couple on the western side of Piazza del Duomo.

American Express (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 721 04 010; Via Larga 4; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

Banca Cesare Ponti (Map pp256-7; Piazza del Duomo

19) Good rates, and a 24-hour automatic banknote-exchange machine.

Banca Commerciale Italiana (Map pp256-7; Piazza della Scala) A 24-hour booth with currency-exchange machine and ATMs.

Post

Central post office (Map pp256-7; Piazza Cordusio;

☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat)

Stazione Centrale (Piazza Duca d'Aosta; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm Sat)

Tourist Information

Central tourist office (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 725 24

301; www.milanoinfotourist.com; Piazza del Duomo 19a;

☎ 8.45am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Sun)

Liniate airport (☎ 02 702 00 443; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Malpensa airport (☎ 02 748 67 213; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Stazione Centrale (☎ 02 725 24 360; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Sun)

Travel Agencies

Travel 365 (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 674 93 147; Galleria di Testa, Stazione Centrale)

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Milan is relatively safe, but pickpockets (including young children) prey on its main shopping areas, train stations and busiest public transport routes. Pay extra attention on metro Line 3 between the Stazione Centrale and Duomo stops. Touts in the street often approach selling booklets, bracelets and the like – often as a cover to pick your pocket too. Keep a close eye on your belongings at all times.

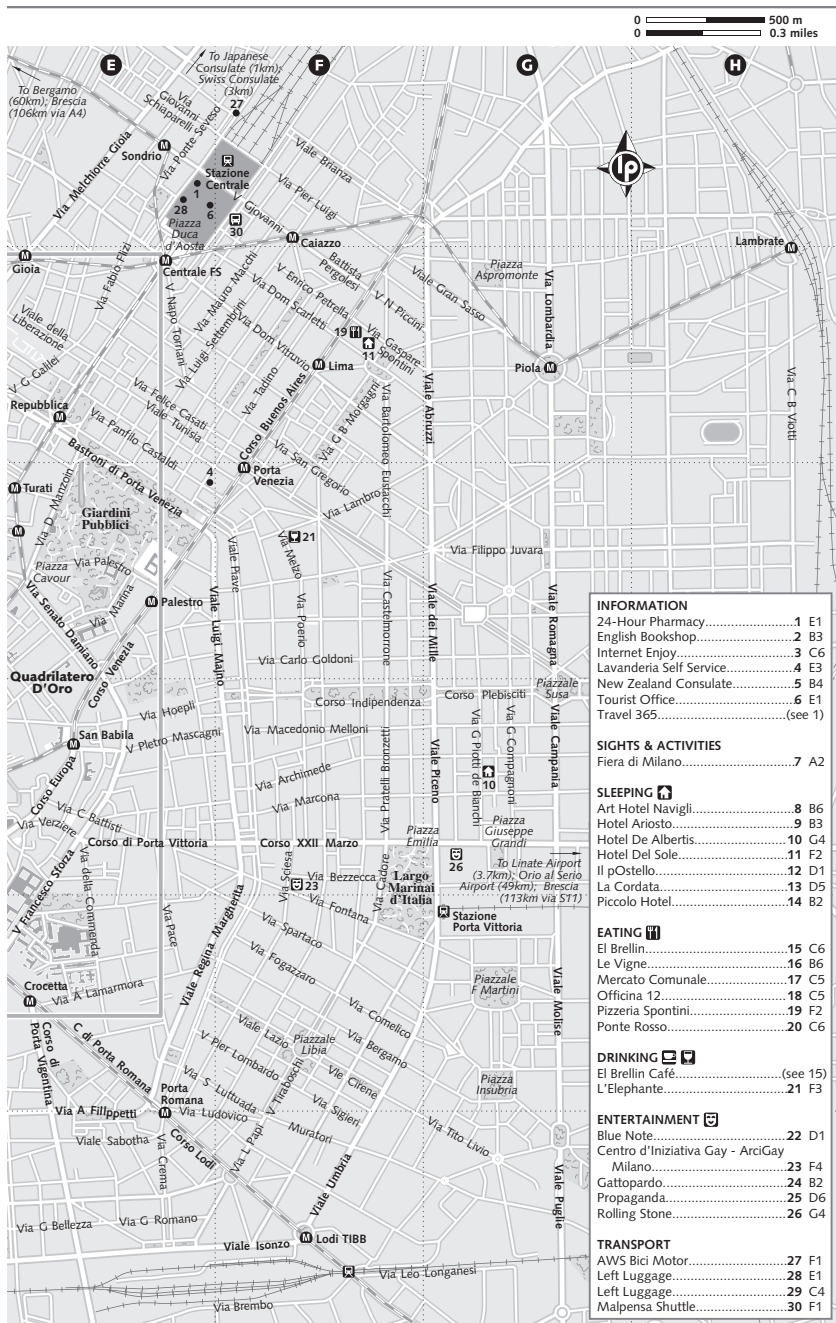
Beware the bird-seed sellers on Piazza del Duomo who sneak seeds into tourists' pockets, prompting pigeons to dive-bomb the victim, who is then encouraged to buy seed to escape further bombardment.

SIGHTS

Many visitors hit Milan for its shopping rather than sights, but there's plenty to see beyond the boutiques.

Duomo & Around DUOMO

A frenzy of flying buttresses, 135 spires and a staggering 3200 statues, Milan's Gothic **Duomo** (Map pp256-7) is the world's largest of its kind, and third largest in any style in



LOMBARDY & THE LAKES

CENTRAL MILAN





INFORMATION						
American Bookstore.....	1 C5	Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnica.....	31 A7	Marchesi.....	59 C6	
American Express.....	2 E7	Museo Poldi-Pezzoli.....	32 E5	Radetzky.....	60 C2	
Australian Consulate.....	3 F6	Museo Teatrale alla Scala.....(see 71)		Zucca in Galleria.....	61 D6	
Banca Cesare Ponti.....	4 D6	Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea.....	33 F4	ENTERTAINMENT 📺		
Banca Commerciale Italiana.....	5 D5	Palazzo Marino.....	34 D6	Eleven.....	62 D1	
British Consulate.....	6 E6	Parco Sempione.....	35 B4	FNAC.....	63 C7	
British Institutes.....	7 B6	Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.....	36 D6	Gasoline.....	64 C1	
Central Post Office.....	8 C6	Pinacoteca di Brera.....	37 D4	Hollywood.....	65 D1	
Central Tourist Office.....	9 D6	Pinacoteca e Raccolte d'Arte.....(see 23)		La Banque.....	66 D6	
Etnoland Shop.....	10 D7	The Last Supper.....	38 A6	La Scala Box Office.....	67 E6	
Farmacia Carlo Erba.....	11 D6	SLEEPING 🛏		Messaggerie Musicali.....	68 E6	
Foreigners' Police Office.....	12 E3	3Rooms.....(see 77)		Milan Point.....	69 E6	
French Consulate.....	13 E3	Alle Meraviglie.....	39 C5	Old Fashion Café.....	70 A4	
German Consulate.....	14 D2	Grand Hotel et de Milan.....	40 E5	Ricordi Mediastore.....	71 D6	
Milan Clinic.....	15 F6	Hotel Ariston.....	41 C7	Teatro alla Scala.....	72 D5	
Onda Blu.....	16 A8	Hotel Nuovo.....	42 E6	Teatro Smeraldo.....	73 D2	
Ospedale Maggiore		Una Hotel Tocq.....	43 D1	Tocqueville 13.....	74 D1	
Policlinico.....	17 F8	EATING 🍴		SHOPPING 🛍		
Police Station.....	18 E4	Caffè Torino.....	44 C7	Alan Journo.....	75 E4	
Rizzoli.....	19 D6	Cracco-Peck.....	45 D6	Alessi.....	76 E5	
Touring Club Italiano.....	20 D8	Don Carlos.....	46 E5	B&B Italia Store.....	77 F6	
US Consulate.....	21 E3	Flash.....	47 E7	Corsa Como 10.....	78 D1	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES			Galateria le Colonne.....	48 C8	Damiani.....	79 E5
Basilica di Sant' Ambrogio.....	22 B7	Italian Bar.....	49 D6	Ferrari Store.....	80 E6	
Castello Sforzesco.....	23 B4	Nabucco.....	50 D4	Flos.....	81 F5	
Chiesa di San Maurizio.....	24 B6	Peck.....	51 D6	Kartell.....	82 E4	
Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie.....	25 A6	Princi: Il Bread & Breakfast.....	52 C2	La Rinascente.....	83 E6	
Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna.....	26 F4	Superfresco Standa.....	53 C7	Panca's.....	84 C8	
Civico Museo Archeologico.....	27 B6	DRINKING 🍷		Semoneta.....	85 E4	
Duomo.....	28 E6	Bar Madonnina.....	54 E6	Studio Museo Castiglioni.....	86 B5	
Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II.....	29 D6	Bhangra Bar.....	55 A3	Triennale di Milano.....	87 A4	
La Scala Bookstore.....	30 D5	Farinella.....	56 C5	TRANSPORT		
Museo d'Arte Antica.....(see 23)		Il Salotto.....	57 D6	ATM Info Point.....	88 D6	
Museo degli Strumenti Musicali.....(see 23)		Le Biciclette.....	58 B8	Bus Station.....	89 D1	
Museo della Preistoria.....(see 23)				Bus Stop for ATM Buses to Linate Airport.....	90 F6	
				Malpensa Shuttle.....	91 B5	

Europe. This vision of pink-tinged Candoglia marble was commissioned in 1386 by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, and has a capacity for a congregation of 40,000 (Milan's population at the time). The logistics of transporting the vast stone slabs through the narrow city streets was solved by Da Vinci, whose canal lock mechanism raised water levels one section at a time, allowing their passage to the city centre. Centuries of construction (from east to west) finally saw it completed in 1812. Crowning this Gothic splendour is a gilded copper statue of the **Madonnina** (Little Madonna), the city's traditional protector, though curiously there's no bell tower. History has left its scars – the brass doors at the front bear the marks of bombs that fell nearby during WWII.

The cathedral's echoing interior is equally awe-inspiring, with 146 stained-glass windows, and intricately carved pillars. Although the ceiling also appears carved, it's a

trompe l'œil-painted optical illusion. High above the altar is a **nail** said to have been the one that impaled Christ's right hand on the cross. Predating the cathedral is the early Christian baptistery, the **Battistero di San Giovanni** (admission €1.50; ☎: 9.45am-12.45pm & 2.45-5.45pm Tue-Sun), accessed via a stairwell next to the main entrance. The **crypt** (admission free) displays the remains of San Carlo Borromeo, who died in 1584, in a glass casket; while off to the side, the **treasury** (admission €1; ☎: 9.30am-1.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 1.30-3.30pm Sun) has a small collection of liturgical vessels (interesting only to the truly dedicated).

For a close-up of the forest of spires, statuary and pinnacles – and views as far as Switzerland on a clear day – you can climb 165 steps to the **cathedral roof** (admission €4; ☎: 9am-5.45pm). Alternatively, it's a quick zip up in the **lift** (admission €6; ☎: 9am-5.30pm) to the top. Entrances to both are outside the cathedral on the northern side.

Shorts and uncovered shoulders are not allowed; there are wheelchair ramps to the cathedral's interior only.

The Duomo's surrounding plaza, the **Piazza del Duomo**, is the hub for the city's celebrations and festivities.

To learn more about the cathedral, you can usually pop into the **Museo del Duomo** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 86 03 58; www.duomomilano.it; Piazza del Duomo 14). The museum was closed for restoration during research – check with the tourist office for updates.

GALLERIA VITTORIO EMANUELE II

Framed by an immense archway, the **Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II** (Map pp256-7) opens off the Piazza del Duomo's northern flank. This glass-and-steel-roofed shopping arcade is shaped like a crucifix, and is home to elegant boutiques, cafés, and, unfortunately, a McDonald's. More fittingly, it's also home to the world's second-only seven-star hotel, the **Townhouse Galleria** (www.townhouse.it/thgallery).

Giuseppe Mengoni designed the Galleria as a showplace for modern Milan. Tragically, he plummeted to his death from scaffolding just weeks before his 14-year *tour de force* was completed in 1877. Long-standing Milanese tradition claims you can avoid Mengoni's bad luck by grinding your heel into the testicles of the mosaic bull on the floor (just to the left of the central cross when you're facing north).

PINACOTECA AMBROSIANA

Within Europe's first public library, the 1609-built Biblioteca Ambrosiana, is its outstanding art gallery, the **Pinacoteca Ambrosiana** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 80 69 21; www.ambrosiana.it; Piazza Pio XI 2; adult/child €7.50/4.50; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun). Priceless works that you should check out include Italy's first real still life, Caravaggio's *Canestro di frutta* (Fruit Basket) and da Vinci's *Musico* (Musician).

La Scala

The austere façade of Milan's legendary opera house, **La Scala** (Teatro alla Scala) is at odds with its six-tiered, chandeliered interior of gilded arches and scarlet-silk-lined private boxes. The disparity came about because at the time it was built in 1778, it was on a narrow street blocked by houses. These have since been demolished to create the square out

front, Piazza della Scala, meaning the building can be viewed from a distance.

Conductor Arturo Toscanini revolutionised La Scala's program from 1898 to 1929, but fled Italy rather than play to Mussolini's tune. The opera house was all but destroyed during WWII bombing. On his return to Milan, Toscanini raised funds for its restoration. It reopened under his baton in 1946.

Attending a performance – any performance – here is incredible; see p267 for ticket details. Otherwise, you can peek inside as part of a visit to the in-house **Museo Teatrale alla Scala** (La Scala Museum; Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 433 53 521; www.teatroallascala.org; Piazza della Scala; adult/child €5/4; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.30pm), provided there are no performances or rehearsals in progress. On the museum's ground floor is a chronologically arranged collection of opera-related items including original advertising posters and the death mask and hand cast of Verdi, who premiered numerous operas here. The museum has disabled access. Upstairs are temporary exhibitions, such as costume displays. **La Scala Bookstore** (Map pp256-7; Piazza della Scala) sells posters and CDs.

Around La Scala

Between Piazza della Scala and Piazza San Fedele, Galeazzo Alessi's **Palazzo Marino** (Map pp256-7) is a masterpiece of 16th-century residential architecture. Milan's municipal council has sat here since 1859.

Botticelli's *Madonna and Child* is the star attraction at the nearby **Museo Poldi-Pezzoli** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 79 48 89; www.museopoldipezzoli.it; Via Alessandro Manzoni 12; adult/child €7/5; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). The city's most important private collection, it also displays some superb porcelain, jewellery, tapestries, antique furniture and paintings.

The Last Supper

Da Vinci's depiction of Christ and his dinner companions is one of the world's most iconic images (even more so after *The Da Vinci Code*). Viewing it first-hand, however, is not easy. You'll need to book anything from two weeks to a couple of months ahead, or take a city tour (see p261) that tacks on a visit. Once your bar-coded ticket's been zapped, you have to wait in the main foyer until an iron gate unbolts, then pass through three glass 'holding chambers', then wait until a set of automatic doors slide open, allowing just 25

people at a time inside. But 15 minutes' face time (the maximum allowed) is worth it.

The famous **mural** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 894 21 146; www.cenacolovinciano.org; adult/child €6.50/free, plus booking fee €1.50) is hidden away on one wall of the Cenacolo Vinciano, the refectory adjoining **Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie** (Map pp256-7; Corso Magenta; ☎ 8.15am-6.45pm Tue-Sun). Restoration of *The Last Supper* began in 1977 and was completed in 1999. The work was in a lamentable state after centuries of damage and decay. Da Vinci himself is partly to blame: his experimental mix of oil and tempera was applied between 1495 and 1498, rather than only over a week or so as is typical of fresco techniques. The Dominicans didn't help matters in 1652 by raising the refectory floor, hacking off a lower section of the scene, including Jesus' feet. The most damage was caused by the methods used by restorers in the 19th century, whose alcohol and cotton-wool technique removed an entire layer. The mural narrowly escaped destruction in WWII (photographs show the surrounding damage). Despite the 22-year restoration effort, 80% of the original colour has been lost. Photography's not allowed (but there is, of course, a gift shop).

Reservations must be made by phone. Once through to an operator, you'll be allotted a visiting time and a reservation number, which you present 30 minutes before your visit at the refectory ticket desk. If you turn up late, your ticket will be resold.

The ticket desk rents out audio guides (one/two people €2.50/4.50) in English. English-language guided tours (€3.25) take place at 9.30am and 3.30pm Tuesday to Sunday – again you'll need to reserve ahead.

Castello Sforzesco

Originally a Visconti fortress, this immense red-brick **castle** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 884 63 700; www.milanocastello.it; Piazza Castello; adult/child €3/1.50, after 2pm Fri free; ☎ castle grounds 7am-6pm or 7pm, museums 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) was later home to the mighty Sforza dynasty that ruled Renaissance Milan. The castle's defences were designed by the multitalented Da Vinci; Napoleon later drained the moat and removed the drawbridges. Today, it shelters 10 specialised museums, all of which can be accessed on the same ticket.

Among the standouts is the **Museo d'Arte Antica** (Map pp256-7), containing Michelangelo's

last, unfinished work, *Pietà Rondanini*. Paintings by Bellini, Tiepolo, Mantegna, Correggio, Titian and Van Dyck take pride of place in the **Pinacoteca e Raccolte d'Arte** (Map pp256-7). Milan's past is unearthed at the **Museo della Preistoria** (Map pp256-7), which displays local archaeological finds from the Palaeolithic era to the Iron Age. Vintage instruments, including some of the world's earliest violins, are a must-see for music lovers at the **Museo degli Strumenti Musicali** (Map pp256-7).

Sprawling over 47 hectares, the castle's leafy **Parco Sempione** (Map pp256-7) is graced by a neoclassical arch and the Torre Branca (1933), a 103m-tall steel tower near the rather ugly Palazzo dell'Arte.

Around Castello Sforzesco

A trio of interesting sights spanning the ancient to the futuristic are just south of the castle.

The Monastero Maggiore, a 9th-century Benedictine convent rebuilt in the 1500s, is a dramatic backdrop for the extensive collections of Roman, Greek and Etruscan artefacts housed in the **Civico Museo Archeologico** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 50 011; Corso Magenta 15; adult/child €2/1, after 2pm Fri free; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun).

St Ambrose, Milan's patron saint, is buried in the crypt of the Romanesque **Basilica di Sant'Ambrogio** (Map pp256-7; Piazza Sant'Ambrogio 15), which he founded in the 4th century. Since then, the church has been repaired, rebuilt and restored several times, resulting in a mishmash of styles that – as with the city's fashions – somehow work. Another lasting legacy of Ambrose's is the term 'Ambrosian', which even today is often used as a synonym for 'Milanese'.

Kids and would-be inventors will go goggle-eyed at the **Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnica** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 48 55 51; www.museoscienza.org; Via San Vittore 21; adult/child €8/6, incl submarine tour €10/8; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Fri, to 6.30pm Sat & Sun). Exhibits range from models testing Da Vinci's far-fetched designs to electricity, astronomy, or clock- and guitar-making. There's a 1940s submarine that can be toured if you book ahead. The museum has wheelchair access.

Pinacoteca di Brera

Religious art amassed (or rather, purloined) by Napoleon formed the basis of the formidable collection at the 17th-century Palazzo di Brera's **Pinacoteca di Brera** (Map pp256-7;

☎ 02 894 21 146; Via Brera 28; adult/child €5/2.50; ☎ 8.30am-7.15pm). Look out for Andrea Mantegna's masterpiece *The Dead Christ* as well as Veronese's *Last Supper* – very different in style to da Vinci's depiction of events. Also on show here are pieces by Raphael, Bellini, Rembrandt, Goya, Caravaggio and Van Dyck. The gallery has wheelchair access.

Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna

Napoleon's temporary Milanese home, the 18th-century Villa Reale, now houses the **Civica Galleria d'Arte Moderna** (GAM; Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 760 02 819; Via Palestro 16; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Tue-Sun). It's well worth a visit for its wide collection of 19th-century works, including many from Milan's neoclassical period.

TOURS

The tourist office sells tickets for pricey but worthwhile three-hour city bus tours (€50 including admission to *The Last Supper*, Castello

Sforzesco and La Scala's museum). Although they whiz you through the city's main sights, your entry tickets to the Castello and La Scala are good for the rest of the day, allowing you to go back at leisure. Tours depart from the taxi rank on the western side of Piazza del Duomo at 9.30am Tuesday to Sunday (except for a couple of weeks during August). From April to October there are also day trips to Lago di Como (€60).

Zani Viaggi (☎ 02 86 71 31; www.zaniviaggi.it) runs a variety of guided tours in and around the city (€32 to €50), some including admission to *The Last Supper*. It also offers day trips to Cinque Terra, Verona, Lago di Como and other destinations, ranging from €50 to €110. Trips depart from Piazza Castello and Stazione Centrale.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

La Scala's opera season opens on Milan's biggest feast day, the **Festa di Sant'Ambrogio**, on

HOME CHIC HOME

Milan might fight it out with Paris on the catwalk, but it is indisputably the world's capital in the realm of fashion for the home. The latest innovations are unveiled each April at the five-day **Salone Internazionale del Mobile** (Furniture Fair), held at the Fiera di Milano (p262) since 1961.

Design showrooms, galleries and shops abound. A Ron Arad Bookworm book shelf, produced by Milanese pioneer of plastic **Kartell** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 659 79 16; Via Carlo Porta 1), can be yours at its flagship store. Minimalist-chic homewares are the hallmark of **B&B Italia Store** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 76 44 41; Via Durini 14; ☎ 3-7pm Mon, 10am-7pm Tue-Sat). Chrome and rice-paper lighting designs at **Flos** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 760 01 641; Corso Monforte 9) are light years ahead of their time. And where would any design fiend worth their salt be without a kitchen appliance from **Alessi** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 79 57 26; Corso Matteotti 9)?

Half-price Flos desk lamps and Bugatti espresso makers can be picked up at Milan's first discount outlet for designer furnishings, **Emporio 31** (☎ 02 42 225 77; www.emporio31.com; Via Tortona 31; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun). It's located inside the left courtyard.

Art and design intertwine at the city's ground-breaking contemporary galleries. Leading the pack is **Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea** (PAC; Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 760 09 085; www.comune.milano.it/pac; Via Palestro 14; adult/child €5.20/2.60; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sat, to Thu, to 7.30pm Sun), which mounts wildly experimental exhibits in all media. **Triennale di Milano** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 724 34 212; www.triennale.it; Viale Alemanga 6; admission varies depending on exhibit; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm Tue-Sun) contains the Permanent Collection of Italian Design, plus temporary exhibits such as Le Corbusier's prefab house. Retro items at **Studio Museo Castiglioni** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 72 43 41; Piazza Castello 27; admission €2; ☎ 10.30am-8.30pm Tue-Sun) range from the streetlight-turned-pendulum Arco floor lamp to early examples of Alessi's gadget wizardry.

At newsstands, look out for the magazines *Domus* and *La Casa Bella*, both founded in 1928 by Gio Ponti, considered the architect of Italian design.

Milan itself is getting a design overhaul with a flurry of construction projects around town. Biggest and boldest of them all is the CityLife complex. Architecture all-stars Zaha Hadid, Arata Isozaki, Daniel Libeskind and Pier Paolo Maggiora are reinventing an industrial site near the Fiera, which by 2014 will include twisting office towers, parks, canals – and housing that will be invariably filled with fashionable furniture made in Milan.

7 December. Celebrations also take place at the **Fiera di Milano** (Map pp254-5; ☎ 800 820 029, 02 480 08 061; www.fieramilano.com; Largo Domodossola 1), the trade, conference and exhibition centre northwest of the city. See the boxed text, p268, for information on the international fashion shows.

Carnevale Ambrosiano The world's longest carnival, this event culminates with a procession to the Duomo; held in February.

Festa del Naviglio Parades, music and performances take place during the first 10 days of June.

Milan Jazz Festival The city swings during this November festival.

SLEEPING

Finding a room in Milan (let alone a cheap one) isn't easy, particularly during the fashion weeks, furniture fair and other exhibitions, when rates skyrocket.

Note that many of the services you'd take for granted at most hotels (especially at these prices!), such as breakfast, sometimes command an additional fee; and even at a three-star hotel, there may not be any public areas such as a bar or lounge area.

The tourist office distributes *Milano Hotels*, a free annual listings guide to Milan's 350-odd hotels. Lonely Planet's online booking service (lonelyplanet.com/hotels) reviews standout properties that can be booked online.

Budget

The area around the Stazione Centrale has some of the city's least expensive accommodation, but many places double quietly (and often not so quietly) as brothels.

HOSTELS & CAMPING

Campeggio Città di Milano (☎ 02 482 00 999; www.parcquaquatica.com; Via G Airaghi 61; person/tent/car €8/6/6, 2-/3-/4-person bungalow from €40/50/62; ☞ Feb-Nov) Facilities at this four-star 'camping village' west of the centre include a bar, restaurant, laundry, and bike rental, as well as an aqua park (with a 40% discount for campers). From the De Angeli metro station, take bus 72 from Piazza de Angeli to the Di Vittorio stop, from where it is a 400m walk. By car, leave the Tangenziale Ovest at San Siro-Via Novara.

Il pOstello (Map pp254-5; ☎ 333 175 22 72; http://postello.realityhacking.org; Via A della Pergola 5; dm €10; ☑) If you're a flashpacker, forget it, but this chilled community arts centre in the Isola district has 28 dorm beds for like-minded

travellers. DJs spin electro beats on Wednesday night and reggae is performed on Sunday night (€5 for nonguests). There's no sign; look for the graffiti-covered blue metal gate concealing the doorbell.

La Cordata (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 583 14 675; www.ostellimilano.it; Via Burigozzo 11; dm/s/d €18/40/70; ☒ ☑) Handy for the canal district, and an easy walk to the centre, these modern glass-and-brick premises have Spartan but spotless tiled rooms, wi-fi and a self-catering kitchen (though no breakfast). Check-in is from 2pm to 10pm and there's 24-hour access.

Ostello Piero Rotta (☎ 02 392 67 095; milano@ostellionline.org; Via Martino Bassi 2; B&B €19-19.50; ☞ reception 7-9am & 3.30pm-1am, closed late Dec-mid-Jan; ☑) If you're stuck, head west out of town to Milan's **Hostelling International** (HI) hostel.

HOTELS

ourpick Hotel De Albertis (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 738 34 09; www.hoteldealbertis.it; Via De Albertis 7; s incl breakfast €40-90, d incl breakfast €50-150; ☑) Run by a warm, welcoming family, this small hotel occupies a gracious old building in a leafy residential street. Character-filled rooms have sponge-painted walls and floor-to-ceiling tasseled drapes; higher-priced rooms come with a full range of facilities including fridges and free broadband. Breakfast is Illy coffee and fresh pastries, and it's a flat 20-minute walk (or 10-minute ride on tram 27) to the Duomo.

Hotel Del Sole (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 295 12 971; www.delsolehotel.com; Via Gaspare Spontini 6; s without/bathroom €35/50, d without bathroom €50-70, d with bathroom €65-85; ☞) One of the best options in the not-always-salubrious Stazione Centrale area, 400m from the station, this cheerful hotel has unadorned but entirely acceptable rooms, some with balconies. If you're a light sleeper, ask for a room overlooking the courtyard.

Piccolo Hotel (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 336 01 775; www.piccolohotelmilano.it; Via Piero della Francesca 60; s €50-75, d €85-120; ☑) A 1970s time warp with a groovy rounded reception desk and vintage rooms with lots of venerated timber, this hotel proves that if you wait long enough, trends eventually come full circle. It's a stumble to some great clubs, and if you're driving, you can ditch the car here and catch a tram to the centre.

Midrange

Hotel Nuovo (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 64 444; www.hotelnuovomilano.com; Piazza Beccaria 6; d €90-130) The draw card at this single-star hotel is definitely

the location, rather than the burgundy-and-blue décor, but rooms are clean with gleaming wooden floors, and the city is on your doorstep.

Alle Meraviglie (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 805 10 23; www.allemeraviglie.it; Via San Tomaso; d €145-205; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) There are just half-a-dozen rooms at this boutique hotel in a pretty side street in the city centre. Each is uniquely decorated with beautiful fabrics and fresh flowers, but all are enticing enough to make you want to stay snuggled up inside with a book (there are no TVs). Breakfast will set you back €15 but wi-fi's free.

Hotel Ariston (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 720 00 556; www.brerahotels.com; Largo Carrobbio 2; s incl breakfast €110-200, d incl breakfast €160-290; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) Milan's first ecological hotel is literally a breath of fresh air, with purified air in hotel rooms, herbal tea made with purified water, organic breakfast, natural fibre-filled mattresses, soaps and shampoos with all-natural ingredients, and a free bicycle at the door to combat emissions while wishing the rest of Milan's traffic would do the same. The hotel's wi-fi's d.

Hotel Ariosto (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 481 78 44; www.brerahotels.com; Via L Ariosto 22; s €110-200, d €160-290; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) Fill up on the generous buffet breakfast before feasting your eyes on *The Last Supper*, a 200m stroll from this elegant turn-of-the-20th-century hotel. Some rooms come with spa jets in the baths, and wrought-iron balconies, and there's a handy in-house laundry service. Wi-fi and bikes are available.

Art Hotel Navigli (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 894 10 530; www.arthotelnavigli.com; Via Angelo Fumagalli 4; s incl breakfast €148-320, d incl breakfast €168-385; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) Behind its nondescript façade just off the canal, this four-star hotel opens to a striking lobby and lounge with bold wine-coloured walls and metallic sculptures. Rooms (some with wheelchair access) are minimalist-sleek, with glossy timber and flatscreen TVs. Parking is free, and service is professional and genuine. You'll get the best deals by phoning and asking what's available.

Top End

Una Hotel Tocq (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 6 20 71; una.tocq@unahotels.it; Via Alessio De Tocqueville 7d; d from €205; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) A passé fright from the outside, but inside the Una Tocq's retro *Brady Bunch*-gone-glam styling is fabulous. Celebs sip cocktails on the terrace of the bar/restaurant before hitting the adjacent clubs.

Prices are notoriously fickle but there are often bargains on its website.

3Rooms (Map pp256-7; www.3rooms-10Crosocomo.com; d €310; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) Can't drag yourself and your shopping bags away from concept shop Corso Como (see the boxed text, p268)? You don't have to – the villa's three guest rooms let you sleep amid Eames bedspreads, red Arne Jacobsen chairs and Saarinen leather.

Grand Hotel et de Milan (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 72 31 41; www.grandhoteletdemilan.it, Via Alessandro Manzoni 29; d from €350; (P) (X) (♿) (🚿)) Operatic history looms large at this 19th-century period piece: Verdi once lived in suites 105 and 106, and Callas and Caruso have also slept in its antique-furnished rooms. Mod cons include wi-fi. Has wheelchair access.

EATING

Like its fashions, meals in Milan range from classics to fusion and imports. An increasing number of the fashion houses (Gucci, Armani and others) have also exclusive café/restaurants attached to their stores.

Milan's provincial specialities include polenta and the first course of choice, *risotto alla milanese* (saffron-infused risotto made with bone marrow stock). Milanese mains include *fritto misto alla milanese* (fried slices of bone marrow, liver and lung), *busecca* (sliced tripe boiled with beans) and *cotoletta alla milanese* (breaded veal). Milan is also the home of *panettone* (fruity Christmas cake) and *colomba* (a dry, dove-shaped cake first baked in the 6th century and traditionally accompanied by sweet dessert wine).

If you're on a budget, do as the Milanese do and fill up during *aperitivi* for the cost of a cocktail, glass of wine or beer at the city's bars – see the boxed text, p264.

Restaurants

Smart business eateries congregate around the cathedral. In the Brera area, pavement terraces open up along hip Via Fiori Chiari in summer. The canal district has a host of appealing spots.

Reservations are generally a good idea and essential for top-end establishments.

Flash (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 583 04 489; Via Bergamini 1; pizzas €7-10, mains €11-22; (X) noon-4pm & 7pm-1am; (♿)) Exuding a 1950s retro ambience without trying, Flash gets packed to the rafters with locals tucking into its gargantuan pizzas. It also cooks up delicious fresh pasta and

risotto; anything with *cinghiale* (wild boar) is a speciality.

Officina 12 (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 894 22 261; Alzaia Naviglio Grande 12; mains €10-30; 🍷 7pm-midnight, 12.30-3pm last Sun of month; ♿) Within a former mechanic's workshop, this cavernous place serves classy pizzas and salads in a mezzanine loft, a 'jazz room' hung with black-and-white photos, and an enclosed garden.

Le Vigne (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 837 56 17; Ripa di Porta Ticinese 61; mains €14-18; 🍷 7.30-11.30pm Mon-Fri & Sun, noon-3pm Sat & last Sun of month; ♿) Run by kindly owners, this Slow Food restaurant's timber shelves bow with wine bottles. It's renowned for its use of local cheeses, such as zucchini flowers stuffed with artisan herbed ricotta.

Ponte Rosso (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 837 31 32; Ripa di Porta Ticinese 23; mains €15; 🍷 Mon-Sat & last Sun of month; ♿) Service is a bit snippy, but the polenta cooked to perfection, risotto and chocolate mousse are just three reasons not to let that deter you. A fourth: the stylish space, with contemporary art installations suspended from the walls and ceiling.

Italian Bar (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 869 30 17; Via Cesare Cantù 3; mains €15-19.50; 🍷 Mon-Sat 7.30am-8.30pm; ♿) If Cracco-Peck is out of your league, its sidekick, Italian Bar, might fit the bill. A wide choice of wines by the glass accompanies zesty mains such as *bresaola* (cured meat) seasoned with capers, oil and lemon. You can also pop by for a power breakfast, afternoon tea from 4pm, or *aperitivo* from 7pm.

Nabucco (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 86 06 63; Via Fiori Chiari 10; mains €14-22; ♿) Fronted by an alfresco ter-

race, this intimate restaurant is named after the Verdi opera that confirmed his reputation. Compositions such as risotto with radicchio salad and smoked Scamorza cheese, and a trio of *tortellini* with melted butter and sage, raise it above several other fine restaurants on the same street.

ourpick El Brellin (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 581 01 351; Alzaia Naviglio Grande 14; lunch around €35, dinner around €50, Sunday brunch €22; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat & noon-3pm Sun; ♿) Set around an old 1700s laundry, El Brellin's candlelit garden is a romantic spot for made-on-the-premises pasta and classical Milanese specialities, and its upstairs dining room has views of the passing canal-side parade. On Sunday, El Brellin's buffet tables are laden with platters of cured meats, scrambled eggs, spinach-and-ricotta lasagne, whole smoked salmon, and homemade desserts including sinfully rich biscuit-filled chocolate salami. Reservations aren't accepted for brunch; arrive early to secure a table.

Don Carlos (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 723 14 640; Via Alessandro Manzoni 29; mains €20-28, tasting menus €80; 🍷 dinner, closed Aug; ♿) Glowing with wall-mounted lamps, this opera-goer's haunt takes its name from Verdi's five-act opus. Chef Angelo Gangemi's forte is seafood, such as black cod with lentils, bruschetta and black truffles, or *tagliolini* with clams and wild-rocket pesto.

Cracco-Peck (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 87 67 74; Via Victor Hugo 4; set menus €90-130; 🍷 Mon-Sat; ♿) Any restaurant associated with food purveyor Peck (see boxed text, opposite) is guaranteed to be special, but when it's headed up by acclaimed chef Carlo Cracco, you start to run out of superlatives. Cracco's inspired creations such as seafood pasta with espresso sauce, and dark chocolate with caviar (accompanied by more than 1800 wines), have earned him two Michelin stars.

Cafés & Quick Eats

The line between what constitutes a *caffè*, bar, restaurant and gelateria often blurs in Milan (especially after an *aperitivo* or two).

Pizzeria Spontini (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 204 74 44; Via Gaspare Spontini; dishes from €4) Munch standing up at this busy little joint, which has cooked the best pizza in the Stazione Centrale area – and much of Milan – since 1953.

Princi: Il Bread & Breakfast (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 659 90 13; Via Della Moscova 52; price by weight; 🍷 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 8am-10pm Sun) This busy bakery/café sells slices of pizza and focaccia to eat indoors, on

EAT, DRINK & BE MERRY: MILAN'S APERITIVO SCENE

Happy hour elsewhere in the world might mean downing cut-price pints, but not in oh-so-stylish Milan. Its nightly *aperitivo* is a two- or three-hour ritual, starting around 6pm, where for €5 to €9 a cocktail, glass of wine, or beer comes with an unlimited buffet of antipasti, bruschetta, cured meats, salads, and even seafood and pasta. (Occasionally you'll pay a cover charge up front that includes a drink and buffet fare, which generally works out the same.) Take a plate and help yourself; snacks are also sometimes brought to your table. Most of the city's bars offer *aperitivi*; including those listed, opposite.

FEELING PECKISH

Forget *The Last Supper*: gourmards head to Milan for its food and wine emporium, **Peck** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 802 31 61; www.peck.it; Via Spadari 7-9; 🕒 3-7.30pm Mon, 8.45am-7.30pm Tue-Sat). This Milanese institution opened its doors as a deli in 1883. Since then, it's expanded to a dining room/bar upstairs and an *enoteca* (wine bar) downstairs; along with one of the country's finest restaurants (Cracco-Peck; opposite), and more affordable bar/restaurant (Italian Bar; opposite) around the corner.

The Aladdin's Cave-like food hall is smaller than its reputation suggests, but what it lacks in space it makes up for in variety, with some 3200 variations of *parmigiano reggiano* (Parmesan) at its cheese counter, just for starters. Other treasures include an exquisite array of chocolates, pralines and pastries; freshly made gelato; seafood; caviar; pâtés; a butcher; fruit and vegetables; truffle products; olive oils and balsamic vinegar. Sneak a peek into the stainless-steel kitchen in the back right-hand corner of the store to see the small army of chefs preparing the fantastical food on display.

After selecting items to take away (grilled veggies, breaded veal and turkey breast, stuffed olives, rice balls, lasagne and so on), take your ticket to a pay station while your meal is warmed, placed in a heat-retaining bag, then gift-wrapped with a bow.

A takeaway meal will cost around €15. Upstairs, you can dine on a three-course lunch plus house wine for around €50 – or just stop for an espresso in the tearoom.

the decked terrace enclosure, or on the run. There's also a huge choice of cakes, bread and fresh pasta.

Gelateria le Colonne (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 837 22 92; Corso di Porta Ticinese 75; ice creams €2; 🕒 Thu-Tue) Come here for artisan ice cream in wild flavours such as rice, amaretto, orange blossom and *genepi* (an Alpine herb).

Caffè Torino (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 869 33 07; www.caf.fetorino.it; Via Torino; dishes around €7.50; 🕒 7am-8.30pm) People queue here for the rich classic flavours such as chocolate.

Self-Catering

Via Sporonari, just off Piazza del Duomo, is the pick of the city streets for bread, cakes, salami, cheese, fruit and wine. Takeaway fare doesn't come more magnificent than at the temple to food, Peck (see boxed text, above).

Stock up on supermarket produce at the **Superfresco Standa** (Map pp256-7; Via della Palla 2a) and fresh fruit, veg and fish at the covered market, **Mercato Comunale** (Map pp254-5; Piazza XXIV Maggio; 🕒 8.30am-1pm Mon-Thu, 4-7.30pm Fri, 8.30am-1pm & 3.30-7.30pm Sat).

DRINKING

Milanese bars are generally open until 2am or 3am, and virtually all serve *aperitivi* (see the boxed text, opposite).

The canal district, the cobbled backstreets of Brera, and swish Corso Como and its surrounds are all *primo* areas for a drink, Milan-style.

Farinella (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 890 95 084; Foro Buonaparte 71; 🕒 lunch & dinner, aperitivo 6-8pm) The buffet at this breezy bar adjoining a smart-casual restaurant should satisfy most appetites – though don't leave it much past 7pm or you'll find it diminished, if not demolished.

El Brellin Café (Map pp254-5; 🕒 7pm-2am) El Brellin's laidback bar/café sits right on the canal, and serves a salad-oriented buffet until 9.30pm.

Bhangra Bar (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 349 34 469; www.bhangrabarmilano.com; Piazza Sempione 1; admission free-€6; 🕒 from 6.30pm Wed-Sun) A couscous-and-curry buffet is served with a side of jazz on Wednesday, African percussion on Friday, international beats on 'Melting Pot' Thursday, and trip-hop plus a shiatsu massage with your drink on 'Tao' Sunday (€20 including drink, buffet and 20-minute massage).

Bar Madonnina (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 64 947; Vicolo Pattari 1-3; 🕒 lunch & dinner, bar 6.15pm-1am) On a balmy Milan night, there's no better spot than Madonnina's Corso Vittorio Emanuele II terrace for quaffing cocktails, balancing precariously laden canapés, and watching the bold and beautiful flounce by.

Le Biciette (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 581 04 325; www.lebiciette.com; Via Torti 4; 🕒 Mon-Sat 6pm-2am & Sun 12.30-2pm) Once a bike warehouse and now one of the best *aperitivi* bars in Milan. Evidence of its former life includes glassed-in bicycle memorabilia.

L'Elephante (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 295 18 768; Via Melzo 22; 🕒 6.30pm-2am) The arty-alternative crowd

here is as mixed as its killer cocktails: gay, lesbian and straight, locals and visitors. The setting is equally eclectic: no two chairs are alike.

Radetzky (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 657 26 45; Corso Garibaldi 105; ☎ 7pm-2am) Corso Como has the name and reputation, but Corso Garibaldi, which connects Corso Como to the Brera quarter, is fast becoming an extension of this fashionable strip, thanks to stylish bars like Radetzky. Despite its glossy black marble décor, the atmosphere here is relaxed and staff and regulars are welcoming.

Historical spots to slam espresso shots, linger over an aperitif, or dine in style:

Marchesi (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 87 67 30; Via Santa Maria alla Porta 11a) Dating back to 1824, Marchesi's wood-panelled interior displays chess and draughtboards made from chocolate.

Il Salotto (Map pp256-7; Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II) Milan's 'drawing room' has harassed waiters and outrageous prices, but offers a front-row view of the passing parade of shoppers.

Zucca in Galleria (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 64 435; Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II 21) The city's most historic café overlooks Piazza del Duomo, with a mosaic interior dating from 1867.

ENTERTAINMENT

Milan has some of Italy's top clubs and a lavish cultural calendar capped off by La Scala's opera season. The main theatre and concert season opens in October.

More than 50 active theatres are sprinkled around town. The tourist office stocks several entertainment guides in English: *Milano Mese*, *Hello Milano* (www.hellomilano.it) and *Easy Milano* (www.easymilano.it). The free Italian newspapers distributed on the metro are also handy for what's-on listings.

For club listings, check out *Corriere della Sera* (www.corriere.it in Italian); *ViviMilano* (www.corriere.it/vivimilano in Italian) which comes out on Wednesday; and *La Repubblica* (www.repubblica.it in Italian) on Thursday.

Live Music

Blue Note (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 690 16 888; www.bluenotemilano.com in Italian; Via Borsieri 37; tickets €23-30; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon, 10am-1pm & 2pm-midnight Tue-Fri, 2pm-midnight Sat, 7-11pm Sun) Hosts top-class jazz acts from around the world.

Propaganda (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 583 10 682; Via Castelbarco 11; ☎ Thu-Mon) and **Rolling Stone** (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 73 31 72; www.rollingstone.it in Italian; Corso XXII Marzo 32; ☎ Thu-Sun) are the city's top two venues to catch live rock.

The biggest names play at **Palasharp** (☎ 02 334 00 551; Viale Sant'Elia 33), near the San Siro stadium, west of town, and **Datchforum** (☎ 02 48 85 71; www.forumnet.it in Italian), 6km south of town. Free buses shuttle between Romolo metro station and Datchforum before and after concerts.

Box Tickets (see boxed text, below) sells concert tickets.

Nightclubs

Clubs generally open until 3am or 4am Tuesday to Sunday; cover charges vary from €10 to upwards of €20. Door policies can be formidable as the night wears on.

Gattopardo (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 345 37 699; Via Piero della Francesca 47; ☎ 7pm-4am Tue-Sun) This gorgeous champagne-coloured space in a deconsecrated church is filled with flickering candles and baroque-style furniture. Gattopardo's clientele is equally aesthetically blessed – dress to impress to gain entry.

WHERE TO SCORE TICKETS

Tickets for concerts, sporting events and the theatre can be booked online through **Ticket One** (☎ 02 39 22 61, 840 05 27 20; www.ticketone.it) or **Ticket Web** (☎ 02 760 09 131; www.ticketweb.it). **Milano Concerti** (☎ 02 487 02 726) only handles ticketing for international rock concerts. **Box Tickets** (☎ 02 847 09 750; www.boxtickets.it in Italian) sells tickets for musicals at Teatro Smeraldo, sporting events at the San Siro stadium and concerts at Milan's live music venues.

In person, try the following ticket offices:

FNAC (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 72 08 21; fnac@ticketweb.it; Via della Palla 2) The entrance is on Via Torino.

Messaggerie Musicali (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 79 55 02; Galleria del Corso 20) With an entrance on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II.

Ricordi Mediastore (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 864 60 272; www.ricordimediasstores.it in Italian; Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II)

GAY & LESBIAN MILAN

Like that other queen of the catwalk, Paris, Milan confounds visitors trying to figure out the city's gay scene – because, as one baffled traveller put it, 'everyone's so stylish and sexy'. Added to that, virtually all of Milan's venues attract a mixed gay/lesbian/straight crowd – even on allocated 'gay nights'. But the reigning confusion keeps things interesting during any night out in Milan.

Centro d'Iniziativa Gay – ArciGay Milano (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 541 22225; www.arcigaymilano.org in Italian; Via Bezzeca 3) organises Milan's annual Gay Pride march and can provide information for gay and lesbian visitors.

La Banque (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 869 96 565; Via Porone 6; ☞ from 6.30pm Tue-Sun) Centrally located, this former bank has decent beats, a languid lounge bar and a mood-lit restaurant.

Old Fashion Café (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 805 62 31; Viale Emilio Alemagna 6; ☞ 9pm-4am Tue-Sat) Look for the discreet red canopy at the rear of the Palazzo dell'Arte to find this classy club where DJs hit the decks most nights.

Hollywood (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 659 89 96; Corso Como 15; ☞ 10.30pm-4am Tue-Sun, closed Jul & Aug) Yes, this is the very club frequented by soccer players and supermodels, and if you stick around you might witness Milan's next scandal in the making – or be a party to it.

Other happenin' haunts:

Gasoline (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 290 13 245; www.discogasoline.it; Via Bonnet 11a; admission €16; ☞ 10.30pm-4am Thu-Sun, closed Aug) Glam disco that goes into overdrive on Gay Tea Dance Sundays.

Tocqueville 13 (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 290 02 973; Via de Tocqueville 13; ☞ 10pm-3am or 4am Tue-Sun) Hip, dance-oriented spot inauspiciously located on the ground floor of a concrete high-rise.

Eleven (Map pp256-7; ☎ 3933 30 49 13; Via de Tocqueville 11; ☞ shop 3-10pm Mon, noon-10 Tue-Sat, bar from 6.30pm, club from 10pm till late) Pick up a new outfit from Eleven's concept boutique (look for the gleaming black Alfa Romeo parked in the middle of the shop floor), then head up the black staircase to its chic 1st-floor club.

Opera & Theatre

The opera season at **Teatra alla Scala** (Map pp256-7) runs from November through to July but you can see theatre, ballet and con-

certs here year-round, with the exception of August.

You'll need perseverance and luck to secure opera tickets at La Scala (€10 to €180; up to €2000 for opening night). About two months before the first performance, tickets can be bought by telephone on ☎ 02 86 07 75 (24 hours) and online at www.teatroallascala.org; these tickets carry a 20% surcharge. One month before the first performance, any remaining tickets are sold (with a 10% surcharge) at the main **La Scala box office** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 720 03 744; www.teatroallascala.org; Galleria Vittorio Emanuele; ☞ noon-6pm). On performance days, any unsold tickets – a very rare occurrence – are sold at half-price. There is also a self-ticketing machine in La Scala's bookshop. Consult the computer terminal in the La Scala box office or the website for ticket availability.

Musicals are staged at **Teatro Smeraldo** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 290 06 767; www.smeraldo.it in Italian; Piazza XX Aprile 10).

Sport

FOOTBALL

The city's two clubs, the 1899-established AC Milan and the 1908-established FC Internazionale Milan (aka 'Inter') play on alternate Sundays in season at the **San Siro stadium** (Stadio Giuseppe Meazza; ☎ 02 404 24 32; www.sansiro.tour.com; Via Piccolomini 5, museum & tours Gate 21; museum adult/child €7/5, incl guided tour €12.50/10; ☞ nonmatch days 10am-5pm).

Guided tours of the 1920s-built stadium take you behind-the-scenes to the players' locker rooms. Tours include a visit to the Museo Inter e Milan museum, a shrine of memorabilia, papier-mâché caricatures of players, and footage of the greats in action.

Take tram 24, bus 95, 49 or 72, or the metro to the Lotto stop, from where a free bus shuttles to the stadium. Tickets are available at the stadium or, for AC Milan matches, from **Milan Point** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 454 09 24; Via Ragazzi del '99) and branches of the Cariplo bank.

For Inter matches, try Banca Popolare di Milano branches or Ticket One (see boxed text, opposite).

FORMULA ONE

Italy's Grand Prix tears around the **Autodromo Nazionale Monza** (☎ 039 248 22 12; www.monza.net.it; Parco di Monza, Via Vedano 5) in September. The track is 20km north of central Milan.

FASHION CAPITAL

Milan's fashion scene has ridden on the coat-tails of creative activity that the city has witnessed from the 1960s onwards. With the departure of many *haute-couture* fashion houses from Florence in the mid-1950s, coupled with the emergence of a new mass market in high fashion, Italy's largest fashion show – a twice-yearly Florentine event since 1951 – made a leap to the industrial north. This stitched up Milan's status as Italy's fashion capital.

The world's top designers unveil their women's collections in February/March and September/October, while men's fashion hits the runways in January and June/July. Shows last 10 to 12 days and are held at the Fiera di Milano.

One of the rising stars of the fashion shows is women's wear label, Kristina Ti, created by Turin designer, Cristina Tardito. Cristina's Milan showroom is attended by buyers from 15 countries. For her, the fashion shows are 'an important moment to show my work to the international press and buyers. It's the moment when I can compare my ideas with the other designers'. Like many local and foreign designers, Cristina's designs incorporate only Italian fabrics, which she says are 'full of important and precious details such as trimmings, embroideries and unique laces'. But her inspiration comes from everything: 'Istanbul prints, warm colours of Marrakech, the dawns of Siviglia, the shells of Nobisè... everything becomes shades and prints. I try to recover the Italian way of dressing: beautiful and seducing'. Cristina describes the Milanese style in particular as 'a melting pot of cultures and a touch of humour... It's sophisticated without making any effort. A Milanese lady is never too sexy, never too monastic, never too much in one way. My garments are a reflection of these characteristics: style and charm cannot exist without intelligence'.

Where there are fashion shows, there is, of course, shopping. Gucci moved to town the same year as the first fashion shows, and its flagship store ushered in what is now known as the **Quadrilatero d'Oro** (Golden Quad; Map pp256–7), a quadrangle of pedestrian streets bordered by Via della Spiga, Via Sant'Andrea, Via Monte Napoleone and Via Alessandro Manzoni. The quad's narrow streets are crammed with Italian designers such as Milan-born Giorgio Armani, who revolutionised the industry with his *prêt à porter* (ready to wear) collection in the early 1980s. Among the numerous other flagship stores you'll find here are Prada, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana and Moschino. The tourist office has a free map, but the ultimate way to browse is simply meandering the little streets. To accessorise in style, head to Italy's leading diamond house, **Damiani** (Map pp256–7; Via Monte Napoleone 10); snazzy glove-maker **Semoneta** (Map pp256–7; Via della Spiga); and milliner **Alan Journo** (Map pp256–7; ☎ 02 760 01 309; Via della Spiga 36). The word 'milliner' derives from 'Milan', dating back to the 16th century, when its residents were known for their head-turning caps and bonnets.

Fashion shopping isn't confined to the Golden Quad. Giorgio Armani started out as a window dresser at the city's main department store **La Rinascente** (Map pp256–7; Piazza del Duomo; ☎ 9am–10pm Tue–Sat, 10am–8pm Sun). All the major labels are represented here; you can take time out from shopping on the terrace of the 7th-floor bar/restaurant overlooking the Duomo's spires.

For something altogether more personal, soft leather shoes are custom made (based on a range of in-house designs) at the family-run cobblers, **Panca's** (Map pp256–7; ☎ 02 839 45 43; www.turypancas.com; Corso di Porta Ticinese 96; ☎ 9.15am–1pm & 3.15–7.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.15am–7.30pm Sat, 10am–1pm & 4–7pm Sun). Handmade footwear costs €99 to €200. Boots take about a month to make, while shoes take 15 days but you can stop by to see if they have a pair in your size in stock.

Ultraexclusive concept shop **Corso Como 10** (Map pp256–7; ☎ 02 290 02 674; Corso Como 10) was set up by former Italian *Vogue* contributor Carla Sozzani, and is secluded in a vine-draped townhouse courtyard. Handpicked limited-edition fashions, fragrances and quirky homewares are displayed like the works of art they are.

If your credit card's wilting at the thought of all that shopping, you can pick up bargain-priced designer seconds, samples and remaindered cast-offs at discount-fashion outlets around the city – the tourist office has a free map.

SHOPPING

Milan is a shopper's paradise for fashion (see boxed text, opposite) and homewares (see boxed text, p261).

Ferrari Store (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 760 17 385; Piazza Liberty 8) Formula One fans can make a pit stop here at the largest of Italy's five official outlets, spanning three floors of cool toys, accessories and racing wear.

Markets

Markets fill the canalside Viale Papiniano in the southwest of the city on Tuesday and Saturday mornings. There is a flea market in Viale Gabriele d'Annunzio on Saturday and an antique market in Brera on Via Fiori Chiari every third Saturday of the month.

Old gramophones and turntables, lava lamps, Bakelite telephones, tailors' mannequins, crockery, furniture, vintage clothes, shoes, jewellery and more are laid out along both banks of the city's main canal, spilling over into the surrounding streets, during the antique market held on the last Sunday of each month on the Alzaia Naviglio Grande and Ripa di Porta Ticinese.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Most European and other international flights use **Malpensa airport** (www.malpensa.com), 50km northwest of the city. The majority of domestic and a handful of European flights use the more convenient **Linate airport** (www.sea-aeroportimilano.it), 7km east of the city centre. For flight information, call ☎ 02 748 52 200 (both Malpensa and Linate airports).

An increasing number of budget airlines also use Orio al Serio airport, near Bergamo.

Bus

Bus stops are scattered throughout the city, so unless you know exactly which one you need, it's simpler to travel by train.

For many national and international destinations, buses (operated by numerous different companies) leave from the **bus station** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 63 79 01; Piazza Sigmund Freud) opposite the main entrance to the Stazione Porta Garibaldi. **Eurolines** (☎ 02 637 90 299; Piazza Sigmund Freud) has a ticketing desk here.

Train

You can catch a train from **Stazione Centrale** (Piazza Duca d'Aosta) to all major cities in Italy.

Check schedules at its **information office** (☎ 147 88 80 88; ☹ 7am-9pm). Daily trains (intercity train fares are quoted here) run to and from Venice (€24, 3½ hours), Florence (€27, 3½ hours), Genoa (€15.50, 1½ hours), Turin (€20, 1½ hours), Rome (€51, 4½ hours) and Naples (€62, 6½ hours). This is also a good point to pick up international connections to/from Switzerland (with the Cisalpino train) and France (with the TGV).

Ferrovie Nord Milano (FNM) trains from **Stazione Nord** (Stazione Cadorna; www.fnmgroup.it/orario in Italian; Piazza Luigi Cadorna) connect Milan with Como (€3.50, one hour, hourly). Regional services to many towns northwest of Milan are more frequent from **Stazione Porta Garibaldi** (Piazza Sigmund Freud).

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airports

LINATE AIRPORT

From Milan's Piazza Luigi di Savoia, in front of the Stazione Centrale, **Autostradale** (☎ 02 339 10 794; www.autostradale.com) runs buses to Linate airport (adult/child one way €3/1.40, 25 minutes, every 1½ hours between 5.40am and 9.35pm). Tickets are sold on board by the driver. You can also get local ATM bus 73 (one way €1, 20 minutes, about every 15 minutes between 5.30am and 8pm) from Piazza San Babila (on the corner of Corso Europa).

MALPENSA AIRPORT

The **Malpensa Express** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 02 2 02 22; www.malpensaexpress.it; ☹ ticket office 7am-8pm) train links Stazione Nord with Malpensa airport (one way €11, 40 minutes, every 30 minutes).

The airport is also served by **Malpensa Shuttle** (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 585 83 185; www.malpensa-shuttle.com; ☹ ticket office 7am-9pm) coaches, departing from Piazza Luigi di Savoia, outside Stazione Centrale (every 20 minutes between 5am and 10.30pm). A one-way ticket per adult/child costs €5/2.50 for the one-hour journey.

Autostradale runs buses roughly every 30 minutes between 4.35am and 9.15pm from Piazza Luigi di Savoia, outside Stazione Centrale, to Malpensa (adult/child €5.50/2.75, 50 minutes).

A taxi from Malpensa into Milan will cost at least €65 (much more during peak hour).

ORIO AL SERIO AIRPORT

Autostradale runs buses approximately every 90 minutes between 4.15am and 10pm from

Piazza Luigi di Savoia to Orio al Serio airport, near Bergamo (adult/child €6.90/3.45, one hour).

Bicycle

Hire a bicycle for around €10 a day from **AWS Bici Motor** (Map pp254-5; ☎ 02 670 72 145; Via Ponte Seveso 33), on the corner of Via Schiaparelli.

Car & Motorcycle

Street parking costs €1.50 per hour in the city centre (€2 per five hours after 8pm). To pay, buy a SostaMilano card from a tobacconist, scratch off the date and hour, and display it on your dashboard. Underground car parks charge €5 for the first two hours and between €1.50 to €2 per hour after that.

Rental car companies have offices at Stazione Centrale and both airports.

Public Transport

Milan's efficient public transport system is run by **ATM** (☎ 800 808 181; www.atm-mi.it). The metro consists of four underground lines (red MM1, green MM2, yellow MM3 and blue Passante Ferroviario), which run from 6am to midnight.

A ticket costs €1 and is valid for one ride or up to 75 minutes' travel on ATM buses and trams. You can buy a book of 10 tickets (five double-journey tickets) for €9.20 or unlimited one-/two-day tickets for bus, tram and metro for €3/5.50. Tickets are sold at metro stations, tobacconists and newspaper stands around town, but you can't buy them on board.

Free public transport maps are available from the **ATM Info Point** (Map pp256-7; ☎ 7.45am-8.15pm Mon-Sat) in the Duomo metro station.

Taxi

As elsewhere in Italy, hailing taxis is futile – they don't stop. Head for a taxi rank or call ☎ 02 40 40, ☎ 02 69 69 or ☎ 02 85 85.

SOUTH OF MILAN

PAVIA

pop 73,900 / elev 77m

First impressions of Pavia are deceiving, as its pretty old town is encircled by a large industrial-agricultural belt. Pavia's cobbled streets and piazzas buzz with students from the city's ancient university, and are a refreshing change of pace from the hubbub of Milan,

30km north. Still, for those who aren't studying here, half a day is ample.

Until the 11th century, Roman Pavia rivalled Milan as the capital of the Lombard kings, leaving behind a Romanesque basilica. Legacies of the battle-plagued years following include medieval watchtowers, a domed cathedral, and the 15th-century castle, Castello Visconteo, which now houses a fine museum.

Although the industrial and agricultural areas surrounding the city may not be much to look at, they make a major contribution to Italian cuisine, producing about one-third of the country's rice, as well as cheeses including soft Robiolina and ricotta, and hard, semiripe varieties such as Teleggio, and salamis and goose meat products.

The area's real highlight is the Carthusian monastery Certosa di Pavia, one of northern Italy's most lavish buildings, which is an easy 10-minute trip from Pavia by bus or car.

Information

Tourist office (☎ 0382 59 70 01; www.turismo.provincia.pv.it in Italian; Via Filzi 22; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm Fri)

Sights

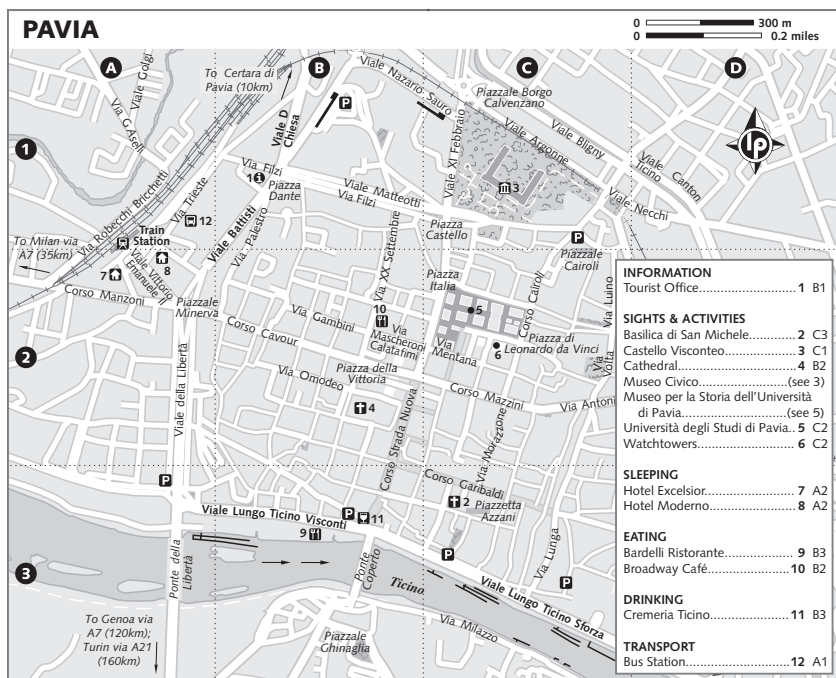
OLD TOWN

Much of Pavia's medieval centre has restricted traffic, making it pleasant for a stroll.

Looming over the old town is the forbidding **Castello Visconteo**, built in 1360 for Galeazzo II Visconti. It now houses the **Museo Civico** (☎ 0382 30 48 16; www.museocivici.pavia.it; Viale XI Febbraio; adult/EU citizen/child €6/free/free; ☎ 10am-5.50pm Tue-Sun). Intriguing collections include archaeological, ethnographic and art collections, plus displays on medieval Pavia and the Risorgimento (the Italian reunification period).

Christopher Columbus and inventor of the electric battery, Alessandro Volta, are two illustrious graduates of the **Università degli Studi di Pavia** (University of Pavia; ☎ 0382 50 41; www.unipv.it; Corso Strada Nuova 65). Founded as a school in the 9th century, it became a university in 1361. The stately campus houses a small museum, the **Museo per la Storia dell'Università di Pavia** (☎ 0382 2 97 24; Corso Strada Nuova 65; admission free; ☎ 3.30-5pm Mon, 9.30am-noon Fri).

Crowning the town centre is the immense dome of Pavia's red-brick **cathedral**, which is Italy's third largest. Da Vinci and Bramante contributed to the design of the cathedral



which was begun in 1488 but not completed until the 19th century. In 1989 its bell tower collapsed, killing four people.

Barbarossa was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1155 at the **Basilica di San Michele** (Piazzetta Azzani 1), built in the Romanesque style in 1090.

More than 100 medieval watchtowers once enveloped the old town; the trio of **watchtowers** on Piazza di Leonardo da Vinci is all that remains today.

CERTOSA DI PAVIA

One of the Italian Renaissance's most notable buildings is the splendid **Certosa di Pavia** (Pavia Charterhouse; ☎ 0382 92 56 13; Viale Monumento; admission by donation; 🚗 9-11.30am & 2.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun Nov-Feb, 9-11.30am & 2.30-5pm Tue-Sun Oct & Mar, 9-11.30am & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep). Located 10km north of Pavia, the monastery was founded by Gian Galeazzo Visconti of Milan in 1396 as a private chapel for the Visconti family and a home for 12 monks.

The interior is Gothic, although some Renaissance decoration is evident. In the former sacristy is a giant sculpture, dating from 1409

and made from hippopotamus teeth, including 66 small bas-reliefs and 94 statuettes. Behind the 122 arches of the larger cloisters are 24 cells, each a self-contained living area for one monk. Several are open to the public.

To reach the charterhouse (about a 10-minute walk) from the bus stop, turn right at the traffic lights and continue straight ahead. See p272 for bus details.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Excelsior (☎ 0382 2 85 96; www.excelsiorpavia.com; Piazzale Stazione 25; s/d €58/84; 📞 🚗 🚰) The value-for-money ratio here is first-rate. Prints of old-town Pavia line the walls of spacious rooms, which have new timber furnishings and floating floors. The location, outside the station's main exit (the higher of the two staircases when you get off the train), is handy if you're catching an early train or lugging heavy bags (or both). Breakfast costs an extra €6.

Hotel Moderno (☎ 0382 30 34 01; www.hotelmoderno.it; Viale Vittorio Emanuele II 41; s/d €115/150; 📞 🚗 🚰) Housed in an old family *palazzo* from the 19th century, this swish hotel's rooms blend antique style with contemporary comforts. A fitness

centre and free bikes are available for guests, and there's an upmarket restaurant on site.

Broadway Café (☎ 0382 2 47 33; Via XX Settembre 35; dishes €5.50-6; ☎ 8am-2am Tue-Sun) Bruschetta served on wooden platters is the speciality of this funky spot lit by rose-tinted uplights, low suspended lamps and brick arches. It also has salads and a menu of the day of just one starter (€5.80) and one main (€6.50).

ourpick Bardelli Ristorante (☎ 0382 2 74 41; Viale Lungo Ticino Visconti 2; mains €14-18; ☎ Mon-Sat) Pavia's grandest restaurant is this beautiful old house down by the riverside, with a glassed-in winter garden and courteous staff. Specialities include *risotto mantecato la serre* (risotto with asparagus and saffron). Regional wines by the bottle, such as a Di Frara, start at around €18.

Drinking

Cremeria Ticino (☎ 0382 53 94 07; Ponte Ticino 4; ☎ 8am-2am Tue-Sat, 9am-2am Sun, 6pm-2am Mon) Posers practise their art on the front terrace of this retro-glam bar overlooking the river. Tubular orange resin downlights, backlit display cases, woodgrain tables and white moulded seating set its '60s interior far apart from the cafés that ring Piazza della Vittoria.

Getting There & Away

Sila (☎ 1991 531 55; www.sila.it in Italian) bus 175 (Pavia-Binasco-Milano) links **Pavia bus station** (Via Trieste) and Certosa di Pavia (10 minutes, at least seven daily). **Migliavacca** (www.migliavaccabus.it in Italian) buses serve Milan's Linate airport up to six times daily via Certosa di Pavia.

Direct trains link Pavia train station with Milan (€2.95, 30 minutes, up to eight daily), Genoa (€6, 1½ hours) and beyond.

EAST OF MILAN

Heading east of Milan brings you to the historic cities of Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona and Mantua. To their north are Italy's dazzling lakes. Lago di Como is north of Milan, while Lago d'Iseo is northeast of Bergamo and northwest of Brescia, and vast Lago di Garda is a short journey north from Mantua.

BERGAMO

pop 117,500 / elev 249m

With its wealth of medieval, Renaissance and baroque architecture, Bergamo is one of northern Italy's most intriguing cities.

Actually, Bergamo comprises what are essentially two separate towns. The most interesting, by far, is its hilltop *città alta* (upper town), protected by more than 5km of heavy-duty walls. A funicular carries you from the western edge of the upper town up to the quaint quarter of San Vigilio. The walk to San Vigilio offers some stunning views. Down on the plain, the sprawling *città bassa* (lower town) is a mishmash of modern buildings and wide, traffic-filled streets.

Although Milan's skyscrapers to the southwest are visible on a clear day, historically Bergamo was more closely associated with Venice, which was in control of the city for 350 years until Napoleon arrived. And despite its long domination by outsiders, Bergamo's upper town has scarcely changed, retaining a strong sense of local identity.

The nearby Bergamo Alps have a handful of small ski resorts, as well as ice- and rock-climbing opportunities.

Information

Lower town tourist office (☎ 035 21 02 04; turismo1@comune.bergamo.it; Piazzale Marconi; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Province-wide information, including Alpine activities.

Spedale Riuniti (☎ 035 26 91 11; Largo Barozzi 1) Hospital.

Police station (☎ 035 27 61 11; Via Alessandro Noli)

Upper town tourist office (☎ 035 24 22 26; Via Gombito 13; ☎ 9am-12.30pm Mon & Fri, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-4pm Tue-Thu) Has upper town information only.

Sights

PIAZZA VECCHIA

The upper town's beating heart is this café-clad piazza, lined by elegant architecture spanning the city's history. The white porticoed building on Via Bartolomeo Colleoni, which forms the northern side of the piazza, is the 17th-century **Palazzo Nuovo**, now a library. Turn south and you face the imposing arches and columns of the **Palazzo della Ragione**, built in the 12th century. The lion of St Mark is a reminder of Venice's long reign. Note the sun clock in the pavement beneath the arches. Next to the palace, the **Torre del Campanone** (Piazza Vecchia; admission €2; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Tue-Fri & Sun, to 9.30pm Sat Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4.30pm Sun, Mon-Sat by reservation Nov-Mar) tolls the old 10pm curfew. During research the tower was temporarily closed for the installation of a wheelchair-accessible lift to the top of the tower, in

BERGAMO

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles

INFORMATION

Lower Town Tourist Office.....	1 D5
Police Station.....	2 D2
Upper Town Tourist Office.....	3 B2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore....	4 A2
Capella Colleoni.....	(See 4)
Cathedral.....	5 A2
Citadel.....	6 A2
Civico Museo Archeologico.....	(See 6)
Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea.....	7 D2
La Rocca.....	8 B2
Museo di Scienze Naturali Enrico Caffi.....	(See 6)
Museo Donizettiano.....	9 A2
Museo Storico della Città.....	10 B2
Orto Botanico Lorenzo Rota.....	11 A1
Palazzo della Ragione.....	12 A2
Palazzo Nuovo.....	13 B2
Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Carrara.....	14 D2
Porta di Sant'Agostino.....	15 C2
Torre del Campanone.....	16 A2

EATING

Antica Osteria del Vino Buono...20	B2
Colleoni e dell'Angelo.....21	A2
Ol Giupi e la Margi.....22	D3

TRANSPORT

Bus Station.....23	C5
Bus to Hostel.....24	B2
Funicular to Monte San Vigilio.....25	A1
Lower City Town Car Station.....26	B3
Upper Town Cable Car Station.....27	B2

SLEEPING

Agnello d'Oro.....17	B2
Hotel San Lorenzo.....18	A2
Sole.....19	A2

Other locations and distances:

- To Monte San Vigilio (400m); Il Gourmet (400m)
- To Ospedali Riuniti (250m)
- To Hotel San Giorgio (800m); Milan via A4 (50km); Como (75km)
- To Da Vittorio (9km)
- To Nuovo Ostello di Bergamo (1.5km)
- To Orto al Serio Airport (4km)

addition to the current stairs; both should be open by the time you're reading this.

Tucked in behind these secular buildings is the core of Bergamo's spiritual life, the Piazza del Duomo. Roman remains were discovered during renovations of the modest baroque **cathedral** (☎ 035 21 02 23; Piazza del Duomo; 🕒 7.30-11.45am & 3-6.30pm), which is due to reopen

sometime during 2008. Begun in 1137, the Romanesque **Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore** (☎ 035 22 33 27; Piazza del Duomo; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Mon-Fri, 9-11am & 2.30-5pm Sat, 9-11am & 2.30-6pm Sun) was later tizzed up with the addition of the gaudy Renaissance **Cappella Colleoni** (☎ 035 21 00 61; Piazza del Duomo; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2-4.30pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct).

CITADEL

Taking up the western corner of the upper city is the defensive hulk of Bergamo's citadel, occupied today by two small museums. The **Museo di Scienze Naturali Enrico Caffi** (☎ 035 39 94 42; msnbg@tiscalinet.it; Piazza della Citadella 10; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar) contains stuffed animals and fossils (including an ancient winged reptile), though it's really for dedicated fans of the genre. More broadly appealing is the **Civico Museo Archeologico** (☎ 035 24 28 39; Piazza della Citadella 12; admission free; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Fri Apr-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), which chronicles local history from the prehistoric through to the Lombard period, and has some interesting Roman frescoes and mosaics on show.

MUSEO STORICO DELLA CITTÀ & MUSEO DONIZZETTIANO

In the former Convento di San Francesco (founded in the 13th century), this **history museum** (☎ 035 24 71 16; www.museostoricobg.org; Piazza Mercato del Fieno 6a; adult/child €3/free; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-7pm Sat & Sun) emphasises the town planning that took place in the years leading up to Italian unification.

The history museum's 19th-century section is located in the fortress **La Rocca** (☎ 035 24 71 16; Piazzale Brigata Legnano), whose round tower dates from Bergamo's days as a Venetian outpost. La Rocca keeps the same hours as the main museum. The same ticket covers entry to here and also to La Rocca's surrounding **park**, with sweeping views over Bergamo.

History museum tickets are also good for the **Museo Donizzettiano** (☎ 035 39 92 69; Via Arena 9; admission free; 🕒 10am-1pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2.30-5pm Sat & Sun), an ornate hall housing the piano and manuscripts of Bergamo's favourite musical son, Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848).

ORTO BOTANICO LORENZO ROTA

For more spectacular views, trudge uphill along Colle Aperto and bear left up a sign-posted flight of stone steps to Bergamo's **botanic garden** (Orto Botanico Lorenzo Rota; ☎ 035 39 94 66; Scaletta di Colle Aperto; admission free; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mar & Oct, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep), planted with more than 600 species.

ART GALLERIES

Just east of the walls is one of Italy's great art repositories, **Pinacoteca dell'Accademia**

Carrara (☎ 035 39 96 43; Piazza Giacomo Carrara 82a; adult/child €2.58/free; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2.30-5.30pm Tue-Sun). Founded in 1780, it contains an exceptional range of Italian masters. Raphael's *San Sebastiano* is a highlight, but other artists represented include Botticelli, Canaletto, Mantegna and Titian. To get here on foot from the upper town, pass through **Porta di Sant'Agostino** and down Via della Noca.

On the opposite side of the square is the **Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea** (GAMEC; ☎ 035 39 95 28; www.gamec.it; Piazza Giacomo Carrara; admission free; 🕒 10am-1pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-7pm Sun), which displays the academy's small permanent collection of modern works by Italian artists such as de Chirico, de Pisis and Gentilini. Admission prices and opening hours vary for temporary exhibitions.

Sleeping & Eating

Bergamo's proximity to the airport means hotels tend to fill up quickly – advance bookings are recommended any time of year and especially on weekends.

The Bergamaschi are passionate about polenta and eat it as a side dish or dessert – *polenta e osei* are pudding-shaped cakes filled with jam and cream, topped with sugared polenta icing and chocolate birds. Bergamo contributed *casonsèi*, a ravioli stuffed with meat, to the Italian table and the area is noted for its fine red wines, including Valcalepio.

LOWER TOWN

Nuovo Ostello di Bergamo (☎ 035 36 17 24; www.ostello.dibergamo.it; Via Galileo Ferraris 1; dm/s/d €16.50/27/40; 🕒 24hr; 📍) Bergamo's state-of-the-art HI hostel is about 4km north of the train station. Take bus 6 from Largo Porta Nuova near the train station. By car, follow Viale Giulio Cesare north past the stadium and take the fourth right-hand turn after crossing the large Circonvallazione Fabriciano intersection. From the upper town, take bus 3 from the cable car station.

Hotel San Giorgio (☎ 035 21 20 43; www.sangiorgioalbergo.it; Via San Giorgio 10; s/d without bathroom €33/53, s/d with bathroom €53/70) This basic two-star place, around 400m southwest of the train station, is one of the cheapest options in town and offers clean, simple rooms. Rooms with private bathrooms come with their own fridges.

Da Vittorio (☎ 035 68 10 24; Via Cantalupa 17, Brusabotto; set menus €50-120; 🕒 Thu-Tue, closed 3 weeks August; 📍) Bergamo's acclaimed Vittorio

has moved 9km east of town, but it's up there with the best restaurants in Italy, not the least on account of its truffle dishes. To prolong the experience, its rooms (s/d €200/280) have beautifully woven fabrics, marble bathrooms and elegance to spare.

Ol Giupi e la Margi (☎ 035 24 23 66; Via Borgo Palazzo 22; mains €10-14; 🍴 lunch Sun, lunch & dinner Tue-Sat Sep-Jul) Sample authentic Bergamo delicacies in this authentic brick-vaulted restaurant, including fried sausages, risotto, and roast rabbit with grappa and polenta.

UPPER TOWN

The most charming accommodation and restaurants are on Bergamo's hilltop.

Picnickers can pick up steaming-hot pizza slices, focaccias and desserts at high-quality bakeries along the upper town's main street.

Sole (☎ 035 21 82 38; fax 035 240 011; Via B Colleoni 1; set menus €20-25; 🍴 Fri-Wed Mar-Oct) The picture windows and colourful bedspreads at Sole lend its rooms (s/d €85/100) a countrified air, which extends to its restaurant, set in a cool, leafy garden. Located just off Piazza Vecchia.

Agnello d'Oro (☎ 035 24 98 83; Via Gombito 22; set menus €20; 🍴 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat; 🍷) With the incredible clutter of objects adorning every wall, this 17th-century spot could easily pass for an eccentric antique shop. Rooms (s/d €55/92) are attractive and you can dine alfresco in summer.

Il Gourmet (☎ 035 437 30 04; Via San Vigilio 1; set menus €35-40; 🍴 Wed-Mon; 🍷) Run by two wine buffs, this gourmet's haven is hidden away in San Vigilio, a few minutes' stroll beyond the upper town's western walls. Its shady terrace and artful Bergamasco and Mediterranean cuisine make it worth seeking out for a meal, but there are also 10 charming boutique rooms (s/d €66/98). Breakfast costs an extra €10.

Hotel San Lorenzo (☎ 035 23 73 83; www.hotelsanlorenzobg.it; Piazza Mascheroni 9a; s €75-110, d €100-170; 🍷 🍴) San Lorenzo offers quiet and comfortable rooms (if somewhat plain, given its four stars) in a thoughtfully renovated old building overlooking Piazza Mascheroni. Try for a room on the upper level with a mountain-facing balcony.

Antica Osteria del Vino Buono (☎ 035 24 79 93; Piazza Mercato delle Scarpe; set menus €20; 🍴 Tue-Sun) Feast on typical dishes like cheese-sprinkled *casoncelli* (homemade pasta cushions filled with a spicy sausage meat and laced with a

buttery sage sauce) followed by a plate of *polenta del Bergami* (polenta and mushrooms) at this authentic inn.

Colleoni e dell'Angelo (☎ 035 23 25 96; Piazza Vecchia 7; set menus from €40; 🍴 Tue-Sun) Piazza Vecchia provides the ideal backdrop to savour inventive local cuisine including vinegar-scented pigeon breast with apple salad, veal in black truffle sauce, and lobster.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bergamo's airport, **Orio al Serio** (☎ 035 32 63 23; www.orioaeroporto.it), is 4km southeast of the train station. Served by both regular and budget airlines, there are daily flights to/from the UK and other European destinations, as well as connections by air to Rome, Naples, Cagliari and Palermo.

BUS

From Bergamo's **bus station** (☎ 035 24 02 40) on Piazzale Marconi, **SAB** (☎ 035 28 90 00; www.sab-autoservizi.it in Italian) operates services to the lakes and mountains.

TRAIN

From the Piazzale Marconi train station, there are almost hourly trains to/from Milan's Stazione Centrale (€3.50, 45 minutes) and less-frequent trains to Brescia (€3.50, 50 minutes) and Cremona (€6.70, two hours). Change in Brescia or Cremona for Mantua.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

ATB (☎ 035 23 60 26) operates buses to/from Orio al Serio airport, departing every 20 minutes from Bergamo bus station. A one-way ticket costs €1.60 and journey time is 15 minutes. The airport is also served by direct buses from Milan and Brescia.

All the major car-rental agencies have desks at the airport.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

ATB's bus 1 connects the train station with the cable car to the upper city and Colle Aperto. From Colle Aperto, either bus 21 or a funicular continues uphill to San Vigilio. Buy tickets, valid for 75 minutes' travel on buses and cable cars, for €1 from machines at the train and cable-car stations. An all-day ticket allowing unlimited travel is available for €2.50; three-day tickets cost €5.

VALTELLINA

Covering the band of Alps across Lombardy's north along the Swiss border, the Valtellina offers decent skiing and is well set up for walking. The area is largely off the tourist track, and if time allows, its friendly, down-to-earth villages reward exploration.

The **Valtellina tourist board** (www.valtellinaonline.com) has several information points throughout the region, including the main **tourist office** (☎ 0342 51 25 00; infovaltellina@provincia.so.it; Via Trieste 12, Sondrio; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri) in the transport hub of Sondrio. The tourist office has information for hikers. For information on the Alpine ski resort of Bormio, in Valtellina's far eastern realms, see Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio, p326.

Trains link Milan with Sondrio (€7.75, two hours, hourly), from where buses connect the Valtellina's resorts and towns.

BRESCIA

pop 196,200

Urban sprawl, a seedy bus and train station area, and the odd skyscraper don't hint at Brescia's fascinating old town, which serves as a reminder of its substantial history.

Brescia already had centuries of (now-obscure) history behind it when the Romans conquered the Gallic town in 225 BC. The Carolingians took over in the 9th century, and were followed by a millennium's worth of outside rulers including the Venetians. As revolutionary fervour swept Europe in 1848-49, Brescia was dubbed 'The Lioness' for its 10-day attempted uprising against Austria in a prelude to its participation in the movement towards Italian unification a decade later.

Legacies of Brescia's past include significant Roman ruins, two cathedrals and a vast medieval castle. As a result, the town is filled with gaggles of kids on school excursions (if you're here during term time, you're bound to encounter them).

Northwest of Brescia is the little-visited but beautiful Lago d'Iseo, while heading northeast brings you to Italy's largest and most popular lake, Lago di Garda.

Information

Ospedale Civile (☎ 030 3 99 51; Piazzale Ospedale) Hospital; located north of the centre.

Police station (☎ 030 3 74 41; Via Botticelli) Southeast of the centre.

Post office (Piazza della Vittoria; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist office (☎ 030 374 99 16; www.provincia.brescia.it/tourismo; Piazza della Loggia 6; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30 Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm Sat)

Sights

Audio guides (€5) covering the central sights are available from the tourist office.

CASTLE

Brescia's historic centre is dominated by a hill, **Colle Cidneo**, crowned with a rambling castle that has been the core of the city defences for centuries. **Torre Mirabella**, the main round tower, was built by the Viscontis in the 13th century. The castle hosts two mildly diverting museums, the **Museo delle Armi Antiche** (☎ 030 29 32 92; admission €3; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep), with its extensive collection of vintage weaponry, and the **Civico Museo del Risorgimento** (☎ 030 4 41 76; admission €3; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May, 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep), dedicated to the history of Italian unification.

ROMAN SIGHTS

The most impressive of Brescia's Roman relics are the remains of the **Tempio Capitolino** (Via dei Musei; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm), a Roman temple built by the Emperor Vespasian in AD 73. The **Palazzo Martinengo** (☎ 030 280 79 34; Via dei Musei 28; admission fee varies; ☎ 9.15am-1pm Tue-Fri) provides a lavish backdrop for temporary art exhibitions.

About 50m east of the Tempio Capitolino along Via dei Musei, cobbled Vicolo del Fontanon leads to the well-preserved ruins of a **Roman theatre**. Continuing east you'll reach Brescia's most intriguing sight – the jumbled **Monastero di Santa Giulia & Basilica di San Salvatore**. Inside the rambling complex is the **Museo della Città** (☎ 030 297 78 34; Via dei Musei 81b; adult/child €8/free, temporary exhibitions extra; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-May, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep), where artefacts from the Roman town are on show, including some intricate mosaics. The star piece of the collection is the 8th-century **Croce di Desiderio**, a Lombard cross encrusted with hundreds of jewels.

CATHERDRALS

The most compelling of all Brescia's religious monuments is the 11th-century **Duomo Vecchio** (Old Cathedral; Piazza Paolo VI; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Tue-Sun), a rare example of a circular-plan Romanesque basilica, built over a 6th-

make this boutique hotel a gem. If you're driving, staff can arrange off-site parking with a pick-up service; if you're not but would like to, they can also arrange car rental.

Hotel Vittoria (☎ 030 28 00 61; www.hotelvittoria.com; Via X Giornate 20; s €166-196, d €217-274; 🍷 🍷) Given this grand 1930s hotel's chandeliers, sweeping ballrooms and luxurious guest rooms, resting your head here represents unexpectedly good value. It's right in the heart of town; ask about parking options when you book.

Eating

Risotto, beef dishes and *lumache alla bresciana* (snails cooked with Parmesan cheese and fresh spinach) are common in Brescia. The surrounding countryside produces good wines, including those from Botticino, Lugana and Riviera del Garda.

Cafés and pizzerias abound in and around the old town's piazzas.

www.restorant (☎ 030 375 22 54; Vicolo Sant'Agostino 3b; mains €10-18; 🍷 noon-1.30pm & 8pm-2am Mon-Sat) This stylish spot is a great place for an *aperitivo*, but most people head here for its outstanding fish dishes, including a wide choice of sweet lake-caught fish.

Locanda dei Guasconi (☎ 030 377 16 05; Via Becaria 11; mains €11-20; 🍷 Tue-Sun) The Locanda dei Guasconi is regularly buzzing with locals tucking into superb risotto, pasta, fish and ostrich. You may need a reservation, even for lunch, but the atmosphere is welcoming and relaxed.

La Sosta (☎ 030 29 25 89; Via Martino della Battaglia; set menus €40-60; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Set in the stables of a 17th-century palace, flanked by columns, La Sosta excels at finely tuned gastronomic creations using the freshest regional produce. The wine list is equally impressive.

For fresh fruit and veggies head for Brescia's colourful **market** (Piazza del Mercato; 🍷 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat).

Getting There & Around

Brescia's **airport** (Aeroporto Gabriele d'Annunzio; ☎ 030 965 65 11; www.aeroportobrescia.it) is located 20km east of Brescia (and around 50km west of Verona). Shuttle buses connect the airport with Brescia's train station (one way €7.50, 25 minutes) and Verona's train station (one way €11, 45 minutes). Shuttle bus schedules (coinciding with flights) are posted on the airport's website.

From Brescia's **bus station** (☎ 030 4 49 15; Via Solferino) buses operated by **SAIA Trasporti** (☎ 030 230 88 11; www.saiatrasporti.it in Italian) serve Verona (two hours, 10 to 14 daily) via Desenzano del Garda (50 minutes) and Sirmione (one hour).

There are regular trains to and from Milan (€5.35, 50 minutes), Cremona (€4.05, one hour), Bergamo (€3.50, 30 minutes), Verona (€3.50, 45 minutes) and Venice (€18, 2¼ hours).

Usually, from June to September you can pick up a free bicycle from the **bicycle kiosk** (🍷 7.30am-8.30pm) in front of the train station on Piazzale Stazione. The tourist office has a list of other pick-up and drop-off points around town.

CREMONA

pop 71,400

A wealthy, independent city-state for centuries, Cremona boasts some fine architecture. The city is best known around the world, however, for its violin-making traditions (see the boxed text, p280).

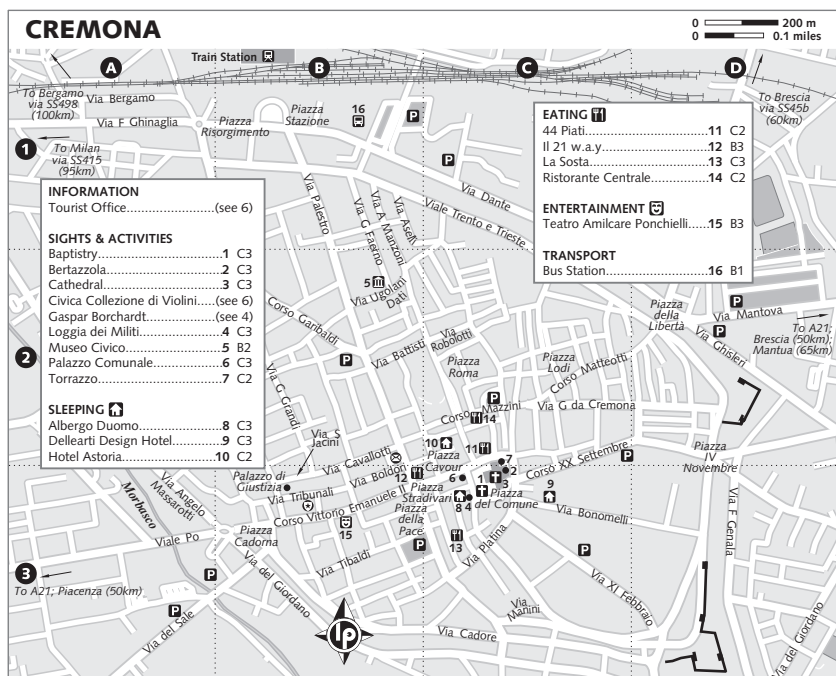
Cremona's medieval heart, with its magnificent cathedral, is a beauty. On the main square, the **tourist office** (☎ 0372 2 32 33; Piazza del Comune 5; 🍷 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm) can give you information on the town.

Sights

Like most Lombard towns, Cremona was an independent *comune* until the 14th century, when the Viscontis of Milan added it to their growing collection. To maintain the difference between the secular and spiritual, buildings connected with the Church were erected on the eastern side of **Piazza del Comune**, and those concerned with secular affairs were constructed across the way. On Sundays, the piazza is filled with antique stalls.

Cremona's stately **cathedral** started out as a Romanesque basilica but, by the time it was finished in 1190, it was heavily overtaken by Gothic modishness. Inside there are paintings by Renaissance masters Boccaccio Boccaccino, Giulio Campi and Gian Francesco Bembo, although perhaps most interesting are the partial frescoes uncovered in the early 1990s, including a vast scene of the Crucifixion above the central doorway.

The cathedral's most prized possession is the 'Holy Thorn', allegedly from the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus Christ, which was



CREMONA

INFORMATION

Tourist Office.....(see 6)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Baptistry.....1 C3
 Bertazzola.....2 C3
 Cathedral.....3 C3
 Civica Collezione di Violini.....(see 6)
 Gaspar Borchardt.....(see 4)
 Loggia dei Militi.....4 C3
 Museo Civico.....5 B2
 Palazzo Comunale.....6 C3
 Torrazzo.....7 C2

SLEEPING

Albergo Duomo.....8 C3
 Dellearti Design Hotel.....9 C3
 Hotel Astoria.....10 C2

EATING 🍴
 44 Piatti.....11 C2
 Il 21 w.a.y.....12 B3
 La Sosta.....13 C3
 Ristorante Centrale.....14 C2

ENTERTAINMENT

Teatro Amilcare Ponchielli.....15 B3

TRANSPORT

Bus Station.....16 B1

donated to the church by Cremona-born Pope Gregory XIV in 1591. It's kept behind bars in the Capella delle Reliquie. In the crypt, the robed and masked body of Cremona's 12th-century patron saint, San Omobono Tuceghi, is on show in a glass casket.

The adjoining 111m-tall **torrazzo** (bell tower; adult/child €4/3, incl baptistry €5/4; 🕒 10am-1pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Sat & Sun), with its great zodiacal clock, is connected to the cathedral by a Renaissance loggia, the **Bertazzola**. On the other side of the cathedral is the 12th-century **baptistry** (adult/child €2/1, incl torrazzo €5/4; 🕒 10am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun), which houses some architectural fragments including a 12th-century figure of the Archangel Gabriel that once perched on the roof of the baptistry.

Across the square is **Palazzo Comunale** and, to its south, the smaller porticoed **Loggia dei Militi**; both date to the 13th century. The former was, and remains, the town hall; the latter housed the town's militia.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in central Cremona is surprisingly limited, so definitely book ahead if

you plan to stop here. Open-air market stalls on Piazza della Pace sell fresh fruit and vegetables every morning; on summer nights the piazza spills over with alfresco bars and live music.

Albergo Duomo (☎ 0372 3 52 42; fax 0372 45 83 92; Via Gonalonieri 13; s/d €45/65; 📞 🚗 🚲) Just a few steps from Cremona's cathedral and ablaze with wrought-iron flower boxes in spring, Albergo Duomo offers rooms that are decent value. It also runs its own rather eccentric pizzeria (mains €7 to €18; open for lunch and dinner) that's so local its menu is filled with advertising for lawn-mowing services and the like.

Hotel Astoria (☎ 0372 46 16 16; www.astoriahotel-cremona.it; Via Bordinello 19; s €45-50, d €70-80; 📞 🚗 🚲) Down a narrow lane near Piazza Cavour, this is a charming spot, with French-washed corridors and immaculate rooms (including some with separate bedrooms that are handy if you're travelling with kids). Finding nearby parking can be a problem, however.

Dellearti Design Hotel (☎ 0372 2 31 31; www.dellearti.com; Via Bonomelli 8; s €70-138, d €99-186; 📞 🚗 🚲) This hi-tech vision of glass, concrete and steel has rotating displays of contemporary

CREMONA'S VIOLINS

Home of the prized Stradivari violin, Cremona is the premier exponent of the delicate art of making the perfect stringed instrument. All of the great violin-making dynasties started here, including Amati, Guarneri and Stradivari.

Today there are 100 violin-making workshops in the streets around the Piazza del Comune that can be visited, including **Gaspar Borchardt** (☎ 0372 3 19 69; Loggia dei Militi, Piazza San Antonio). The tourist office has a list, and can advise on those where English is spoken.

Various events dedicated to violin-making take place each year, while the **Triennale Internazionale degli Strumenti ad Arco** (International Stringed Instrument Expo) is held in Cremona every third year in October; the next will be in 2009 and 2012.

Year-round you can visit the **Civica Collezione di Violini** (☎ 0372 2 05 02; Piazza del Comune 8; adult/child €6/3.50, incl Museo Civico €10/5; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun), featuring instruments from the Stradivari workshop. The **Museo Civico** (☎ 0372 3 12 22; Via Ugolani Dati 4; adult/child €7/4, incl Civica Collezione di Violini €10/5; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) holds drawings and tools, as well as instruments by Amati and Guarneri (plus art, and archaeological finds).

To hear Cremona's violins in action, the season at the 19th-century **Teatro Amilcare Ponchielli** (☎ 0372 40 72 74; www.teatroponchielli.it; Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 52) runs from October to June; programmes and ticket information are posted on its website.

paintings and photographs, a Turkish bath and a gym, and suitably chic rooms with clean lines, bold colours and artistic lighting.

La Sosta (☎ 0372 45 66 56; Via Sicardo 9; mains €10-15; 🕒 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch Sun Sep-Jun) Surrounded by violin-makers' workshops, this is a beautiful place to feast on regional delicacies such as *bollito* (boiled meats) and *cotechino* (boiled pork sausage) with polenta and *mostarda* (fruit in a sweet mustard sauce). Its *gnocchi vecchia cremona* (old Cremona gnocchi; filled with Lombard cheese) is the house speciality.

Il 21 w.a.y. (☎ 0372 3 49 88; Piazza Stradivari 20-21; mains €9-16; 🕒 7am until late Tue-Sun; ♿) Cremona's hippest new hangout is this restaurant/wine bar, with retro-inspired timber panelling and tiling, modular furniture and fab cocktails. Generous salads feature on the pared-down menu.

Other dining recommendations:

44 Piatti (☎ 0372 46 18 67; Via Torriani 11; mains around €5; 🕒 lunch) Cheap, cheery local cafeteria in the heart of town.

Ristorante Centrale (☎ 0372 2 87 01; Vicolo Pertusio 4; mains €8-10; 🕒 Fri-Wed) Cosy, historic restaurant renowned for its fresh local cheeses. No credit cards.

Getting There & Away

The city can be reached by train from Milan (€5.70, one hour, several daily), Mantua (€4.45, one hour, hourly) and Brescia (€4.05, one hour, hourly), or from the south by changing at Piacenza. Buses serve the local area.

MANTUA

pop 47,900

Serene and beautiful, Mantua (Mantova) lies on the shores of Lago Superiore, Lago di Mezzo and Lago Inferiore. Unlike the pre-Alpine and Alpine Lombard lakes further north, Mantua is on the open plain, and its trio of lakes is actually a glorified widening of the river Mincio. Parts of its waters are protected by the Parco del Mincio, but petrochemical industry sprawl has scarred the surrounding countryside.

Mantua was settled by the Etruscans in the 10th century BC and prospered under Roman rule. Latin poet Virgil was born just outside the modern town in 70 BC. The city fell into the hands of the Gonzaga dynasty in 1328, under whose rule it flourished, attracting the likes of Petrarch and Rubens. Shakespeare's Romeo found his fateful poison in a Mantuan apothecary. The golden days of 'La Gloriosa' ceased when Austria took control in 1708. Habsburg troops were in control (aside from the Napoleonic interlude at the end of the 18th century) until 1866, when Mantua rejoined Italy. Superb architecture, bearing witness to its rich history, still survives today; particularly around its four interconnected cobbled squares in the city's heart.

From Mantua, you can take some scenic boat excursions, including trips to Venice; and the city is an easy hour or so's journey from Lago di Garda to the north.

Something to watch out for: the city's anglicised name is becoming less common. For example, if you're looking up train timetables online, you'll need to use the Italian 'Mantova' (whereas most other anglicised names are accepted).

Information

Hospital (☎ 0376 20 11; Via Albertoni)

Mail Boxes Etc (☎ 0376 32 53 00; Via Cavour 5-7; per hr €2; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Mon-Fri) Has an online computer to check email.

Police station (☎ 0376 20 51; Piazza Sordello 46)

Post office (Piazza Martiri di Belfiore; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon & Wed, to 2pm Tue & Thu-Sat) Also has currency exchange and an ATM inside.

Tourist office (☎ 0376 43 24 32; www.turismo.mantova.it; Piazza Mantegna 6; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm)

Sights

PALAZZO DUCALE

Occupying a whopping chunk of the city's northeastern corner, the imposing walls of **Palazzo Ducale** (☎ 0376 35 21 00; www.mantovaducalce.it; Piazza Sordello 40; adult/EU citizen/child €6.50/free/free; ☎ 8.45am-7.15pm Tue-Sun) hide three squares, 15 courtyards, a park and 500-odd rooms. The centrepiece is **Castello di San Giorgio**, overflowing with works of art collected by the Gonzaga family, Mantua's longtime rulers. Don't miss Andrea Mantegna's **Camera degli Sposi**, a wonderful series of frescoes executed by the master between 1465 and 1474 in one of the castle's towers. The trompe l'oeil oculus adds a playful touch to the more formal family scenes. Other rooms worth pausing over include the **Sala del Pisanello**, decorated with unfinished 15th-century frescoes of Arthurian legends by Pisanello, the heavily frescoed **Sala di Troia** and the **Camera dello Zodiaco**, with its magnificent deep-blue ceiling festooned with figures from the zodiac. Equally bizarre is the 18th-century **Sala dei Fiumi**, a Habsburg-era folly with artificial grottoes covered in shells and mosaic. No photography is allowed.

CHURCHES

The elaborate baroque cupola of **Basilica di Sant'Andrea** lords over the city. Designed by Leon Battista Alberti in 1472, it safeguards a much-disputed relic: golden vessels said to hold earth soaked by the blood of Christ. Longinus, the Roman soldier who speared Christ on the cross, is said to have scooped up the earth and buried it in Mantua after

leaving Palestine. Today, these containers rest beneath a marble octagon in front of the altar, and are paraded around the town in a grand procession on Good Friday. There is no dispute, though, about the tomb of the painter Andrea Mantegna, also inside the basilica.

South of the basilica, across 15th-century colonnaded Piazza delle Erbe, is the 11th-century Romanesque **Rotonda di San Lorenzo** (Piazza delle Erbe; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun), sunk below the level of the square and believed to stand on the site of a Roman temple dedicated to Venus. In the **Palazzo della Ragione**, which runs the length of the square from the Rotonda and was once the seat of secular power in the city, you can see exhibitions of varying interest (usually free).

The **cathedral** (Piazza Sordello 16) pales before the magnificence of the basilica. The façade was erected in the mid-18th century, while the decoration inside was completed by Giulio Romano after a fire in 1545.

On Lago Superiore, 8km from Mantua in Grazie di Curtatone, is the Lombard Gothic-style **Santuario di Santa Maria delle Grazie** (☎ 037 63 10 02; Grazie di Curtatone), built in 1406 in thanks for the end of the Black Death. Inside are 53 life-size papier-mâché statues.

PALAZZO TE

The main reason to visit Mantua's other Gonzaga palace, **Palazzo Te** (☎ 0376 32 32 66; Viale Te; adult/child €10/7; ☎ 1-6.30pm Mon, 9am-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat & Sun) isn't its modern art and Egyptian displays (interesting though they are), but the fanciful 16th-century palace itself. Built by Giulio Romano, over-the-top rooms include the **Camera dei Giganti**, one of the most fantastic and frightening creations of the Renaissance, adorned with dramatic frescoes depicting Jupiter's destruction of the Titans.

OTHER SIGHTS

Past the 13th-century Palazzo della Ragione is **Palazzo Broletto**, which dominates neighbouring Piazza Broletto. In a niche on the façade is a seated figure wearing a doctor's cap, which is said to represent Virgil.

Enter Piazza Sordello from the south and on your left you have the grand house of the Gonzagas' predecessors, the Bonacolsi clan. Hapless prisoners used to be dangled in a cage from the tower, aptly called the **Torre della Gabbia** (Cage Tower). Behind the cathedral lies **Casa di Rigoletto** (☎ 0376 44 94 62; Piazza Sordello;

admission free; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6pm), which Verdi used as a model set for most of his operas.

Activities

BOAT TOURS

Motonavi Andes (☎ 0376 36 08 70; www.motonaviandes.it in Italian; Via San Giorgio 2) organises boat tours of the lakes (starting from €7 for one hour), five-hour excursions to San Benedetto Po (one way Monday to Saturday €13, Sunday €15; double return) and day trips to Venice (€68 Monday to Saturday, €75 Sunday). Boats arrive/depart from the Imbarco Motonavi Andes, behind Castello di San Giorgio on Lago di Mezzo's shore.

The separate company **Navi Andes** (☎ 0376 32 45 06; www.naviandes.com; Lago di Mezzo jetty) runs similarly priced tours. **Local boat owners** (Barcaoli del Mincio; ☎ 0376 34 92 92; www.fiumemincio.it) can arrange ecothemed trips on lesser-explored waterways on request.

CYCLING

The tourist office stocks an excellent booklet in English detailing cycling itineraries along the Po river, in the **Parco del Mincio** (☎ 0376 36 26 57; Via Marangoni 36) and around the lakes. One route takes cyclists around Lago Superiore to the Santuario di Santa Maria delle Grazie. Rent bikes from **La Rigola** (☎ 0376 36 66 77; Via Trieste; per day from €8).

PARCO DELL SCIENZA

A riverside promenade with an informative twist, the **Parco dell Scienza** (☎ 0376 33 83 37; Viale Mincio) stretches along the shore of Lago di Mezzo from Porta San Giorgio to Porta Molina. Information panels and gadgets illustrate various physical and scientific phenomena in a kid-friendly fashion.

Festivals & Events

For five days each September, central Mantua is taken over by the **Festivaletteratura** (Literature Festival; www.festivaletteratura.it), with open-air bookstalls, and readings and author discussions (some in English).

The city's jazz festival, **Mantova Jazz** (www.mantovajazz.it in Italian) swings from late March through to early May.

Sleeping

Hotel ABC (☎ 0376 32 33 47; www.hotelabcmantova.it; Piazza Don Leoni 25; s/d with shared bathroom from €33/44, s with bathroom €66-88, d with bathroom €77-121; P ♿)

Right opposite the train station, this hotel is a reasonable and very convenient option with clean, comfortable rooms.

Libenter B&B (☎ 0376 22 24 14; www.libenter.org; Via Pomponazzo 15; apt for up to 4 people incl breakfast €70-120; ♿) This artistically decorated house overlooking a courtyard has two one-room apartments and a two-room apartment, offering independence in a central location. Breakfast is served at Libenter Moderna Osteria (p284).

Rechigi Hotel (☎ 0376 32 07 81; www.rechigi.com; Via Pier Fortunato Calvi 30; s €68-115, d €93-215; P ♿) A stark marble interior provides a fabulous backdrop for the Le Corbusier designer chairs and contemporary art displayed at Mantua's unique art hotel. Less elaborate than the lobby, rooms are cool, calm and sophisticated, and some have wheelchair access.

Hotel Broletto (☎ 0376 22 36 78; www.hotelbroletto.com; Via dell'Accademia 1; s/d €70/120; ♿) The location of this hotel – just off Piazza Broletto and less than five minutes' stroll to the lake – and the friendliness of the family who run it can't be beaten. Rooms are somewhat old fashioned (built-in woodgrain furniture, lino floors), but come with contemporary comforts including satellite TV.

Eating

More than a million pigs a year are reared in the province of Mantua. Try *salumi* (salt pork), *pancetta* (salt-cured bacon), *prosciutto crudo* (salt-cured ham) and risotto with the locally grown *vialone nano* rice. *Tortelli di zucca* (sweet pumpkin-stuffed cushions of square pasta) is the city's most venerable dish, while *risotto alla pilota* (risotto with minced pork) and *luccio* (pike) also appear on most menus. Mantua is also renowned for its sweet specialities, including *torta di tagliatelle* (an unusual slice made from crunchy tagliatelle pasta baked with sugar and almonds) and *torta sbrisolona* (a hard, biscuit-like 'cupcake' with almonds).

Open-air cafés abound on Piazze Sordello, Broletto and Erbe.

Fragoletta Antica (☎ 0376 32 33 00; Piazza Arche 5; mains €7-10; ☎ Tue-Sun) Just back from the waterfront, this rustic place serves tasty dishes such as gnocchi with ricotta, burnt butter and parmesan, in a warm, cosy dining room filled with heavy wood and lined with wine bottles.

Hosteria dei Canossa (☎ 0376 22 17 50; Vicolo Albergo 3; mains €8-13.50; ☎ Wed-Mon) Hidden away

on a tiny side street, this local gem dishes up regional risotto, pasta and meat dishes teamed with hard-to-find Lombard wines, from between its red-brick walls.

Clos Wine Bar (☎ 0376 36 99 72; www.closwinebar.it; Corso del Sogliari 3; mains €9; ☎ 10am-10pm Tue-Sun) This innovative wine bar/eating space is situated behind a giant glass door, and has a minimalist, high-ceilinged interior.

Libenter Moderna Osteria (Piazza Concordia 18; mains €9-12) A hip spot a few minutes' stroll from Libenter B&B, with polished concrete and retro moulded plastic furniture.

Ristorante Masseria (☎ 0376 36 53 03; Piazza Broletto 7; mains €9-14; ☎ lunch Fri-Tue, dinner Thu-Tue; ☎) Masseria's pumpkin ravioli is among the best in town, as is its wine list. The building dates from the 13th century, and features an early 15th-century fresco of medieval Mantua, the oldest depiction of the city in existence. It was only rediscovered during renovations in 1981.

Grifone Bianco (☎ 0376 36 54 23; Piazza delle Erbe 6; set menus €23-35, mains €11-20; ☎ Thu-Mon; ☎) Several stellar restaurants congregate on Piazza delle Erbe, but for gastronomic cuisine par excellence, Grifone's damask tablecloths, heavy silverware and plates of local salami, and pike with salsa and polenta, make it stand out.

Pick up sweet local treats from **Caravatti** (Piazza delle Erbe 18); **La Ducale** (Via Pier Fortunato Calvi 25), both dating from 1865; or the friendly **Pavesi** (cnr Via dell'Accademia & Via Broletto).

Shopping

Market stalls selling everything from fruit, flowers, pots, pans and clothes to useless clutter fill Piazzas Sordello, Broletto and delle Erbe and their surrounding streets on Thursday morning.

Getting There & Around

APAM (☎ 0376 32 72 37; www.apam.it in Italian) operates buses to/from Sabbioneta (return tickets only) and San Benedetto Po. Azienda Provinciale Trasporti Verona (ARV) buses head to Lago di Garda (see p298).

From the **train station** (Piazza Don Leon), there are direct trains to/from San Benedetto Po, Cremona, Milan and Verona.

AROUND MANTUA

Sabbioneta

pop 4400

Some 30km southwest of Mantua, en route from Cremona, you'll see bizarre star-shaped

walls accessed by a narrow driveway. Inside lies the surreal settlement of Sabbioneta. The town was created in the 16th century by Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna in an attempt to build a Utopian city. Though it has something of a ghost-town feel today, thanks in part to its size and layout on the surrounding plains, there's still a strong local community.

Within the walls are four 16th-century monuments to visit. Sabbioneta's **ticket office** (☎ 0375 22 10 44; www.sabbioneta.org; Piazza d'Armi 1; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-7pm Sat, closed Sun), inside Palazzo Giardino, sells tickets covering admission to its monuments (adult/child €10/5) and acts as a tourist office for the town. Tickets for individual sites cost €3 each; opening hours are generally the same as the ticket office, barring special events.

The top two sights are the **Teatro all'Antica** (Antique Theatre), constructed in the years 1588 to 1590, with statues of Olympic gods topping a loggia held up by Corinthian pillars, and the frescoed walls and painted-wood ceiling of the 90m-long **Galleria degli Antichi** (Gallery of the Ancients), constructed between 1583 and 1584. The duke of Sabbioneta resided in **Palazzo Giardino** (Garden Palace), built from 1578 to 1588, and ruled the dukedom from the 1554 **Palazzo Ducale**. Also within the walls are a 19th-century **synagogue** and the **Museo di Arte Sacre**, with a treasury containing a Golden Fleece medallion found in the tomb of Vespasiano Gonzaga.

A handful of simple café/restaurants are scattered along Sabbioneta's streets.

APAM (☎ 0376 23 03 46; www.apam.it) buses link Sabbioneta with Mantua (€9 return, 50 minutes, up to five daily).

San Benedetto Po

pop 7700

The highlight of this otherwise-sleepy Po valley town, 21km southeast of Mantua, is its Benedictine **abbey** (☎ 0376 62 00 25; Piazza Matteotti; church free, museum €2; ☎ church 7.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm, cloisters 8am-7pm). Founded in 1007, little remains of the original buildings, although the Chiesa di Santa Maria still sports a 12th-century mosaic. Don't miss the Correggio fresco, which was discovered in the refectory in 1984.

Buses and trains both serve San Benedetto Po from Mantua, but the most scenic way to arrive is by boat (see p283).

THE LAKES

Writers from Goethe and Stendhal to DH Lawrence and Hemingway have all lavished praise on the Italian lakes, but even their words scarcely express the lakes' beauty.

Elaborate villas attest to the roll call of celebrity visitors and residents that the lakes, which are ringed by snow-powdered mountains, have attracted over the centuries. Tourism, though, isn't as prevalent around the lakes as you might expect. Many northern Italians visit for the day or weekend, and summer generally sees northerners head for the Ligurian seaside, meaning it's possible to find relative peace in many parts of the lakes even in Italy's peak holiday month of August.

The lakes fan out across Italy's north. In this guide, we've covered the main lakes from west to east. Sprinkled between them are countless smaller lakes.

The westernmost of the main lakes, Lago d'Orta, is entirely within Piedmont; about 100km northeast of Turin. East is Lago Maggiore, whose western shore and Borromean Islands are also in Piedmont, while its eastern shore is in Lombardy and its northern reaches nudge into Switzerland. East of here is tiny Lago di Piano; and Lago di Lugano, which straddles the Swiss-Italian border. East again is the most breathtaking of the lakes, Lago di Como. More or less due north of Milan, its main town, Como, is famed for its silk industry, and is the main gateway (and gangway) to the idyllic villages that dot Lago di Como's shores, including Bellagio and Varenna. Further east, Lago d'Iseo is tucked up in the mountains midway between Bergamo and Brescia. Of all the lakes, Lago d'Iseo is the most unheralded (and hence most tranquil). It has quaint harbour towns and a hinterland sheltering prehistoric rock carvings. East of Brescia (north of Mantua), the largest of the lakes, Lago di Garda, is by far the busiest. In its south-western corner, Desenzano del Garda is the lake's main transport hub. The lake's southeastern corner (in the Veneto region) has Disney-style family amusement parks, including Italy's largest, Gardaland. Tiny Sirmione, sitting out on a narrow peninsula in the centre of Lago di Garda, is guarded by a 13th-century castle and has overgrown Roman ruins through which you can ramble. The northern reaches of Lago di Garda extend into the Alpine region of Trentino-Alto Adige.

Trains serve many of the lakes' main towns, while passenger and car ferries ply the waters. If you're travelling by car, there are some twisty but stunning lakeside drives. One word of caution: cycling around the main lakes is not ideal. Heavy traffic (including freight trucks), narrow roads, long tunnels and a lack of bicycle lanes strike fear into the hearts of even pro cyclists. Tourist offices throughout the area can provide cycling advice.

LAGO D'ORTA

Shrouded by thick, dark-green woodlands, little Lago d'Orta measures 13.4km long and just 2.5km wide. It's separated from its bigger and better-known eastern neighbour, Lago Maggiore, by Monte Mottarone.

The focal point of the lake is the quaint medieval village of **Orta San Giulio** (population 1130; elevation 293m), which is often referred to simply as Orta. Just across from the town's web of squares and cobbled lanes sits the island of **Isola San Giulio**. The island is almost entirely taken up by **Basilica di San Giulio**, a 12th-century basilica inhabited by just a few nuns today – hence its nickname 'island of silence'. The official name for the village and island comes from the Greek evangelist, Giulio, who's said to have rid the island of snakes, dragons and assorted monsters in the late 4th century. Boats at Orta San Giulio's waterfront simply depart when there are sufficient passengers to warrant the five-minute crossing. There are no hotels or restaurants on the island, but the footpath, **La Via del Silenzio** (The Way of Silence), encircling the island makes for a peaceful stroll.

For more serenity, head up to **Sacro Monte**, a hillside dotted with some 20 small chapels dedicated to St Francis of Assisi. The parklands here are a great spot for a picnic: pick up picnic fare at Orta San Giulio's Wednesday market, or pop over by boat from Orta San Giulio to **Omegna** (population 15,000) for its lively Thursday market. The skies above Omegna light up each August during the **World Fireworks Championships**.

Orta San Giulio's **tourist office** (☎ 0322 90 51 63; infoorta@distrettolaghi.it; Via Panoramica; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Wed-Sun) has information on the lake and its green surrounds.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Orta (☎ 0322 9 02 67; www.campingorta.it; Via Domodossola 28, Orta San Giulio; per person €5-6.50, tent

€8-15, car €4-5.50, 2-person bungalow €65-90; (P) (Q) Open year-round, with heated facilities in winter, this family-run camping ground is set in the woods just 1.5km from Orta San Giulio's medieval centre. If you're staying in the bungalows, don't forget your towel. The camping ground's wi-fi'd.

Piccolo Hotel Olina (☎ 0322 90 55 32; www.orta.net/olina; Via Olina 40, Orta San Giulio; s/d €50/65; ☹ closed Jan; (P)) Artistically decorated with contemporary prints, bright colours and light-wood furniture, this ecofriendly hotel right in Orta San Giulio's medieval heart is a gem. In addition to homebaked breakfasts, there's a wonderful little restaurant (open Thursday to Tuesday; two-/three-course menus are €24/30, mains €10 to €14) also open to nonguests.

Villa Crespi (☎ 0322 91 19 02; www.slh.com/crespi; Orta San Giulio; s/d from €220/280; (P) (Q) (R) (S)) Staying at this Moorish extravaganza, which is topped with an aqua-coloured onion-dome spire, doesn't come cheap, but the opulent interiors and sprawling gardens, designed for cotton trader Benigno Crespi in 1879, are one-of-a-kind.

Agriturismo Il Cucchiaio di Legno (☎ 0322 90 52 80; Via Prisciola 10 Loc Legro, Orta San Giulio; set menus €25; ☹ dinner Thu-Sun) A 500m stroll beyond the train station, this honest-to-goodness *agriturismo* restaurant (no guest rooms) cooks up delicious local dishes including risotto, fish straight out of the lake, and salami and cheese from the surrounding valleys. Dine alfresco on the vine-draped patio overlooking the herb-planted garden.

Other dining recommendations:

Pizzeria Il Pozzo (☎ 0322 9 01 50; Via Panoramica 16, Orta San Giulio; pizzas €4-6.50, pasta €6; ☹ Fri-Wed) Contemporary spot with good pizza and table tennis.

Al Boeuc (☎ 339 584 00 39; Orta San Giulio 28; dishes €6-13; ☹ 6.30pm-1am) Hidden old-town treasure for a drink or traditional fare. Open for lunch as well in fine weather.

Getting There & Away

Orta Miasino train station is a 3km walk from the centre of Orta San Giulio. Between March and October, a little **tourist train** (one way/return €2/3; ☹ Thu-Tue) shuttles between the town centre and the train station approximately every half-hour.

Navigazione Lago d'Orta (☎ 0322 84 48 62) runs boats to numerous lakeside spots from its landing stage on Piazza Motta, including Isola San Giulio (single/return €1.50/2.50), Ome-gna (€3.50/6) and Pella (€2/3.50).

LAGO MAGGIORE

If you're arriving from Switzerland by train, once you emerge from the Alpine tunnels into the bright Italian sunlight, the views of the flower-filled Borromean Islands studding the dazzling blue lake are unforgettable.

The train line shadows the lake's western shore, which is its prettiest side; sprinkled with picturesque villages and towns, including the main town, Stresa.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses leave from the waterfront at Stresa for destinations around the lake and elsewhere, including Milan, Novara and Lago d'Orta. The daily Verbania Intra-Milan bus service operated by **SAF** (☎ 0323 55 21 72; www.safduemila.com in Italian) links Stresa with Arona (20 minutes), Verbania Pallanza (20 minutes) and Verbania Intra (25 minutes), all €1.75; and Milan (€5.70, 1½ hours).

Stresa is on the Domodossola-Milan train line and is well served by hourly trains from both Milan (€4.40 to €8.50, one hour) and Domodossola (€2.65 to €6, 30 minutes).

Ferries and hydrofoils around the lake are operated by **Navigazione Lago Maggiore** (☎ 0322 23 32 00, 800 551 801; www.navigazione.laghi.it in Italian), which has its main ticket office in Arona. Boats connect Stresa with Arona (adult/child one way €6.20, 40 minutes), Angera (€6.20, 35 minutes), Baveno (€3.80, 20 minutes) and Verbania Pallanza (€4.60, 35 minutes). Various one-day passes are also available: departing from Stresa, a ticket covering Isola dei Pescatori, Isola Bella and Isola Madre costs €11.50; and a ticket covering Isola dei Pescatori and Isola Bella costs €8.50. More-expensive one-day passes include admission to the various villas, too. Services are reduced in autumn and winter.

The only car ferry connecting the western and eastern shores for motorists sails between Verbania Intra and Laveno. Ferries run every 20 minutes; one-way transport costs from €6.40 to €10.90 for a car and driver or €3.90 for a bicycle and cyclist.

Stresa

pop 4900 / elev 205m

Facing due east across the lake, Stresa has a ringside view of the fiery orange sun rising up over the water. The town's easy access from Milan has made it a favourite for artists and writers seeking inspiration. Hemingway was

LAGO MAGGIORE EXPRESS

Lago Maggiore Express (tickets adult/child €28/14) is a picturesque day trip under your own steam (no guide) that includes train travel from Stresa to Domodossola, from where you get a charming little train to Locarno in Switzerland and a ferry back from Locarno to Stresa. Tickets are available from Navigazione Lago Maggiore (opposite).

one of many; he arrived in Stresa in 1918 to convalesce from a war wound. A couple of pivotal scenes towards the end of his novel *A Farewell to Arms* are set at the Grand Hotel des Iles Borromees, the most palatial of the hotels garlanding the lake. Stresa still has something of a nostalgic air from this era, both along the lakeside promenade and in its cobbled old town.

Offshore, the Borromean Islands make an ideal excursion from Stresa, with regular ferry services.

INFORMATION

Banks and ATMs abound on Corso Italia, Stresa's waterfront promenade.

Leone (☎ 0323 3 15 16; Via Tommaso 19) Bookshop stocking English-language novels and travel guides.

New Data (☎ 0323 83 03 23; Via De Vit 15a; per 30 min €3; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 0323 3 13 08; stresa@distrettolaghi.it; Piazza Marconi 16; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mar-Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat Nov-Feb)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Captivating views of the lake unfold during a 40-minute cable-car journey on the **Funivia Stresa-Mottarone** (☎ 0323 3 02 95; Piazzale della Funivia; adult return Alpino/Mottarone €10/15; ☎ departs every 20min 9.30am-5pm) to the top of 1491m-high Monte Mottarone. At the Alpino midstation (803m), 700 Alpine species flourish in the **Giardino Botanico Alpina** (☎ 0323 3 02 95; adult/child €2/1.50; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct), a botanical garden dating from 1934.

The mountain itself offers good biking trails as well as walking opportunities. **Mountain bikes** (☎ 0323 3 03 99; www.bicico.it) can be rented from the lower Stresa cable-car station. Rates include a helmet and road book detailing a 25km panoramic descent (two to three hours) from the top of Mottarone back to Stresa. A

one-way trip with a bike on the cable car to Alpino/Mottarone costs €6/10.

Walkers can ask at the cable-car station for a free copy of *Trekking on the Slopes of Mont Mottarone*, which outlines a two-hour walk from Stresa to the Giardino Botanico Alpina and a four-hour walk to the top of Mottarone. Walks further afield are mapped out in the free multilingual *Nature Hikes* brochure, available at tourist offices. Skiing down Mottarone's gentle slopes is limited to five green and two blue slopes, making it good for beginners. Gear can be hired from the station at the top of Mottarone. A one-day ski pass costs between €16 and €21.

Exotic birds and animals roam relatively freely at the kid-friendly **Parco Zoologico di Villa Pallavicino** (☎ 0323 3 24 07; adult/child €9/6; ☎ 9am-6pm Mar-Nov), at the southern end of Stresa.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are 40 camping grounds up and down the lake's western shore; the tourist office has a list. Seasonal closings are generally November to February, but this can vary, so it's always best to check ahead.

Hotel Luina (☎ 0323 3 02 85; luinastresa@yahoo.it; Via Garibaldi 21; s €38-55, d €55-80; ☎) In the heart of Stresa's cobbled streets, Luina is a simple but friendly place with comfortable rooms (some with balconies and lake views) and a fun local restaurant that often hosts live music in summer. Breakfast costs an extra €4 to €8.

Hotel Elena (☎ 0323 3 10 43; www.hotelelena.com; Piazza Cadorna; s €57-68, d €68-83; ☎) Adjoining a café, the old-fashioned Elena is slap-bang on Stresa's pedestrian central square. Wheelchair access is possible, and all of Elena's comfortable rooms have a balcony overlooking the square.

La Stellina (☎ 0323 3 24 43; www.lastellina.com; Via Moninari 10; s €50-70, d €75-90; ☎) A couple of blocks' stroll from the main square, an early 19th-century building makes a beautiful backdrop for this charming little B&B. Of its three floral-themed rooms, the 'rose room' has a wooden spiral staircase leading to an attic sitting room.

Hotel La Palma (☎ 0323 3 24 01; www.hlalpalma.it; Lungolago Umberto I 33; s €90-150, d €150-260; ☎ ☎ ☎) There's a distinct Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack vibe at this grandly proportioned 1960s hotel on the lakefront. All rooms have Jacuzzi jets, and the heated pool has fabulous lake views. Its restaurant (set menus from €30)

serves a sumptuous array of seafood. It's framed by floor-to-ceiling glass looking onto flowering gardens, which are floodlit at night. The restaurant's open to nonguests, but you'll need to reserve ahead.

Osteria degli Amici (☎ 0323 3 04 53; Via Anna Maria Bolongaro 33; pizzas €4-8, mains from €10) You may need to queue (it's always packed) but it's worth it to dine under vines on one of Stresa's most delightful terraces in the centre of town.

Il Borromeo (☎ 0323 93 89 38; www.borromees.it; Corso Umberto I 67; set menus €69; 🍷) The flowing dining rooms of this glass-paned, pistachio-coloured restaurant in the Grand Hotel des Iles Borromees don't appear to have changed since Hemingway's days here. In summer, you can dine on the elegant terrace, but you'll still need formal wear of an evening. If too much luxury is barely enough, the hotel's rooms start at €310 for a double.

Borromean Islands

Forming Lago Maggiore's most beautiful corner, the Borromean Islands (Isole Borromeo) can be reached from various points around the lake, but Stresa and Baveno offer the best access. Three of the four islands – Bella, Madre and Pescatori (also called Superiore) – can all be visited, but San Giovanni is off-limits to the public.

BELLA

Isola Bella took the name of Carlo III's wife, the *bella* Isabella, in the 17th century, when its centrepiece, **Palazzo Borromeo** (☎ 0323 3 05 56; www.borromeoturismo.it; adult/child €11/4.50; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mar-Oct), was built for the Borromeo family. Presiding over 10 tiers of terraced gardens, the baroque palace contains works by Tiepolo and Van Dyck, as well as Flemish tapestries and sculptures by Canova. Mussolini tried to stave off WWII here at the Conference of Stresa in April 1935; other well-known guests have included Napoleon and Josephine in 1797 (you can see the bed they slept in), and Prince Charles and Princess Di in 1985. The Borromeo family still use it as their summer residence, occupying the 2nd floor during August and September (though the grounds and lower floors remain open to visitors). Beneath a 23m-high ceiling in the former concert room is a 200-year-old wooden model of the palace and island. Below, a 3000-year-old fossilised boat is displayed behind glass in the cool palace grottoes. The grottoes are stud-

ded with pink marble, lava stone, and pebbles from the lake bed. A combined ticket covering admission to the Borromeo and Madre palaces costs €16/7 per adult/child.

What's left of the island swarms with stalls selling gelati, pizzas and souvenirs.

our pick Elvezia (☎ 0323 3 00 43; Isola Bella; mains €12-16; 🕒 Tue-Sun Mar-Oct, Fri-Sun Nov-Feb) is the place for authentic family cooking. It serves pastas including ravioli stuffed with ricotta, and tagliatelle with creamy herb-infused sauce, as well as lake fish such as perch baked in foil. Service is warm and personal, views extend from the terrace, and the wine selection is first rate. Great coffee too. Booking ahead is essential for dinner during winter.

MADRE

The entire island of Madre is taken up by the fabulous 16th- to 18th-century **Palazzo Madre** (☎ 0323 3 05 56; adult/child €9/4.50; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mar-Oct). White peacocks whose fanned feathers resemble bridal gowns strut around gardens that until recently were even more lavish than those of Palazzo Borromeo on Isola Bella. In late June 2006, however, a tornado struck the island, uprooting many of the island's prized palms and other plants, including a once-cathedral-like 200-year-old cypress tree that was still clinging to life at the time of research. The palace itself was unscathed: interior highlights include Countess Borromeo's doll collection, a neoclassical puppet theatre designed by a scenographer from Milan's La Scala, and 'horror' theatre with a cast of devilish marionettes.

A combined ticket covering admission to the Borromeo and Madre palaces costs €16/7 per adult/child.

PESCATORI

The tiny island of Pescatori, in the absence of souvenir stalls, retains much of its original fishing-village atmosphere. Apart from an 11th-century apse and a 16th-century fresco hanging in the **Chiesa di San Vittore**, there are no real sights; hence many visitors make it their port of call for lunch. Restaurants clustered around the boat landing, all serving grilled fish fresh from the lake from around €14.

If you want to stay on the island, the romantic **Albergo Verbano** (☎ 0323 3 04 08; www.hotelverbano.it; s €90-120, d €150-180; 🕒 Mar-Dec) has a dozen rooms with wrought-iron bedsteads, and half- and full-board options. The hotel

will send its own boat out free for guests once the ferries have stopped running.

South of Stresa

It was in **Arona** (population 15,900), 20km south of Stresa, that the son of the Count of Arona and Margherita de' Medici, who would go on to become San Carlo Borromeo (1538–84), was born. His birthplace, the Rocca Borromea castle, was later destroyed by Napoleon. But Arona's saint is far from forgotten: in addition to a church and several chapels, the hill dedicated to him bears the revered religious monument, **Sancarbone**. Erected between 1614 and 1698, the 35m bronze-and-copper statue can be climbed, affording a spectacular view from the top.

Across the water, the medieval Rocca di Angera houses the 12-room **Museo della Bambola** (Doll Museum; ☎ 0331 93 13 00; adult/child €7.50/4.50; ☎ 9am–5.30pm Mar–Oct), displaying the Borromeo family's priceless collection of dolls.

Waterside cafés with magnificent views of the castle include **Café de la Sera** (☎ 0322 24 15 67; Lungo Lago Marconi 87; mains from €7; ☎ lunch), offering a simple choice of four dishes for each course.

Arona's **tourist office** (☎ 0322 24 36 01; Piazzale Duca d'Aosta; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 3–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–12.30pm Sat) is opposite the train and bus stations, and can help with accommodation.

North of Stresa

Heading 4km north of Stresa brings you to **Baveno** (population 4550), which has good ferry links to the Borromeo Islands, and a fistful of hotels. If you've got energy to burn (or kids who do), stop off at **Lake Maggiore Adventure Park** (☎ 0323 91 97 99; www.sport-fun.info; Strada Cavalli 18, Baveno; full course adult/child €25/17; ☎ 10am–4pm winter, 10am–11pm summer, closed Dec–Feb). Thrills and spills include suspension courses, an artificial climbing wall, a trampoline 'acro-jump', and a cycling course with jumps. Its café has stunning lake views from its patio.

Further north towards Switzerland, **Verbania** (population 30,300), the biggest town on the lake, is split into three districts. Verbania Intra – the Swiss end with an attractive old town and car-ferry port to cross the lake – and Verbania Pallanza – the middle chunk – are of the most interest. Pallanza's highlight is the grounds of the late-19th-century **Villa Taranto** (☎ 0323 40 45 55; www.villataranto.it; adult/child €8/5.50; ☎ 8.30am–6.30pm Mar–Sep, to 5pm Oct). In 1931 royal

archer and Scottish captain Neil McEacharn bought the villa from the Savoy family. He planted some 20,000 species over 30 years, and today it is considered one of Europe's finest botanical gardens. Boats stop at Pallanza and at the landing stage in front of the villa.

Verbania's **tourist office** (☎ 0323 50 32 49; Corso Zanitello 6–8; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–6pm Mon–Fri) is on the waterfront in Verbania Pallanza and has accommodation details. Backpackers will want to make a beeline for the lake's only hostel, **Ostello Villa Congrave** (☎ 0323 50 16 48; ostello_verbania@libero.it; Via alle Rose 7, Verbania; dm incl breakfast €14.50, s/d €19/€38; ☎ Mar–Oct & Christmas, reception 7am–11am & 3.30–11.30pm Mar–Oct & Christmas). For rustic regional dining, the flower-topped pergola terrace overlooking a quaint old-town square at **Ostello del Castello** (☎ 0323 51 65 79; Piazza Castello 9, Verbania Intra; mains €12–18; ☎ Mon–Sat), 20m from the ferry port, is hard to beat.

Just 5km short of the Swiss border is **Cannobio** (population 5100). The tiny toy town's spotless cobblestone streets are impossibly quaint. Cannobio has an active sailing and windsurfing school, **Tomaso Surf & Sail** (☎ 0323 7 22 14; www.tomaso.com), next to a patch of gritty beach at the village's northern end. Mountain bikes can be hired per hour/day for €4/14 from **Cicli Prezan** (☎ 0323 7 12 30; Viale Vittorio Veneto 9), opposite the **tourist office** (☎ /fax 0323 7 12 12; Viale Vittorio Veneto 4; ☎ 9am–12pm & 4.30–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sun Apr–Sep, 9am–noon & 4.30–7pm Mon–Wed & Fri, 9am–noon Sun Oct–Mar). **Hotel Pironi** (☎ 0323 7 21 84; hotel.pironi@cannobio.net; Via Marconi 35, Cannobio; s/d from €85/120), in a 15th-century *palazzo* amid Cannobio's cobbled maze, is one of several really charming hotels in the village.

LAGO DI COMO

In the shadow of the snow-covered Rhaetian Alps, Lago di Como (also known as Lago Lario) is the most spectacular of the lakes. Shaped like an upside-down letter Y, measuring 120km all up, its squiggly shoreline is scattered with villages, including exquisite Bellagio, in the centre of the inverted V on the lake's southern shore. Where the southern and western shores converge is the lake's main town, Como. Lecco, the other large town on the lake, sits where the southern shore meets the lesser-explored eastern shore.

Lombard kings once took refuge from invaders on Isola Comacina, the sole island in this beguiling 146-sq-km body of water.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The Como-based **Società Pubblica Trasporti** (SPT; ☎ 031 24 72 47; www.sptcomo.it in Italian) operates regular buses around the lake, which depart from the bus station. Key routes include Como–Colico (1½ hours, three to five daily), via all the villages on the western shore mentioned in this section (some with a change of bus in Menaggio); Menaggio–Lugano (one hour, hourly), via Lago di Piano; Como–Bellagio (one hour, hourly); and Como–Erba–Lecco (one hour, almost hourly). Further afield, buses link Como and Bergamo (€6, 2¼ hours, around six daily) and Como and Malpensa airport (€13, one hour, three daily). Updated schedules are posted online.

Como's main train station (usually listed as Como San Giovanni on train timetables) is the lake's main point of arrival and departure. Trains from Milan's Stazione Centrale (€3.40, one hour, at least hourly) stop here and continue on into Switzerland. Trains from Milan's Stazione Nord (€3.40, one hour, hourly) use Como's lakeside Stazione FNM (listed on timetables as Como Nord Lago). From Lecco, local trains run the length of the eastern shore.

Ferries and hydrofoils operated by Como-based company **Navigazione Lago di Como** (☎ 031 57 92 11, 800 55 18 01; www.navigazione.laghi.it; Piazza Cavour) crisscross the lake, departing year-round from the jetty at the northern end of Piazza Cavour. Single fares range from €1.80 (Como–Cernobbio) to €9.50 (Como–Lecco). A whole host of other tickets are available, including those for day cruises with lunch and those that include admission to various lakeside villas. Como's tourist office has a free map marking all ferry departure points, and also has schedules.

Motorists can cross the lake with a car ferry on the western shore at Cadenabbia and on the eastern shore at Varenna. There are also car ferries from Bellagio to Cadenabbia, Menaggio and Varenna approximately every half-hour in summer and leaving approximately every hour in winter.

Como

pop 82,900 / elev 202m

Elegant Como is the main access town to the lake. Its twin claims to fame are the lake with which it shares its name, and its silk industry. Como's mulberry trees died out in the early 1900s from a combination of disease and the Industrial Revolution, but although the yarn is

now imported, silk is still woven and designed here. Genuine Como silk bears a label of certification, and you can buy silk scarves and ties for a fraction of the cost of prices charged at boutiques internationally.

Just 50km north of Milan, Como makes a more attractive and more affordable alternative to the busy capital.

INFORMATION

Bar Black Panther (031 243 006; Via Giuseppe Garibaldi 59; ☎ 7am-midnight Tue–Sun) Free internet access for customers.

Ospedale Sant'Anna (☎ 031 58 51 11; Via Napoleona 60) Hospital.

Police station (☎ 031 31 71; Viale Roosevelt 7)

Post office (Via T Gallio 6; ☎ 8.30am–7pm Mon–Sat) Main post office; also has currency exchange. There's a branch post office on Via Vittorio Emanuele II 99 (open 8.30am to 12.30pm Monday to Saturday).

Tourist office (☎ 031 26 97 12; www.lakecomo.org; Piazza Cavour 17; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2.30–6pm Mon–Sat)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Como's lakeside location is stunning and its narrow pedestrian lanes are a pleasure to explore, with some notable sights along the way. Elements of baroque, Gothic, Romanesque and Renaissance styles can be seen in Como's marble-clad **cathedral** (Piazza del Duomo). The cathedral was built between the 14th and 18th centuries, and is crowned by a high octagonal dome. Next door, the polychromatic **town hall** was altered in 1435 to make way for its sacred neighbour.

The circular layout of the 6th-century **Basilica di San Fedele** (Piazza San Fedele), with three naves and three apses, has been likened to a clover leaf. Its 16th-century rose window and precious 16th- and 17th-century frescoes add to its charm. The façade dates from 1914.

Significant remains from prehistoric and Roman times are displayed at the **Museo Archeologico** (☎ 031 27 13 43; Piazza Medaglie d'Oro; adult/child €3/free; ☎ 9.30am–12.30pm & 2–5pm Tue–Sat, 10am–1pm Sun). A block south, Como's **city walls** were rebuilt in 1162 following their demolition by the Milanese in 1127, who had forced Como to surrender, destroy all its buildings (save its churches) and walls, and become dependent on Milan until Barbarossa came along in 1152.

The lakeside **Tempio Voltiano** (☎ 031 57 47 05; Viale Guglielmo Marconi; adult/child €3/free; ☎ 10am–noon & 3–6pm Tue–Sun Apr–Oct, 10am–noon & 2–4pm Nov–Mar) was built in 1927. This neoclassical temple is now

a museum devoted to Como-born electric-battery inventor Alessandro Volta (1745–1827). The **Monumento ai Caduti** (War Memorial; Viale Puecher 9), nearby, is a classic example of Fascist architecture and dates to 1931.

Northeast along the waterfront, past Piazza Matteotti and the train station, is the **Funicolare Como-Brunate** (☎ 031 30 36 08; Piazza de Gasperi 4; adult/child one way €2.40/1.55, return €4.10/2.60; 🕒 6am-midnight summer, to 10.30pm winter), a cable car built in 1894. It takes seven minutes to reach hill-top **Brunate** (720m), a quiet village offering splendid views. Brunate's baroque **Chiesa di San Andrea** (Piazza della Chiesa), with its pink exterior and giant bell peeping out of the bell tower, is hard to miss. In **San Maurizio**, a short walk away, scale 143 steps to the top of the lighthouse, built in 1927 to mark the centenary of Alessandro Volta's death. A shuttle bus (€1) links the two hamlets between March and October.

South of the old town, the **Museo della Seta** (Silk Museum; ☎ 031 30 31 80; www.museosetacom.com; Via Castelnuovo 1; adult/child €8/2.60; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm Tue-Fri) unravels the town's silk history, with early dyeing and printing equipment on display. From Como's San Giovanni train station, take bus 7 to the Setificio stop.

The tourist office has ample walking and cycling information, and a list of the area's numerous golf courses.

SLEEPING

ostello Villa Olmo (☎ 031 57 38 00; Via Bellinzona 6; dm incl breakfast €14.50; 🕒 reception 7-10am & 4.30-11pm, closed Dec-Feb; (P)) In a rambling garden right on the lakefront, Como's HI hostel is two doors up from the heritage-listed villa of the same name. All dorms are single sex, there's a daytime lockout (including the grounds) and a mid-night curfew. But there are meals from €9.50, a fun night-time bar (alcohol service ceases at 10pm), and staff are friendly. The hostel is 1km from the main train station and 20m from the closest bus stop. Take bus 1, 6, 11 or 14.

In Riva al Lago (☎ 031 30 23 33; www.inrivaallago.com; Piazza Matteotti 4; s without bathroom €30-38, s with bathroom from €40-45, d without bathroom €40-47, d with bathroom €53-63, 2-person apt from €70; (P)) Don't be deceived by the unassuming exterior of this hotel, situated right behind the bus station. Refurbished rooms are tastefully furnished, some with original wood beams, and there are a handful of apartments for up to five people. Rates don't include breakfast, but you'll find plenty of cafés nearby.

Albergo Posta (☎ 031 26 60 12; www.hotelposta.net; Via Giuseppe Garibaldi 2; s from €52-59.50, d €62.50-67.50; (P)) In the heart of Como, the simple but comfortable Posta offers good value. Some rooms have balconies overlooking the street. Half- and full-board deals are a bargain at the popular ground-floor restaurant.

Locanda Milano (☎ 031 336 50 69; www.locandamilano.it in Italian; Via Alessandro Volta 62, Brunate; s/d from €65/80; (P)) Get away from it all in the hilltop village of Brunate, where Locanda Milano offers restful rooms in pretty yellow and blue hues, perched above its well-regarded restaurant (mains €18 to €22).

Hotel Plinius (☎ 031 27 30 67; www.hotelplinius.com; Via Giuseppe Garibaldi 33; s €60-90, d €90-130; (P) ♿) This once-austere three-star hotel has been transformed, and now makes the most of its central location with sleek, minimalist rooms and a funky restaurant (set menus €30 to €35).

Albergo Firenze (☎ 031 30 03 33; www.albergofirenze.it; Piazza Volta 16; s/d €82/110; (P) ♿) Tucked above a women's fashion boutique on Piazza Volta, this attractive hotel has bright, spotless rooms, including several with access for wheelchairs.

Hotel Metropole & Suisse (☎ 031 26 94 44; www.hotelmetropolesuisse.com; Piazza Cavour 9; s €99-151, d €128-216; (P) ♿) Right on the lakefront and something of a local landmark, this 1892-built hotel has graceful rooms and grand public areas, capturing the romance of Como's turn-of-the-20th-century heyday.

EATING & DRINKING

Pizzeria-Trattoria Stilo (☎ 031 26 12 38; Lungo Lario Trento 11; pizzas €4.50-7) Young, fun staff and a 1st-floor location with lake views make Stilo a great place to sample a huge list of traditional and adventurous pizzas.

Taverna Messicana Pizzeria (☎ 031 26 62 04; Piazza Mazzini 6; dishes €5-7.50) Buzzing with a local crowd, Messicana is situated on a sunny square in the town centre. In addition to pizza there's a great range of steak and pasta dishes.

Il Pomodorino (☎ 031 24 03 84; Via Cinque Giornate 62b; mains €8-12) Hidden away on a quiet pedestrian lane, Il Pomodorino's bizarre art installations and décor make it hugely popular and you may have to wait to be seated in the evening. There's an extensive menu of pizzas, as well as fish and meat dishes, and an internal courtyard.

Ristorante Bellavista (☎ 031 22 10 31; Piazza Bonacossa 2, Brunate; mains €11-15; 🕒 Wed-Mon) Ride

the cable car up to Brunate to dine in this peaceful historic villa with great views over the lake. Fresh fish, pasta, steaks and turkey are on the varied menu, and service is fast and friendly.

Lido (☎ 031 30 61 27; Viale Geno 13; pizzas €4-7, mains €12-25; ☹ Wed-Mon; ☹) The good news: this lively bar/restaurant has delicious pizzas and pastas, and regular live music. The bad: service can be forgetful, giving a whole new meaning to the term 'slow food'. Still, the superb views of the lake go some way to making the wait enjoyable.

ourpick Villa Geno (☎ 031 30 00 12; Viale Geno 12; set menus €60, mains €11-20; ☹ Tue-Sun; ☹) Everyone from the Rolling Stones to the Saudi royals have dined at this stunning lakefront villa. Construction on the building started in 1750 and took 100 years to complete. The result – terrazzo floors, frescoes, columns and a wraparound outdoor terrace – matches the restaurant's sensational cuisine such as lake perch in sage and butter sauce. Despite the grandeur of the premises and the guest list, staff are warm and welcoming to all.

Self-caterers can stock up on supplies at **Granmercato** (Piazza Matteotti 3; ☹ 8.30am-1pm Mon, 8.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 8am-7.30pm Sat) and **Qui C'è** (Via Natta 43; ☹ 8am-1.30pm & 2.30-8pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1pm Sun). Fresh fruit, vegetables and delicacies abound at Como's **food market** (☹ 8.30am-1pm Tue & Thu, 8.30am-7pm Sat) outside Porta Torre.

SHOPPING

Beautiful Como silk scarves and ties have been sold at **A Picci** (Via Vittorio Emanuele II 54) since 1919. A **craft & antiques market** (Piazza San Fedele; ☹ 9am-7pm Sat) fills the piazza out the front of the basilica.

Wines, vintage whiskies and grappas, along with olive oils and balsamic vinegars, line the walls of the sociable wine shop and bar, **Enoteca da Gigi** (☎ 031 26 31 06; Via Luini 48; ☹ 9am-1pm & 2.30-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat, 11am-9pm Sun). Drop by in the evening for a glass of Prosecco or a Sauvignon Blanc (from €2) and enjoy the free, freshly prepared bruschetta.

Southern Shore

Locals say that if you've driven from Como to Bellagio, you can drive anywhere around the lake. And they're right. The 32km western branch of the southern shore is a narrow, twisting, hillside drive, with a steady stream of

traffic. There are no real sights on this shady side of the lake, which doesn't get any direct sunlight in the winter months. But the main reason to make the drive – or better yet, catch a ferry – is the 'pearl' of the lake, Bellagio, suspended like a pendant on the promontory where the lake's western and eastern arms split and head south.

The 22km eastern branch of the southern shore, between Lecco and Bellagio, is an easier drive than the southern shore's western branch, though again, there are few sights as such until you reach Bellagio.

The mountains between the lake's two arms (in the triangle formed by the water and the towns of Como and Lecco) afford sweeping views, and shelter some quaint, little-visited villages. Another option for travelling between Como and Bellagio is to hike along a waymarked trail that follows old mule and cart tracks through this triangle. This scenic walk takes two days, with *refugi* and restaurants along the way. Como's tourist office can provide a free detailed route description.

BELLAGIO

pop 3000

The place that inspired the Las Vegas casino (the same one involved in a heist in *Ocean's 11*) lives up to its fabled reputation. Bellagio's sapphire-blue harbour, maze of stone staircases and colourful shuttered buildings are truly enchanting. Although summers and weekends teem with visitors, if you turn up on a weekday outside high season, you'll have the little village almost to yourself.

The lavish gardens of **Villa Serbelloni** (☎ 031 95 15 55; Via Garibaldi 8; adult/child €6.50/3; ☹ tours 11am & 4pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct) cover much of the promontory on which Bellagio sits. Visits are by guided tour only and numbers are limited; tickets are sold 10 minutes in advance from the small **information office** (Piazza Chiesa 14) near the church.

Garden-lovers can also stroll the grounds of neoclassical **Villa Melzi D'Eril** (☎ 339 644 68 30; Via Melzi D'Eril; adult/child €6/4; ☹ 9am-6pm Mar-Oct), built in 1808 for one of Napoleon's associates and coloured by flowering azaleas and rhododendrons in spring.

Bellagio's **tourist office** (☎ 031 95 02 04; Piazza Mazzini; www.bellagiolakecomo.com; ☹ 9am-noon & 3-6pm), next to the boat landing stage, has information on water sports, mountain biking and other lake activities. Internet access is

available at **bellagio.point.com** (☎ 031 95 0437; Salita Plinio 8-12; per 15min/hr €2/6; ☎ 10am-10pm).

Sleeping & Eating

For such an exquisite spot, there are a surprising number of affordable places to sleep and eat (and plenty of luxurious places to spoil yourself, too).

Residence La Limonera (☎ 031 95 21 24; www.residencelalimonera.com; Via Bellosio 2; 2-person apt €70-100; 🏠) This elegant villa in an old lemon grove has been divided into 11 spacious and thoughtfully furnished self-catering apartments. Apartments for three and four people are also available.

Hotel Bellagio (☎ 031 95 22 02; www.bellagio.info; s €80-115, d €80-155; 🍷 🍷) Tucked off a stair-lined street in the village centre. Views of the lake unfold from most of the artistically decorated, contemporary rooms at this two-star boutique hotel.

Hotel Excelsior Splendide (☎ 031 95 02 25; www.hsplendide.com; d €112-130; 🗓 mid-Mar–Oct; 🍷) Painted an eye-catching golden yellow, this Liberty-style hotel was built in 1907 and its marble foyer and 52 spacious rooms have a faded grandeur. There's an elegant dining room indoors (with half-board available), and a canopied terrace on the lakefront serving lunch (set menus from €28).

Far Out (☎ 031 95 17 43; Salita Mella 4; mains €11.50-19; 🗓 mid-Mar–Nov, Fri–Sun Dec–mid-Mar; 🍷) Jazz, blues, Italian folk and the occasional DJ set perform every Friday night at this chic new space, run by a dynamic young team, in a tiny alleyway. Standout dishes include *bellagina* (freshly made pasta with dried lake fish), calamari with fragrant olive oil, and grilled beef in Chianti.

Western Shore

Without the mountains blocking the light, the western shore gets the most sunshine on the lake. For this reason, it's lined with the most lavish villas, where high-fliers from football players to film stars reside. The shore stretches 80km from Como north to Sorico at the lake's tip; from here you can continue north into Switzerland or head east into Trentino-Alto Adige.

CERNOBBIO TO LENNO

Ocean's 11 may have been shot at Bellagio's Vegas namesake, but scenes from *Ocean's 12* were filmed in the Lago di Como village

of **Cernobbio**, at the 19th-century Villa Erba (Largo Luchino Visconti; closed to the public). Cernobbio is also home to the lake's most magnificent hotel, **Villa d'Este** (www.villadeste.it). But if you don't have a cool €700-odd to spend a night, try the cosy, wood-shuttered **Albergo Centrale** (☎ 031 51 14 11; www.albergo-centrale.com; Via Regina 39, Cernobbio; s/d €75/120; 🍷 🍷). Situated away from the water on Cernobbio's main street, it has a flowery terrace, a red-brick cellar, and a tavern serving pizzas baked in a wood-fired oven.

If you're driving, follow the lower lake-side road (Via Regina Vecchia) north from Cernobbio, which skirts the lake shore past a fabulous row of 19th-century villas around **Moltrasio**. Fashion designer Gianni Versace, who was murdered in Miami Beach, Florida, in 1997, is buried in the village cemetery; his former villa is still owned by the Versace family.

A few kilometres north is the charming hamlet of **Laglio**, home to *Ocean's* star, George Clooney (see the boxed text, opposite). North again, **Argegno** is the departure point into the mountains on the **Funivia Argegno-Pigra** (☎ 0318 108 44; one way/return €2.50/3.40; 🗓 8am-noon & 2-5pm, longer hours in summer). The cable car makes the five-minute climb to the 860m-high village of **Pigra** every 30 minutes. Argegno's **Locanda Sant'Anna** (☎ 031 82 17 38; www.locandasantanna.it; s €88-110, d €110-130, mains around €15; 🍷 🍷 🍷) has beautiful lamp-lit guest rooms and a rustic restaurant.

In **Lenno**, scenes from 2006's James Bond remake, *Casino Royale*, and *Stars Wars Episode II* were shot at **Villa del Balbianello** (☎ 0344 5 61 10; adult/child €5/2.50; 🗓 gardens 10am-6pm Tue & Thu-Sun Apr-Oct), a villa built by Cardinal Angelo Durini in 1787. Visitors are only allowed to walk the 1km from the Lenno landing stage to the estate on Tuesday and at weekends; other days, you have to take a **taxi boat** (☎ 333 410 38 54) from Lenno.

TREMEZZO

pop 1300

At 17th-century **Villa Carlotta** (☎ 0344 4 04 05; Riva Garibaldi; adult/child €7.50/free; 🗓 9am-6pm Apr-Sep, 9-5pm Mar & Oct), the botanical gardens are filled with colour in spring from orange trees knitted into pergolas and some of Europe's finest rhododendrons, azaleas and camellias. The villa, strung with paintings and tapestries, takes its name from the Prussian princess who was

BY GEORGE

Little Laglio is home to one very big star, actor/director/social activist/face of Martini, George Clooney. Everywhere you go in this area, people have 'George' stories to tell, such as the time he helped them carry their shopping, or used their phone when his motorbike broke down. You'll also see his autographed pictures in down-to-earth cafés where he pops in for coffee. Locals love him – but they nearly didn't. His plans to buy and restore the dilapidated public beach out the front of his two villas prompted an outcry that locals would no longer be able to use it. Clooney responded by writing the area's 400-or-so families a personal letter, reassuring them of their use of the beach, while offering to stump up for the clean-up and maintenance costs – winning their hearts in the process.

given the place in 1847 as a wedding present from her mother.

Tremezzo's **tourist office** (☎ 0344 4 04 93; infotremezzo@tiscalinet.it; Via Statale Regina; ☹ 9am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct) adjoins the boat jetty. A short stroll south, the 19th-century villa **Hotel Villa Marie** (☎ 0344 4 04 27; www.hotelvillamarie.com; Via Regina 30, Tremezzo; s €65, d 90-110; ☐ ☒ ☹ ☺) has a charming lakeside terrace and spacious, light-filled rooms.

CADENABBIA & MENAGGIO

Motorists can cross the lake by car ferry in Cadenabbia. While waiting for your ferry you can dine on homebaked bread and delicious lake cuisine at **Alberghetto e La Cucina della Marianna** (☎ 0344 4 30 95; www.la-marianna.com; Via Regina 57, Cadenabbia di Griante; s/d from €60/80, set menus €20; ☹ Wed-Mon).

A further 3km north is Menaggio (population 3200). The **tourist office** (☎ 0344 3 29 24; www.menaggio.com; Piazza Garibaldi; ☹ 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Sat) has several excellent brochures on walking and biking in the area. Just 100m uphill from Menaggio's ferry wharf, its hostel, **Ostello La Primula** (☎ 0344 3 23 56; www.menaggiohostel.com; Via IV Novembre 106, Menaggio; dm incl breakfast €14.50; ☹ reception 8-10am & 4-midnight mid-Mar-early Nov; ☐), has lake views from rooms housing 35 beds, and meals (including vegetarian options) for €12. You can rent bikes and kayaks (€13 per day) or just chill on the pebbled terrace. On the lakefront, the aptly named **Hotel du Lac** (☎ 0344 3 52 81; www.hoteldulacmenaggio.it; Via Mazzini 27; d €140; ☐ ☹) has elegantly wallpapered rooms and a friendly, relaxed café (set menus €15). It also has a cheaper annexe with shared bathrooms, with prices from €70 per double.

Behind Piazza Garibaldi in Menaggio's cobbled centre, don't miss the all-natural gelati (and especially the banana gelato) handmade

by Marco and Anna at **Panne & Cioccolato** (☎ 348 267 09 69; Via Calvi 5; ☹ 9am-11pm Mar-Oct).

LAGO DI PIANO & LAGO DI LUGANO

Menaggio is the jumping-off point for Lago di Piano in the Val Menaggio, a remote valley connecting Lago di Como with Lago di Lugano, which straddles the Italian/Swiss border to the west. Tiny Lago di Piano is protected by the **Riserva Naturale Lago di Piano**. Three marked nature trails, 4km to 5.3km long, encircle the lake and the **visitors centre** (☎ 0344 7 49 61; riservalagopiano@yacc.it; Via Statale 117, Piano di Porlezza; ☹ 9am-noon Mon, Tue & Sat, 2-4pm Wed May-Oct), on the lake's northern shore, rents mountain bikes (€5 per hour) and arranges guided visits on foot (€2.50) and on horseback (€30).

A few kilometres east of Lago di Piano is Lago di Lugano, though it has to be said that the Italian side of the lake is not as pretty as the Swiss side. The main town on the Italian side is **Porlezza** (population 4330), from where ferries sail to the town of Lugano in Switzerland.

About 2km east of Porlezza, in the Riserva Naturale Lago di Piano, is **Camping OK La Rivetta** (☎ 0344 7 07 15; www.campingoklarivetta.com; Via Calbiga 30, Porlezza; per person €4.50-5.80, camping site €9-12, 2-/4-person bungalow from €45/62; ☹ Apr-Oct; ☐ ☹). It's a clean, green and peaceful camping ground with good facilities. Some bungalows have wheelchair access, and there's a playground and video arcade for the kids.

ALTO LARIO

North of Menaggio, the road hugging Lago di Como's western shore flattens and widens (in relative terms), affording some spectacular views and an easier drive during which to appreciate them. This northern stretch of the lake is known as the Alto Lario ('upper

Lario'; Lario being Lago di Como's alternate name).

An essential stop for water-sports enthusiasts is **Gravedona** (population 2670). Of the town's several hotels, **Hotel Regina** (☎ 0344 894 46; www.reginahotels.it; Via Regina Levante 10a; s €60-95, d €90-135; 📞 🚰) fronts the beach and has a full range of facilities including a gym, and mountain bikes to explore the surrounding mountains.

Tourist offices around the lake have a list of camping grounds in the area, and loads of info about sailing, windsurfing, kite-surfing and waterskiing.

Eastern Shore

Lago di Como's eastern shore is the least visited, but shelters some really lovely villages. If driving, skip the motorway, and stick to the lakeside S36 from **Colico** south to Lecco.

About 3km south of Colico, the **Abbazia di Piona** (🕒 9am-noon & 2.15-4.45pm), a Cistercian abbey, is a pocket of peace. From the lakeside S36, follow the narrow road for 2km; the last stretch is cobbled.

VARENNA

pop 850

Villa-studded Varenna, 13km south of the Abbazia di Piona, has a web of cobbled streets crowned by a castle. The gardens of **Villa Monastero** (☎ 0341 29 54 50; Piazza Venini 1; adult/child €2/1.50; 🕒 9am-6pm Mar-Oct), a former monastery, and **Villa Cipressi** (☎ 0341 83 01 13; Via IV Novembre 18; adult/child €2.50/1.80; 🕒 9am-7pm Mar-Oct) can both be visited. Magnolias, camellias and yucca trees are among their floral wonders. To get to both villas from Piazzale Martiri Libertà, the square next to the boat jetty, follow the narrow **lakeside promenade** around the shore then bear left (inland) up the steps to Piazza San Giorgio, the village square. Both villas are signposted from here.

Most of the town's accommodation options are clustered around the piazza, up the hill from the waterfront. At the blue-shuttered **Albergo del Sole** (☎ 0341 81 52 18; www.albergodelsole.it; Piazza San Giorgio 21; s €70-85, d €105-120; 📞 🚰), whitewashed rooms are inspired by the lake's steamboats, and there's a good on-site restaurant (set menus from €20) and pizzeria. At the lakeside **Vecchia Varenna** (☎ 0341 83 07 93; www.vecchiavarenna.it; Contrada Scoscesa 10, Varenna; mains €15-16; 🕒 Tue-Sun Feb-Dec) you can dine on stuffed trout, wild boar, and ostrich on rocket.

Varenna's **tourist office** (☎ 0341 83 03 67; www.varennaitaly.com; Piazza Venini 1; 🕒 10am-noon & 3-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-noon Sun) offers information on the lake's entire eastern shore.

South of Varenna, the road continues past the pretty village of **Liernia** en route to Lecco, at the lake's eastern foot.

LECCO & AROUND

pop 50,000

Ferries only serve Lecco from March to October, and, apart from day-tripping motorcyclists, tourism is all but nonexistent here, even when the ferries are running. But Lecco deserves a stop to marvel at how this town, stunningly located on Como's shores, has managed to stay off the radar for so long. Lecco's attractive lakefront leads to a series of piazzas, and in winter you can **ski** the adjacent mountains – Lecco's **tourist office** (☎ 0341 29 57 20; www.turismo.provincia.lecco.it; Via Nazario Sauro 6; 🕒 9am-1pm & 3-6pm) has details. A day's lift ticket costs €26.

The hotel/restaurant **Caviate** (☎ 0341 36 75 83; Lungo Lario Piave 17; s/d €40/55) is proof of how little-touched by tourism Lecco is. Fronted by '60s motel-style fluorescent green lights, the hotel has Spartan rooms, with skewiff furniture, that open onto balconies that take in phenomenal lake views. Caviate's restaurant (mains €9 to €14) serves heaping platefuls of pasta.

From Lecco, it's an easy train ride (€2.65, 45 minutes) southeast to Bergamo. There are no direct trains to Como, but you can reach it by bus (see p290), or a 36km drive.

LAGO D'ISEO

Less than 100km from both Bergamo and Brescia, Lago d'Isèo is the least-known of the lakes. Shut in by mountains, the lake's eastern shore is comprised mainly of tunnels, but the western shore offers an extraordinarily beautiful drive through the narrow rock overhangs (beep your horn before you round the blind bends).

Approaching Lago d'Isèo from the southwest brings you to **Sarnico** (population 5880), with its lovely Liberty villas and a smattering of hotels and restaurants.

At the lake's southeastern edge, the main town, **Isèo** (population 8380), is a pleasant enough spot, though there are few sights, other than a 2-sq-km protected wetland, formed from 18th-century peat beds. In late spring the pools are smothered in water lilies.

Iseo's **tourist office** (☎ 030 98 02 09; Lungolago Marconi 2; ☹ 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Easter-Sep) stocks information about the numerous walking opportunities around the lake and hinterland, and has a list of campgrounds.

From Iseo you can catch a boat to **Monte Isola** (www.monteisola.com), Europe's largest lake island, at 5 sq km. Only the doctor, police and the priest are allowed to drive on the island, making its little fishing village a peaceful retreat. You can walk or bike the 15km-long trail that encircles the island, and pitch up at its simple campground **Campeggio Monte Isola** (☎ 030 982 52 21; Via Croce 144; per person/tent from €4.20/7.80; ☹ year-round).

The **Franciacorta** – a patch of rolling countryside synonymous with its renowned wines – spills around the lake shore as you head north.

Perched on the lake's northwestern tip, the port town of **Lovere** (population 5430) is a gem, with a working harbour and a wealth of walking trails nearby. Its cobbled old town curves around the harbour, shadowed by a leafy lakefront promenade. On the hill at the western end of the harbour is the lake's hostel, **Ostello del Porto** (☎ 035 983 52 90; Via Paglia 70; dm/d €16.50/39; ☹ mid-Mar–Oct; **P** **Q**). Housed in a renovated steel factory (accessed by a narrow pedestrian ramp from the road), its ensuite rooms all have lake views.

our pick **Hotel Lovere** (☎ 035 96 03 96; www.hotellovere.it; Via Marconi 97; s €40–80, d €60–100; **P** **X** **Q** **Q**), at the eastern edge of town, is a gleaming-new option offering outstanding value for money. It has sophisticated, neutral-toned rooms (some overlooking the lake), wi-fi, and an equally outstanding restaurant, **Pinocchio** (pizzas from €5, mains €8–15). Delicious pizzas, pastas and lake fish are served in its artistic dining rooms, and in fine weather, on its panoramic balcony. Hotel guests get a 10% discount on meals, and service at both the restaurant and hotel is flawless.

North of Lago d'Iseo, the **Valle Camonica** weaves its way to the vast **Parco dell'Adamello** and, further north, to the **Parco Nazionale dello Stelvio** (p326). The area borders Trentino-Alto Adige and takes in the better parts of the Lombard Alps. The two national parks offer many walks and are dotted with Alpine huts where you can rest up.

About halfway between Darfo and Edolo, the **Parco Nazionale delle Incisioni Rupestri** (☎ 0364 21 40; adult/child €5/2.50; ☹ 9am-6.30pm Tue–Sun sum-

mer, 8.30am-4.30pm Mon–Fri & 9am-4.30pm Sat & Sun winter), at Capo di Ponte, is a 30-hectare open-air museum containing a representative array of rock engravings going as far back as the Bronze Age.

The area north of Edolo offers some reasonable winter **skiing**, particularly near Ponte di Legno, at the northern end of the valley, and the nearby Passo del Tonale. Brescia's tourist office (see p276) stocks plenty of walking, camping and mountain-hut information. In the valley there are tourist offices at **Darfo Boario Terme** (☎ 0364 53 16 09; Piazza Einaudi 2), **Edolo** (☎ 0364 7 10 65; Piazza Martiri Libertà 2) and **Ponte di Legno** (☎ 0364 9 11 22; Corso Milano 41); call ahead to check opening hours.

Getting There & Around

SAB (☎ 035 28 90 00; www.sab-autoservizi.it in Italian) buses trundle between Sarnico and Bergamo (50 minutes, up to six daily). Trains link Iseo train station with Brescia (€2.70, 30 minutes, hourly), from where you can connect to Bergamo.

Navigazione sul Lago d'Iseo (☎ 035 97 14 83; www.navigazione.lagoiseo.it) operates up to eight ferries daily between (south to north) Sarnico, Iseo, Monte Isola, Lovere and Pisogne. Single fares range from €1.80, to €5.55 for the longest routes. In winter there are substantially fewer sailings.

LAGO DI GARDA

A playground for Italians of all ages, Lago di Garda encompasses an immense 370 sq km. The lake is shaped something like an isosceles triangle, and its broad southern end resembles an inland sea. In the southwestern corner, **Desenzano del Garda** is known as the *porta del lago* (gateway to the lake), with good transport connections around the lake and beyond. In the centre of the southern shore, on a sliver-like peninsula, is the impossibly quaint village of **Sirmione**, bookended by a castle at its entrance and a maze of Roman ruins on its headland. If you have kids to entertain, the lake's southeastern corner is home to two amusement parks.

Particularly as you head north, Lago di Garda's Ora (southerly) and Peler (northerly) winds make it a windsurfer's haven. Once you've hit flower-filled **Gardone Riviera**, the lake rapidly narrows as the altitude climbs. Across from Gardone on the eastern shore, a cable car glides from the windsurfers'

hang-out of **Malcesine** to **Monte Baldo** (2200m), where there's wintertime skiing and year-round mountain biking. By the time you reach the hiking haven **Riva del Garda**, at the northern tip, craggy mountains tower over the lake, likening it to a fjord.

The diverse range of activities on offer has made Garda the most (over)developed of the lakes, and despite a plethora of accommodation, booking ahead is advised.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Buses run by **APT** (☎ 045 805 79 11; www.aptv.it) connect Desenzano del Garda train station with Riva del Garda (two hours, up to six daily) along the western shore. **Peschiera del Garda** train station (10km southeast of Sirmione) is on the Riva del Garda–Malcesine–Garda–Verona APTV bus route, with hourly buses to both Riva (1½ hours) and Verona (20 minutes). Buses also run to/from Mantua (1¼ hours, up to eight daily) from Peschiera del Garda train station. The Riva del Garda–Milan (3¾ hours, three daily) bus route operated by **Società Italiana Autoservizi** (SIA; ☎ 030 377 42 37; www.sia-autoservizi.it in Italian) also connects the western shore with Brescia. **Atesina** (☎ 046455 23 85; www.atesina.it in Italian) runs hourly buses from Riva del Garda to/from Arco (20 minutes), Rovereto (45 minutes) and Trento (1¾ hours). Schedules and fares for all three bus companies are posted online.

The two train stations serving the lake, Desenzano del Garda and Peschiera del Garda, are both on the Milan–Venice train line and have almost hourly trains in each direction.

Navigazione sul Lago di Garda (☎ 030 914 95 11, 800 55 18 01; www.navigazione.laghi.it in Italian; Piazza Matteotti 2, Desenzano del Garda) operates numerous passenger ferries year-round. Motorists can cross the lake using the car ferry that yo-yos between Toscolano–Maderno (on the western shore) and Torri del Benaco (on the eastern shore), or seasonally between Limone (11km south of Riva del Garda on the western shore) and Malcesine (15km south of Riva on the eastern side). Lakeside ticketing booths and tourist offices have timetables. Transporting a small car/bicycle on either ferry route costs €7.40/5.30 one way. Passenger one-way fares on a ferry/hydrofoil range from €1, up to €7 for the longest stretch. A one-day ticket allowing unlimited travel costs €24.60/13.30 per adult/child, with cheaper day tickets for smaller zones available.

Desenzano del Garda

pop 20,000

The lake's main transport hub, Desenzano del Garda, is more residential than its lakeside counterparts, and many tourists pass straight through with barely a backward glance. But while Desenzano is not as quaint as some other spots, it's also not as touristy, and buzzes with activity year-round. Hidden amid its urban sprawl is an attractive old port and historic centre. You can get information on the town here from the **tourist office** (☎ 030 914 15 10; Via Porto Vecchio 34; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 3–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–12.30pm Sat).

Right on the lakefront by Desenzano's main beach, **Hotel Europa** (☎ 030 914 23 33; www.desenzano.com; Lungolago Battisti 71; d €86–98; 🍷 🍷) is a breezy modern place with a good restaurant (set menus from €15).

Desenzano is also a hub for nightlife, with bars and discos scattered around town; friendly locals will give you the low-down on the latest in-spots.

Sirmione

pop 6500

Situated 9km northeast of Desenzano, quaint Sirmione sits on an islet at the end of a slender peninsula on Garda's southern shore. Even the tourists who pour into the village in their thousands don't distract from the village's charm or its wraparound lake views. At the gateway to the islet, its square-cut **castle** (Castello Scaligero; ☎ 030 91 64 68; adult/child €4/2; ☎ 9am–12.30pm & 3–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–12.30pm Sat) was built by Verona's ruling family, the Scaligeri, in 1250. There's not a lot inside but the views from the tower are spectacular.

From the **jetty** near the castle, all sorts of vessels will make any manner of trip around the lake – at a price – and an array of water activities can be arranged.

North of the main cluster of shops and restaurants are the open-air and indoor pools of the **Terme di Sirmione** (☎ 030 990 49 23; www.termedisirmione.com; Piazza Virgilio 1; pools Mon–Fri €29, Sat & Sun €36; ☎ by reservation). The source of the lake's hot springs, offshore from Sirmione, were discovered in the late 1800s, and the pools are a natural 37°C. The pools are accessible for wheelchair users; massage treatments are also available.

At the northern tip of the peninsula is the maze of Roman ruins known as **Grotte di Catullo** (☎ 030 91 61 57; adult/child €4/free; ☎ 8.30am–7pm

Tue-Sun Mar-Sep, to 5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Feb). In fact it's not a cave as the name suggests, but was called this by explorers who saw the ruins overgrown with foliage on top, and mistakenly took them for grottoes. The on-site museum displays many artefacts unearthed in the area, and offers a detailed overview of its history. Even when Sirmione's at its busiest, wandering along the windblown peninsula provides a peaceful retreat.

Sirmione's **tourist office** (☎ 030 91 61 14; Viale Marconi 8; ☎ 9am-9pm Easter-Oct, 9am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat Nov-Easter) adjoins a bank and the bus station. Motorised vehicles are banned beyond this point, except for those with a hotel booking on the islet. (Driving even the smallest car along the miniature, pedestrian-clogged main street isn't fun.)

To explore the area, you can rent mountain bikes/50cc scooters for €11/35 per day from **Adventure Sprint** (☎ 030 91 90 00; Via Brescia 15; ☎ 9am-6.30pm); the company also rents larger scooters and cars.

SLEEPING & EATING

An inordinate number of hotels cram into Sirmione, many of which close from the end of October to March. Four camping grounds lie near the town and the tourist office can advise on others around the lake.

Pizzerias, gelaterie and restaurants crowd around Piazza Carducci and along the main street; you'll also find atmospheric spots in the side streets leading to the lakefront on both sides of the peninsula.

Camping Sirmione (☎ 030 91 90 45; www.camping-sirmione.com; Via Sirmioncino 9, Colombane; per person €6-10, tent €6-10, tent & car €9-16, 2-bed chalet €45-75, 4-bed chalet €65-110; ☎ late Mar-early Oct; 📍) This attractive, well-kept site at the base of the peninsula (2.5km from the castle) has smart, modern chalets and a restaurant, shop and waterskiing school.

Hotel Catullo (☎ 030 990 58 11; www.hotelcatullo.it; Piazza Flaminia 7; d €55-70; 📍) One of Sirmione's oldest hotels, dating back to 1888, Catullo (named for the Roman poet who lived in the area) occupies a prime lakeside location, with a lovely garden and smart, contemporary rooms. Half and full board are available, while lake-view rooms cost just €5 extra.

ourpick Hotel Marconi (☎ 030 91 60 07; hmarconi@tiscalinet.it; Via Vittorio Emanuele II 51; s €40-65, d €65-110; 📍 ☎) Even if you're someone who takes nothing more than coffee for breakfast

(or if you've got used to that in Italy by now), the incredible spread of cakes, tarts and pies, made by hand by the family who run this elegant hotel, is a feast for the eyes. Rooms are streamlined and spotless, and you can lounge beneath blue-and-white-striped umbrellas on a timber sundeck extending over the lake.

Antica Trattoria La Speranzina (Via Dante 16; mains €15-18) This authentic little trattoria is tucked well away from the waterfront circus – dine in peace on a quiet lakeside terrace, beneath the olive trees.

DRINKING

Bar Fantastico (Via Santa Maria Maggiore 2; ☎ 7am-11pm) This traditional little bar's location under a tunnel means it has no lake views, but also few tourists, making it a relaxing spot to try a glass of local wine.

Lago di Garda Amusement Parks

The lake's lower eastern shore is home to larger-than-life dinosaurs, pirate ships, roller coasters and a dolphinarium at the kid-oriented **Gardaland** (☎ 045 644 97 77; www.gardaland.it; day tickets adult/child €27/23; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr–mid-Jun & last 2 weeks of Sep; 9am-midnight mid-Jun–mid-Sep; 9am-6pm Sat & Sun Oct, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun late Dec-1st week Jan).

To its north, **CanevaWorld** (☎ 045 696 99 00; www.canevaworld.it; Via Fossalta 1; adult/child aqua park & Movieland €25/21) features an **aqua park** (adult/child €19/16; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-May–Jun & Sep, 10am-7pm Jul & Aug), and **medieval shows** (adult/child dinner & show €25/15; ☎ 1-2 shows daily Apr-Sep) including a medieval banquet (of sorts). Within the same sprawling park is CanevaWorld's **Movieland Studios** (adult/child €19/16; ☎ 10am-6pm Easter-Jun & Sep, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Oct, 10am-7pm Sun-Fri Jul & Aug, 10am-11pm Sat Jul & Aug), featuring stunt-packed action shows. Exact opening times vary slightly throughout the year, so check the website for details.

Contact the parks directly for customised packages including accommodation.

Free buses shuttle visitors the 2km to both parks to/from the Peschiera del Garda train station.

Gardone Riviera & Around

pop 2600

Heading north from Desenzano del Garda on Garda's western shore brings you to **Salò** (population 9980), a pretty village on the gulf which gave its name to Mussolini's puppet

republic in 1943, after the dictator was rescued from the south by the Nazis.

Further north, at the head of a small inlet, is Gardone Riviera, once one of the lake's most elegant holiday spots. Mountains rise up around the village, whose gardens are filled with palms, magnolias, jasmine blossoms and age-old cedar and cypress trees.

Its heyday is recalled at the fabulous estate **Il Vittoriale degli Italiani** (☎ 0365 29 65 11; www.vittoriale.it; Piazza Vittoriale; adult/child Il Vittoriale €7/4, Il Vittoriale & grounds or Museo della Guerra €11/8, Il Vittoriale, grounds & Museo della Guerra €16/11; 🕒 grounds 8.30am-8pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar, Il Vittoriale & Museo della Guerra 9.30am-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar). Italy's controversial poet and ultra-nationalist, Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938) retreated here in 1922 because, he claimed, he wanted to escape the world which made him ill. Visits to d'Annunzio's house are by guided tour only (in Italian, 25 minutes, departs every 10 minutes). **Museo della Guerra** (War Museum) records d'Annunzio's WWI antics - one of his most triumphant and more bizarre feats was to capture a battleship from the fledgling Yugoslavia shortly after WWI when Italy's territorial claims had been partly frustrated in postwar peace talk. In July and August, classical concerts, ballets, plays and operas are staged in the **open-air theatre** (☎ 0365 29 65 19) in the villa's lush grounds.

More plant life can be admired at **Giardino Botanico Fondazione André Heller** (☎ 336 41 08 77; Via Roma; adult/child €6/3; 🕒 9am-6pm Mar-mid-Oct). The botanic gardens were laid out in 1900, and redesigned in the late 1990s by multimedia artist André Heller incorporating sculptures by Keith Haring and Roy Lichtenstein, as well as some 8000 plant species.

The **tourist office** (☎ 0365 2 03 47; Corso Repubblica 8; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Jul-Sep, 9am-12.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Fri & Sat & Mon-Wed, 9am-12.30pm Thu Oct-Jun) stocks a wealth of information on lake activities and accommodation. Try **Locanda Agli Angeli** (☎ 0365 2 08 32; www.agliangeli.com; Piazza Garibaldi 2; s €45-80, d €80-150; 📍), a rustic little inn (set menus from €20) overlooking a pretty piazza en route to Il Vittoriale, with a handful of wood-beamed rooms (some with air conditioning).

About 12km north of Gardone, just past the car ferry port at Toscolano-Maderno, is **Gargnano** (population 3000), a charming harbour where Mussolini based himself during the short life of his Repubblica Sociale Italiana

(or Repubblica di Salò). The lake's most prized sailing regatta, the **Centomiglia**, takes place here each September.

Malcesine

pop 3500

On the lake's eastern shore, the windsurfing centre of Malcesine has a pretty, cobbled village centre crowned by the **Castello e Museo Scaligero** (☎ 045 740 08 37; Via Castello; adult/child €4/1; 🕒 9.30am-6.30pm). Inside there are a couple of natural-history museums and a collection of books by Goethe, who immortalised the castle. The top of the tower has fabulous views.

More eagle-eye views of the lake unfold during the 10-minute ride on the **Funivia Malcesine-Monte Baldo** (☎ 045 740 02 06; adult/child under 1.4m return €15/12; 🕒 8am-7pm), a cable car with rotating glass cabins. Pick up trail information and maps from Malcesine's **tourist office** (☎ 045 740 00 44; www.malcesinepiu.it; Via Capitanato; 🕒 9am-noon & 3-6pm Mon-Sat). In winter you can ski on Monte Baldo's slopes.

Olives harvested around Malcesine are milled into extra-virgin olive oil by the **Consorzio Olivicoltori di Malcesine** (☎ 045 740 12 86; Via Navene).

The peach-coloured **Albergo Aurora** (☎ 045 740 01 14; www.aurora-malcesine.com; Piazza Matteotti 10; d €44-61; 📍) is a cosy one-star inn right in the village heart. Tasty home cooking makes half-board astonishing value at €35 to €42 per person.

Nago-Torbole

pop 2600

Goethe described the *comune* of Nago-Torbole, 15km north of Malcesine, as 'a wonder of nature, an enchanting sight', and its little township of Torbole still retains much of its original fishing-village charm. Picturesque strolls aside, most people come here to ride the wind. Throughout the summer, Torbole is host to a huge **windsurfing and sailing festival**, and the **World Windsurf Championships**.

Beginners and pros alike can hook up with the **Marco Segnana Surf Center** (☎ 0464 50 59 63; www.surfsegnana.it; Foci del Sarcia), which has bases at lakeside Lido di Torbole in Torbole and on Porfina beach in Riva del Garda. Three-hour lessons for beginners/advanced surfers are €59/68, excluding board hire, which costs €18/37 per hour/day. It also rents catamarans (per hour/half-day €39/89), kayaks and bikes.

Torbole's **tourist office** (☎ 0464 50 51 77; Via Lungolago Verona 19; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat Apr-mid-Jun, 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm Sun mid-Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar) has a complete list of surfing schools, distributes free mountain-bike and walking maps, and has information on camping grounds in the area, as well as hotels. One of the best-value options is **Residence Garni Torbole** (☎ 0464 50 52 16; www.hotelortorbole.it; Via Lungolago Verona 47; d €74-100; (P)), with spacious rooms as well as apartments. Most have balconies with lake views.

Easily the most atmospheric place to eat is at the 1860s-built former defensive fort just near Torbole's centre, which houses the **Ristorante Al Forte Alto** (☎ 0464 50 55 66; set menus €25-30, mains €15-18; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner daily from 6pm), serving top-notch typical Trentino cuisine.

Riva del Garda

pop 15,200 / elev 73m

Wedged between the towering rockface and the lake's narrow northern rim, Riva del Garda lies across the border from Lombardy in the Alpine region of Trentino-Alto Adige.

Like its neighbours Malcesine and Torbole, Riva is a well-known windsurfing spot and has several schools that also hire out equipment. The main **tourist office** (☎ 0464 55 44 44; Giardini di Porta Orientale 8; ☎ 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat Apr-mid-Jun, 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm Sun mid-Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar), and its **kiosk** (☎ 0464 55 07 76; Lungolago d'Annunzio 4c; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6.15pm Apr-Oct), which overlooks Piazza Catena where the boats dock, both have a list. They can also advise on everything from climbing and paragliding to wine-tasting and flea markets.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The main reason to visit the local-history exhibits at the **Museo Civico** (☎ 0464 57 38 69; Piazza Cesare Battisti 3; adult/child €2/1.50; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun) is actually for the waterfront castle, Rocca di Riva, dating from 1124, in which it's housed. You can scale the adjoining 34m-tall **Torre Apponale** (adult/child €1/free) for a stunning panorama of the lake and mountains. The 13th-century square tower is topped by an angel-shaped weather vane.

Paddle boats lined up on the lakefront cost €7 per hour for two people.

About 3km north of town – a pleasant 45-minute stroll – is **Cascata del Varone** (☎ 0464 52 14 21; adult/child €5/4; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mar, Oct & school holidays Nov-Feb, 9am-6pm Apr & Sep, 9am-7pm May-Aug). The cascading 100m waterfall is fed by the Lago di Tenno, a tiny lake northwest of Lago di Garda.

Riva makes a natural starting point for walks and bike rides including trails around **Monte Rocchetta** (1575m), which looms over the northern end of the lake. Immediately south of the town, the shore's long shingle beach is framed by a wide green park.

SLEEPING & EATING

Campeggio Bavaria (☎ 0464 55 25 24; camping bavaria@yahoo.it; Viale Rovereto 100; per person/tent/car from €9/6/5; (P)) One of four camping grounds dotting Riva's lakeside, this one is part of the Marco Segnana Surf Center (see opposite) and is a meeting place for windsurfers and mountain bikers. The tourist office has a list of many more camping options.

Ostello Benacus (☎ 0464 55 49 11; www.ostelloriva.com; Piazza Cavour 10; dm €15; ☎ Mar-Nov; (P) (Q)) Riva's HI hostel has a central location just off the main town square, a few moments' stroll from the waterfront, with its own parking, no less, and meals from €9.50. Reception hours are hit-and-miss, so it's a good idea to let them know in advance that you're coming or you may be in for a wait.

Hotel Giardino Verdi (☎ 0464 55 25 16; www.giardinoverdi.com; Piazza Giardino Verdi 4; s €59-64, d €69-74; (P) (X) (Q) (Q)) With balconies overlooking a quiet square, rooms in this three-star hotel are small (and bathrooms tiny), but they're streamlined and contemporary, with neutral tones, and have wi-fi. The terrace out front is a coveted spot for regional cuisine; inside there's a chic, damask-clothed dining room (set menus from €10). Parking is €12.

Hotel Sole (☎ 0464 55 26 86; www.hotelsole.net; Piazza 3 Novembre 35; d €96-160; ☎ restaurant 11.30am-11pm, hotel & restaurant closed Nov-Feb; (P) (X) (Q) (Q)) This grand, golden-hued hotel, once patronised by Nietzsche, is a landmark on Riva's lakefront. Many of its rooms have balconies, and its restaurant (mains €6 to €18) has an extensive selection of lake fish on its menu and a wide terrace to take in the views.

Riva has dozens of takeaway places and delicatessens for picnic supplies, in addition to lakeside cafés, pastry shops and gelaterie galore. For exceptional pizzas, seek out **Bella**

Napoli (☎ 0464 55 21 39; Via Armandi Diaz 29; pizzas €5-10; 🗓 daily Jun-Sep, Thu-Tue Easter-May & Oct, closed Nov-Feb). Seasonal opening hours may vary slightly.

North of Riva del Garda

From the medieval village of **Arco** (population 14,500), 5km north of Riva, a 20-minute stroll through olive groves to **Castello di Arco** (☎ 0464 51 01 56; adult/child €5/2; 🗓 10am-7pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm Oct & Mar, to 4pm Nov-Feb) limbers up the muscles for the more strenuous terrain awaiting walkers a few kilometres north.

Anyone looking to experience this outdoors lover's paradise should hook up with **Friends of Arco** (☎ 3331 661 401, 0464 53 28 28; www.friendsofarco.it; Via Segantini 64, Arco; 🗓 office 5-10pm

Mon-Fri, by appointment Sat & Sun, phone service from 9am), a mountain-guide service offering a huge range of courses and excursions, from gentle day trips taking in the local botany to multiday adventure courses, including canyoning, trekking, climbing and ski mountaineering. The Friends can also help you book accommodation. Arco's **tourist office** (☎ 0464 53 22 55; Viale delle Palme 1; 🗓 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat Apr-mid-Jun, 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon & 3.30-6.30pm Sun mid-Jun-Sep, 9am-noon & 2.30-6.15pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar) can also help.

Hotel L'Olivo Hotel (☎ 0464 51 64 30; www.hotelolivo.it; d €40-48; 📍) is an appealing three-star option with comfortable rooms, located in Arco's town centre.

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