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# Milan – the Secrets of the City

discovered through the eyes of an adopted Milanese

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## FOREWORD

At the time I moved to Milan in 1993, I wasn't initially enthusiastic to have landed in the one Italian city that seemed the least Italian.

Now, of course, I wanted to go to Italy. This "land where the lemon trees bloom," as Goethe writes, most certainly aroused a longing in my German heart.

It all started when I took my first year of Italian at 15 while attending a classical humanities high school. And that, coupled with our end of the year class trip to Italy, seemed to have determined my path early on. Moreover, it prompted me to study art history alongside my law studies. I then went on to spend a portion of my studies in Padua where I correspondingly completed an internship as a legal trainee. Later, as a young lawyer working in a Frankfurt firm, I started my career by counselling Italian clients. It wasn't long before the opportunity arose for me to open a branch office of the firm in Milan in 1993, where I continue to work today.

Well, I thought, it may be Milan, but it's still Italy. Though, the few times I had visited the city in the past, I had never really felt convinced of that as such. This city simply didn't seem to meet any of the stereotypical notions we Germans had of this country, apart perhaps from the language spoken here, which after all is (primarily) Italian.

Accordingly, it took me a few years to get to know Milan, little by little, and to also accept it in my heart as my new home. This happened solely by gaining a more in-depth understanding of the city's history. This is also what prompted me to write this book, initially for myself. And finally, I am drawn to Italy thanks to the observations Rudolf Lill made in his book, *The History of Italy from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century until the Beginnings of Fascism*: "For as long as humanistic and Christian traditions have had a formative effect, poets and artists, traveling scholars and pilgrims have gone to Italy, not so much to experience it as a beautiful and foreign land, but as a source and foundation for understanding their own way of life."

Milan is my home and I know it like the back of my hand.

As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, "You only see what you know." Therefore, it is not my intention to simply guide you through the neighborhoods of this city, but through its history. Following a short introduction of the historical context, unlike other travel guides, I invite you to join me on walks through the city to discover the sights of each era and experience Milan's history yourself.



# MILAN'S HEART AND SOUL

## Work, elegance, and constant change

The city of Bologna is best known for its university, Turin for Fiat and the royal palace. Florence is the place for art. Venice is the unparalleled lagoon city of the Adriatic and Rome the Eternal City. And Milan?

It's difficult to immediately associate this city with one particular, distinctive feature. Milan is the Duomo Cathedral, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, the Teatro Alla Scala, and the stadium in San Siro. Milan is the city of the stock exchange, of banks, of design, and fashion. Milan regards itself as the surreptitious economic capital of the country, cold and foggy, but eager to work and as Italy's gateway to the world where the various cultures converge. The promised land of "America" that generations of Italian emigrants went out in search of is probably here, say the Milanese, both the native-born and local foreigners.

There is no denying that the citizens of Milan possess a certain, and not entirely unsubstantiated, level of arrogance. Southern Italy, which the majority of locals would argue can be reached simply by crossing the Po River, is effectively underdeveloped, and everything outside of Milan is, in the eyes of the Milanese, likewise little more than remote countryside.

The city has taken in countless people from all over the country and "adopted" them, so to speak; for Milan is a city that is neither reserved nor suspicious, but rather extremely tolerant. The city sees its many adopted children for what they are worth and provides everything they deserve, all without expecting them to profess adherence to any one religion, world view, or political belief in return. It is a merit everyone strives to uphold. It's the reason that the most striking feature of the city is all the hectic. Everything moves at a frantic pace. At restaurants, people are served right away. And even people just out for a stroll almost seem to run instead.



*fig. 1: City development*

Hence, the best way to characterize the city is to speak of its work culture.

And this work culture exudes elegance. This not only applies to the imposing boulevards or the fine shops. This elegance is inherent in the Milanese themselves. They keep fit in the city's parks and countless fitness studios. The dress code in the business community is strict and traditional. Casual short-sleeved shirts, shorts, and ankle socks are taboo, even in the unbearable heat. And the necktie, which seems practically non-existent elsewhere, is still often worn here. The women wear muted colors and just enough jewelry. Everything harmonizes beautifully. Of course, they keep up with the latest fashions, but it's the little things, the nuances, that only those in the know pick up on. How fitting it is that the fashion industry belongs to one of the most top branches of the economy; in Milan, work and elegance go hand-in-hand.

These two aspects of the Milanese way of life are embodied in nothing more perfect than the aperitif. Milan's ritual of the aperitif is something very special and is renowned throughout all of Italy. It's not merely throwing back an Aperol or a Campari while you wait, it's much more than that: the bars serve exquisite cocktails along with an open buffet, allowing an opportunity to skip a larger dinner. Eating, as we all know, is deeply rooted in Italian culture and therefore the daily ranking of "the best place" changes from day to day based on mouth-to-mouth propaganda.

Things get started around 6 p.m., often with no set end time. It is a time when work, which naturally takes precedence, is done, but it's still a little early for the more personal evening time at home. The aperitif seamlessly bridges this transition.

Just like the Milanese themselves, this ritual is quick, efficient, flexible, and of course, elegant. Although, one shouldn't dress neither too formally nor too casually. It is here where people keep up with old friends and make new contacts, both professional and personal. Ideally, there is no distinction between the two.

As such, Milan has been in a constant state of change since the time of its founding (fig. 1). Nothing stays the same as it was, with the exception of the cathedral's calming influence. The Milanese exclusively keep their focus on the future and never look back. The country's most talented people come to Milan to find success, and in fact, in Milan every opportunity is open to them. The city has over 200,000 students enrolled across the 17 public and private universities that dot the city, making Milan second only to Boston in terms of its student-to-population ratio. The vast majority of Italy's links with the rest of the world go through Milan. As such, it's no wonder that all the nations of the world are represented here. It's where innovations get their start.

All this has led to the recent development of two completely new districts, CityLife and Porta Nuova. Ever since the 2015 World Expo, Milan has also become more of a tourist attraction than ever before. It's hard to believe that Milan has seen more tourists for the past few years than Venice. And the trend doesn't seem to be slowing down. Milan is set to host the 2026 Olympic games along with Cortina D'Ampezzo, the venue for the winter games.

In light of Milan's dynamic modernity and its open attitude toward the future, it's not entirely surprising that the city's extraordinarily rich history and fine arts are not also on full display. Milan does not flaunt its treasures; they are waiting to be discovered. And with regards to this point, Milan is selling itself short. Due to its economic importance, Milan has always had significant influence both in politics and art since late antiquity.



fig. 3: Green Milan, Via Brisa

The famous Italian writer Guido Piovene, originally from Vicenza but who moved to Milan in his early years, once said: “*Per capire Milano bisogna tuffarvisi dentro, non guardarla come un’opera d’arte*” – “To understand Milan, you need to dive into it, not look at it as a work of art.” While strolling through the city, it’s enough to take a closer look at the abundant civic pride elaborately carved around the building entrances (fig. 2). And these, along with the city’s enchanting *cortili* (inner courtyards) otherwise hidden behind the façades, are the subject of many coffee table books. But don’t forget to also look up: Milan is greener than it might seem at first glance. Many rooftops double as magnificent garden spaces (fig. 3).

This is my motivation for writing this book. I invite you to discover with me the hidden faces of this one-of-a-kind city.