

01-The heart of Milan

Milan: huge international exhibitions and trade fairs, the stock exchange and high finance, large-scale industry, cutting edge design and most of all – high fashion. The designer names of Milan are famous as a symbol of luxury in every shopping Mecca in large cities all over the world, and so, the whole world comes here, to via Montenapoleone, via Spiga and via Manzoni, to shop in some of the top glamour stores on the planet.

But this is not the only side to Milan : today it is a hectic fashion and business capital, but a couple of centuries ago it was the capital of Italy, and at the dawning of the Christian era it was even the capital of the Western Roman Empire. A very ancient city, rich in artistic masterpieces of great beauty. Let us start with the very heart of the city, the huge piazza that acts as the parvis to one of the most imposing cathedrals in Christendom. Built completely from gleaming white marble with a hint of pink, the Duomo is scattered with thousands of statues, giants, busts, high relief carvings... an authentic piece of exquisite lace carved in marble rising to the impossible heights of its spires, leaving the viewer struck with amazement. The whole city was involved in the construction, the saints and merchants, the nobility and the common people, and the work carried on for centuries to become a never-ending work site. As you exit from the Duomo, another piece of history: the lavish interior of the Palazzo reale built in the eighteenth century is now the setting for international contemporary art exhibitions. A few steps away, is the fascinating and charming little piazzetta dei Mercanti, (merchants' square) nestled in a medieval setting that has not changed in centuries. An enchanted place, a place to sit quietly and forget the rest of the world in its frenetic rush just a few yards away.

Returning to Piazza Duomo, half-way down the southern arcades, is the entrance to the galleria Vittorio Emanuele Secondo, where the atmosphere of the " belle époque" still reigns supreme, in a triumph of friezes, sphinxes and caryatids . This elegant arcade, which is still considered the "front parlour" of the city, has played host to the rich and famous, including a young Hemingway who would sit here with his cocktail in the midst of bustling waiters, as he described in his book "Farewell to Arms".

La Galleria leads through to Piazza della Scala, facing the Renaissance building, Palazzo Marino, which hides a magnificent internal court yard, and the world-famous 18th century opera house, the teatro alla Scala, the temple to lyrical opera. The world's most famous singers and actors, musicians and dancers have all performed here; from Rossini to Verdi, from Fracchi to Nurajev, from Callas to Pavarotti, from Toscanini to Muti, and this is also the scene for the stars of the future who come to La Scala to consecrate their career.

The fourteen rooms of the Theatre museum alongside contain busts, prints, portraits, keepsakes, autographs, jewellery, theatre costumes, complete backdrops and scenery, to recall the wonderful past of the theatre and its history.

In the centre of the Piazza della Scala, stands the statue of Leonardo da Vinci to remind the world that the Renaissance genius, both artist and scientist, lived and worked in Milan for many years. Some of his most famous works can be seen in Milan, in the refectory in the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, which safeguards his masterpiece "the Last Supper"; or the sala delle Assi in the splendid Sforza castle, completely decorated with his frescoes; and the fascinating science and technology museum: Museo della Scienza e della Tecnica, that houses a large exhibition area dedicated to his work; in the Ambrosian Library : the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, where his precious codex are kept; or the canals of Milan, called the Navigli, which Leonardo designed for the Duke, Ludovico il Moro.

These, as well as many other places just as rich in history and art are all within a short distance, in the very heart of the city, and for those who wish to discover and love Milan, they deserve to be seen.