

A weekend in . . . Milan, Italy



The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II Corbis

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I'm doing a little twirl in Milan's magnificent shopping arcade, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, trying not to look like a complete idiot. Tradition has it that spinning round three times with your heel on the testicles of the dancing bull on the mosaic floor will bring good luck. Yes, it's cheesy, it takes cojones, but who could resist? I'm not the only one who wants to have a go: a crowd of Japanese tourists is queuing up behind me.

The bull marks the spot where the galleria's unfortunate architect Giuseppe Mengoni plunged from the scaffolding to his death in 1877, just weeks before the opening of his grandiose iron and glass temple of consumerism. It connects the city's most famous landmarks, the enormous Gothic cathedral and La Scala opera house, and is gleaming and gorgeous again as it nears the end of a makeover jointly funded by Prada and Versace – one of many Milanese buildings spruced up in time for the big reveal on May 1, when the normally austere Italian capital of chic will go Expo crazy.

Expo 2015, whose theme is “Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”, will open 10 miles away on a giant exhibition site built along the lines of an ancient Roman town. It promises lessons on sustainability, zany architecture (the centerpiece of the British pavilion is a 17m high filigree aluminium sphere that will throb like a beehive) and foodie treats from around the world.

When the 20 million or so visitors have had their fill of lobster rolls and Korean tacos, seen Bolivia’s tribute to quinoa and marvelled at a Thai floating market, there will be a raft of events to entice them back into the rejuvenated city centre — not least the largest Leonardo Da Vinci exhibition ever staged in Italy (at the Palazzo Reale) and guided tours of La Scala.

But will they fall in love with Milan? This is not a place that gives up its secrets easily, according to **my guide Alice Salvagnin**: “It’s not like Rome or Florence. It’s discreet and its charms are hidden – there’s very little that’s on show.”

To illustrate the point we head for the Piazza dei Mercanti, just behind the crowded Piazza del Duomo but hidden by steps and surrounded by shops. The site of the medieval stock exchange and seat of government (where bankrupts were forced to bare their behinds as a sign of penance), it’s lined with exquisite 14th-century palaces — and almost deserted. We stand in the open arcade under the Palazzo della Ragione, where **Alice demonstrates its little piece of magic**. She stands in one corner with her back to me and mutters; although I’m standing diagonally opposite I can hear every word. The loggia wall was constructed so that merchants could communicate in whispers.

We find more hidden gems in churches tucked away a few streets from the cathedral — including San Bernardino alle Ossa, where I’m unnerved to find a side chapel decorated entirely with human skulls and bones, and Santa Maria presso San Satiro with its astonishing trompe l’oeil altar by Bramante.

Milan’s love of the discreet is nowhere more obvious than in its secret gardens and courtyards, and so **for lunch we head to trendy Porta Nuova**, slip through an inconspicuous entrance and grab a table in one of the most glamorous — the fairy-light draped courtyard garden at 10 Corso Como where the food takes a back seat to the people-watching. Ex *Vogue* editor Carla Sozzoni’s emporium also houses a B&B, gallery, roof terrace and a surprisingly unsnooty concept store stuffed with designer merchandise; I could easily have whiled away the rest of the afternoon here.

There are more courtyards to peer into when **we head south to the Navigli**, what’s left of the network of canals that once stretched across the city. They were mostly filled in to make way for roads on the orders of Mussolini and now there are just two, the Naviglio Grande (once used to bring the marble for the cathedral into the city) and the Naviglio Pavese.

The Grande is lined with old houses, workshops, galleries, bars and restaurants. While it’s not Venice it’s much more boho than the city centre and the ideal spot for an early evening aperitivo — a Milanese ritual that includes a happy hour buffet of cold pasta, pizzas, bruschetta and the like for the (slightly inflated) price of a drink. But I resist a pig-out as I’ve booked a table at the prettiest place on the canal: El Brellin (www.brellin.com). Set in an 18th-century laundry, its

candlelit garden is perfect for a delicious supper of pappardelle with sausage and wild fennel, followed by tuna with artichoke cream and broccoli flowers. When I get back to my hotel I discover that the concierge has bagged me a ticket to see Leonardo da Vinci's luminously restored *Last Supper* in Santa Maria delle Grazie the next morning. That twirling paid off.

Need to know

The luxury hotel

Sleek and discreet, the Carlton Hotel Baglioni (baglionihotels.com) oozes elegance. Traditionally decorated rooms are sized to suit the smaller fashionista but beds are deeply comfortable, reception staff are delightful and breakfast is delicious; the separate Il Baretto restaurant is a haven of old school Italian cooking and its dark, clubby, wood-panelled interior is straight out of St James's. The hotel is ideally located for sightseeing and shopping — bang in the middle of the Quadrilatero d'Oro fashion district with a secret entrance on to the pedestrianised Via della Spiga, the loveliest street in the area.

The budget B&B

Get into the Expo vibe by staying at the Eco-hotel La Residenza (ecohotelresidenzamilano.it). A short stroll from Affori Centro Metro station and in a quiet and safe neighbourhood, it has its own garden and bio-restaurant specialising in risottos. Singles start at £43, doubles at £72 B&B.

Where to eat:

For a quirky night out, book a table on a vintage tram and take in the sights while you tuck into a four-course dinner plus coffee. There are three £50 set menus that must be chosen in advance and the tram leaves Piazza Castello every evening at 8pm (atmosfera.atm.it)

Julia Brookes was a guest of Classic Collection Holidays (0800 2949323 FREE, classic-collection.co.uk). Three nights' B&B at Carlton Hotel Baglioni starts at £722pp, with flights and private transfers.

[Book a walking tour with Alice Savalgnin through Milan Private Tours \(00 39 338 70 90 880, milanprivatetours.com\).](http://milanprivatetours.com)

Buy Expo tickets from expo2015.org. Adult entry is £23 per day.