

Italy has many tempting destinations for the British gay man, but none bring together the men, fashion and culture better than Milan.

Xav Judd reports...

escape milanese-style!

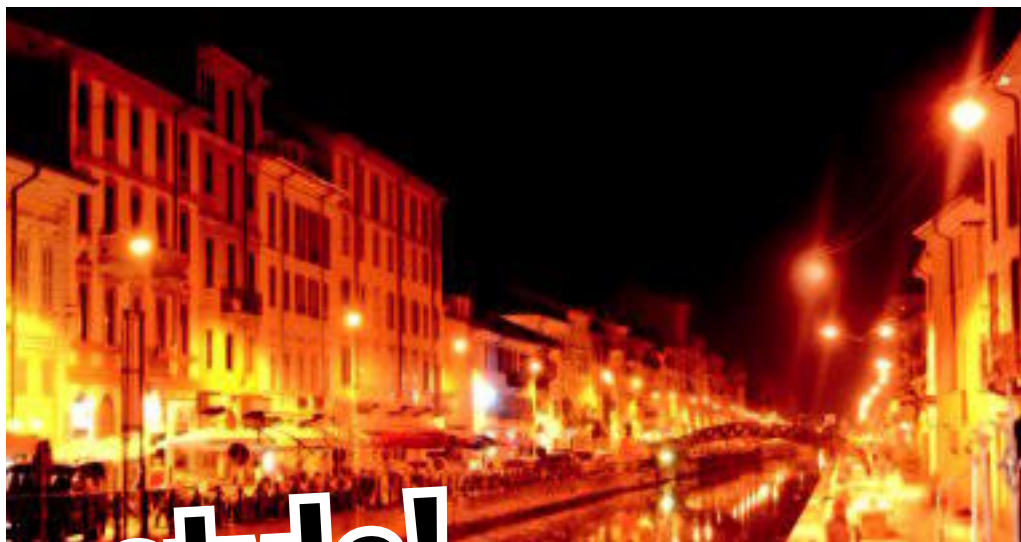
I couldn't have picked a better time to visit Milan than just a week after Italy had won the World Cup. The quaint streets were still awash with red, white and green tricolours, and a sense of joie de vivre, good will and unity was still palpable.

Originally, Italy had been a mélange of separate states, until the endeavours of Cavour, Garibaldi and Mazzini forged them into a single nation in the nineteenth century. However, despite their valiant efforts, in many ways Italy is still like two separate countries. The south is characterised by the sun-drenched shores of Sicily, the sublime crumbling architectural edifice that is Rome, and the homophobic Vatican, which unfortunately is just as archaic. Indeed, prejudicial Catholicism and the widespread influence of this institution are two of the reasons why Italy lags behind most other European countries when it comes to gay rights: only a few Italian regions recognise same-sex unions (*coppie di fatto*). Fortunately, the north of Italy is very different from the south and is much more forward thinking and liberal. Its undoubted centrepiece Milan, which is an unrivalled hub of fashion, culture and industry, even has Italy's only official gay designated area – the street of via Sarmartini. However, although this road was a well-intentioned idea, sadly it's now a bit rundown and the only venue perhaps worth visiting is the gay bar-cum-club **Afterline** (via Sarmartini 25). It's lucky, then, that just a 5 minute Metro journey away is the sublime bar-cum-eatery **Lelephante** (via Melzo 22). With its funky minimalist interiors and retro eighties pop music, it attracts a hip young crowd that spills out onto the pavements every moon-lit evening. But usually not before they've had an Apertivo – a Milanese tradition of having a cocktail at happy hour for a set bargain price (€5 in Lelephante) allowing you to partake in appealing 'eat as much as you like' buffets.

Closer to the centre of town and set on two floors is the predominantly gay **G Lounge** (via Larga 8). It's a bohemian hang-out where

models and fashionistas dance to house and lounge music, in hazy neon tinctures of red, blue and grey. Just as popular is **Gasoline** (via Bonnet 11; www.discogasoline.it): a basement club with a cool vibe and a devoted crowd, who revel in its indie night, Popstarz, on Thursdays. Alternatively, if you're looking for something slightly different, then why not experience the cordial atmosphere of **Nuova Idea International** (via De Castilia 30; Tel: +39 02 6900 7859; www.lanuovaidea.com), where one of the two dance floors is dedicated to polkas and waltzes!

If you want a slight change of pace, as one of the five fashion citadels of the world, Milan has an undeniable reputation when it comes to shopping. All of the usual über labels – Armani, Dolce and Gabbana, Louis Vuitton, Prada and Versace – are here, concentrated mainly around Milan's answer to Bond Street, **via Monte Napoleone**. Of course, being dressed to kill doesn't matter if you're not staying in the most appropriate accommodation. One possibility is **Best Western Galles** (Piazza Lima 2; Tel: +39 02 204 841; www.hotel-galles.it). Contemporary and elegant, with hospitable staff, it's conveniently located in the middle of the bustling shopping street corso Buenos Aires. Although Rome is considered to be the cradle of Italian civilisation, Milan is not without its cultural gems. The **Basilica di San Lorenzo Maggiore** (corso di Porta Ticinese 39; Tel: +39 02 8940 4129) is a magnificent example of Roman and early Christian architecture, which stands behind sixteen 3rd century Corinthian columns that look like gigantic candles when they are lit up at night. And while you're in the vicinity, don't miss a chance to visit perhaps the world's most famous opera house, **La Scala** (Piazza della Scala; Tel: +39 02 887 91; www.teatroallascala.org). Despite the fact that it looks rather mundane from the outside, sitting in its sumptuous red and gold interiors, listening to Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, you'll literally feel like floating in the clouds.



To glimpse the raunchier side of this municipality, try **Flexo** (via Oropa 3; Tel: +39 02 2682 6709; www.flexoclub.it), with its three levels that include a cocktail bar, darkroom and leather area. While at **Cruising Canyon** (via G. Paisiello; Tel: +39 02 2040 4201; www.cruisingcanyon.com) you can explore each other's pot holes, cracks and crevices in darkened areas and cabins, until your heart's content. But if you're still not satisfied, then you can follow your other vital organ and mooch down to **Metro Cimiano Sauna** (via Oropa 3; Tel: +39 02 2851 0528), where I'm sure you'll find someone who'll have you scream 'Viva l'Italia!'



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