Milan v Rome: which city is better?

Both serve up world-beating pasta, fabulous historical sights and elegant hotels. Our Italy expert picks her winner

The Naviglio Grande in Milan; La Primavera by Filippo Gnaccarini in the Piazza del Popolo in Rome

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Mia Aimaro Ogden | Monday June 02 2025, 5.00am, The Times

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If you're looking for a city that's hot right now, Milan is the obvious choice. The Lombard capital works hard by day and parties even harder by night. It's cultured, elegant and exclusive — which is probably why it has taken a while to shake off its reputation for seriousness. I've been coming here since I was a child — to see family, fashion and art — and I've witnessed its evolution first-hand, from a closed metropolitan hub to a vibrant design centre that really opened up to visitors when it hosted Expo 2015. It gets better with every trip.

While aficionados still dress up in their finery for first nights at the historic opera house, La Scala, and bag the front row at Milan Fashion Week, this is also the city that dared to erect Maurizio Cattelan's 11m sculpture of a middle finger pointing skywards in front of the Italian stock exchange.

In contrast, Rome's eternal charms could take a lifetime to explore. It's often holidaymakers' first choice for an Italian city break — and it's hard to overstate its wonders. With more than 35 million visitors annually — putting it at No 2 in the European league table — it combines its extraordinary weight of history with all the dynamism of a modern capital. The fact that the Catholic church is celebrating a jubilee year in 2025 means the city has undergone an unprecedented restoration effort, with monuments, churches and fountains — including the Trevi — getting a glow-up.

Rome is constantly evolving, which is just one of the reasons I love it. A wave of recent five-star hotel openings — including the Bulgari, Six Senses and Edition — plus innovative restaurants and art galleries popping up next to old-school religious guesthouses and 100-year-old *trattorie* proves just how vibrant the energy is in this ancient capital.

So given the choice, which of these glorious cities would you pick for a weekend break? Which has better food, activities, hotels, and culture? Here's our verdict.

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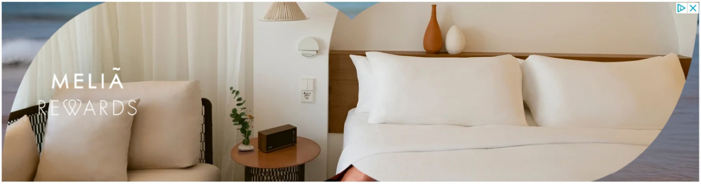

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Things to do

The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan
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Winner It's a tie

Milan has a vibrant social life, which means this powerhouse northern city now gladly opens its doors — and its hearts — to visitors all year round. Milan Fashion Week in February and September and the Salone del Mobile furniture fair in April creates a buzz that is all about the new.

This activity is sustained by a community that champions contemporary art and design (you will find open studios from Brera to Isola) and an aperitivo culture that has seen the former canal district, Navigli, transformed from a shabby backwater into the liveliest hangout in town. The towpaths are packed with cool cafés, bars and hotels, while verdant courtyards are home to artisan markets and chic boutiques.

For the ultimate high-fashion experience, the Golden Triangle, or Quadrilatero d'Oro, taking in Via Monte Napoleone, Via della Spiga and Via Sant'Andrea, is where you will find Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, Valentino, Pucci, Gucci and the rest. Pop into Il Cigno Nero (one of my favourite bars) for an espresso at the elegant counter — be sure to dress accordingly. Then take yourself and your finery to La Scala for an evening opera performance.

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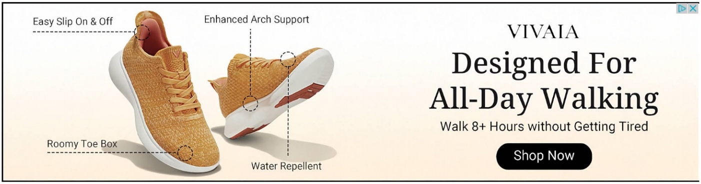

Café life in the Trastevere district of Rome

ALAMY

Rome is the city that never sleeps. There is a bar on every corner - the best of which are in the *centro storico*, from Cul De Sac, an *enoteca* close to Piazza Navona with more than 1,500 wines on offer, to Cielo, a panoramic rooftop hangout at the top of the Hotel de la Ville, with views of the Spanish Steps. The cool Monti area is the epicentre of Rome's younger cocktail-bar scene, while the city also offers jazz venues, late-night clubs and hip cabarets across Ostiense, Testaccio, San Lorenzo and charming Trastevere. For classical and ballet, the Teatro dell'Opera is first-class.

By day, design shoppers head for Via Condotti, where alongside the big fashion brands you will find art galleries, antiques shops and chic home stores. For vintage, it's back to Monti, and for a dreamy mix of jewellery, handmade clothing, rare books and second-hand, head for cobbled Via del Governo Vecchio — one of the loveliest streets in Rome.

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Tui Italia has a four-day guided Discovering Milan tour that takes in the city's cultural highlights.

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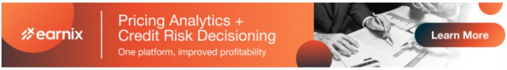

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Food and drink

Dining at Seta in Milan

GEORGE APOSTOLIDIS

Winner Milan

“Italian” food does not exist as a simple concept. This country, still relatively young, consists of 20 distinct regions — and the identity of its food and wine, despite common themes, varies wildly. Milan has its traditional favourites — costoletta (breaded veal), ossobuco (braised veal shanks) and risotto (with costly saffron). Yet this focus on the richly complex classics does not detract from the fact that Milan has a wildly exciting and constantly changing culinary scene, keeping the cosmopolitan crowd on its toes.

From two Michelin-starred Seta, with the brilliant Antonio Guida at the helm, via Langosteria in Navigli — the best place for fish and seafood — to the leafy courtyard at Identita Golose, where acclaimed chefs from all over Italy recreate their most famous dishes, Milan has the high end covered.

Neighbourhood favourites, meanwhile, include Pasticceria Cucchi, one of the last grand cafés in Milan to bake on the premises; Bice, a traditional trattoria in the fashion district; and seven-table La Latteria, a 70-year-old institution that closed in 2024 before reopening in 2025 under the new ownership of fashion brand Loro Piana.

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Osteria La Segreta in Rome

FRANCESCO DOLFO

Roman food culture, meanwhile, is firmly anchored in the tradition of *cucina povera* — cooking that transforms humble ingredients into works of gastronomic art. Pasta alla carbonara, trippa alla Romana (tripe in tomato sauce) and carciofi alla giudia (deep-fried artichokes) are stalwarts.

The restaurant list has its big-hitters — Imago at the Hassler, Heinz Beck's La Pergola at the Rome Cavalieri — but what Rome does best is modest, forward-looking food in convivial surroundings: the delicious Mazzo in San Lorenzo, Roscioli's deli/restaurant near Campo de' Fiori, and Osteria La Segreta on gorgeous Via Margutta, with a twist on the flavours of Campania.

- **Best restaurants in Rome**

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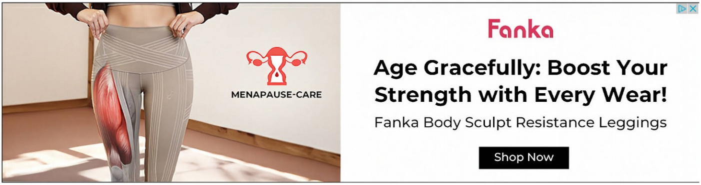

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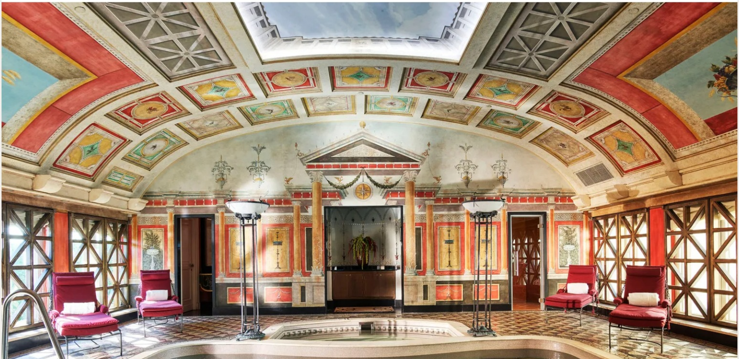
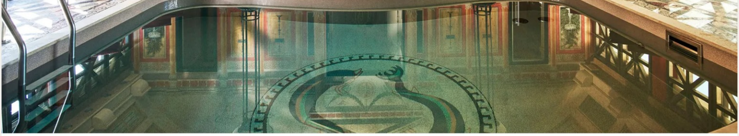
Hotels





The private pool of the Presidential Suite at Principe di Savoia in Milan

Winner Rome

As the capital of Italian fashion and high finance, Milan has a long history of elegant outposts to satisfy its VIP visitors: Mandarin Oriental, Bulgari, Armani, the Principe di Savoia and the revamped Four Seasons have long been top of my personal list.

Dig deeper, however, and you will discover that some of Milan's loveliest B&Bs and boutique hotels are much more affordable: gated palazzi within reach of the Duomo (Antica Locanda dei Mercanti), hubs that double up as spaces to stay and co-work (21 House of Stories), converted fashion studios (Vico Milano) and former family homes (LaFavia) that hum with energy.

- **Best hotels in Milan**
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The view from the roof of Six Senses Rome

JOHN ATHIMARITIS

After decades of relative stasis, in which old-school *grandes dames* including the Eden and the Hassler were frequently outdone in style and substance by small-scale boutique outfits such as the cool PiazzadiSpagna9, Rome is experiencing a boom in its high-end hotel market. The arrival of the W in a conceptual whirl in 2021, followed by the marble-clad Six Senses, playful Edition and opulently restrained Bulgari, provided luxury travellers with some pleasantly tricky choices.

At the other end of the scale, boutique options such as the neat Hotel Monte Cenci and hip hangout the Hoxton ensure style and service at rates that won't make your eyes water.

- Best hotels in Rome
- Best affordable hotels in Rome

Make it happen

Close to Carla Sozzani's 10 Corso Como, B&B LaFavia has four beautifully designed rooms and a terrace with jasmine and banana trees.

lafaviamilano.com

Part of the Ferragamo fashion empire, Portrait Roma is an elegant townhouse off Via Condotti, decorated with photos of the family's starry past.

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Historical sights

Castello Sforzesco in Milan

ALAMY

Winner Rome

It's a tough call when you are up against one of the most historically important — and marvellously storied — cities in the western hemisphere. But Milan punches well above its weight and nothing will bowl you over quite like the Duomo, the wedding-cake cathedral heavy with pink Candoglia marble that is one of the largest in the world. Begun in 1386, it took almost six centuries to complete. The 15th-century Castello Sforzesco is home to museums of archaeology, art and sculpture, surrounded by the manicured green spaces of the Parco Sempione.

The Pinacoteca di Brera is a treasure trove of classical Italian art — highlights include Caravaggio, Raphael and Piero della Francesca — while La Scala, in a riot of gilding and red velvet, delights in stories of high-jinks in the boxes and the tantrums of divas past. Perhaps the nation's most famous work of art still resides in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie:Leonardo da Vinci's heartbreaking *The Last Supper*, depicting the moment when Christ reveals to his 12 disciples that one of them will betray him.

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The Pantheon in Rome

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Your first visit to Rome will blow your mind. I guarantee it. This repository of 3,000 years of art and culture is home to many of the greatest masterpieces in the world, and its beauty is unparalleled. The Forum is the heart of the ancient city: it hosted the seat of government, the law courts, the temples — and the shops. The pretty Palatine Hill is where, according to myth, Romulus founded Rome, and where the emperors built their palaces.

The Colosseum is half-circus, half-sports arena, and gives a fabulous glimpse of the city's vicious underbelly. The Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel house centuries of papal commissions by the greatest European painters — the Raphael Rooms and the Gallery of

Maps are particular highlights. Throw a coin into the Fontana di Trevi to ensure your return to Rome; next time take in Hadrian's Pantheon and its spectacular concrete dome; the Capitoline, widely considered the world's oldest public museum; and the spectacular art in the Villa Borghese.

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Overall winner

The Forum

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Rome

For me, it's Rome — by a squeak. Where else can you find the history of the Western world in microcosm? I left it way too long to come here — and I've been making up for lost time ever since. But that doesn't mean that, when asked where I might one day settle in Italy, my first thought isn't Milan, that elegant northern powerhouse that richly rewards the visitors who work hard to seek out its treasures.

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Rome by a 'squeak'? I would say Rome by a mile. Take away the cathedral and versus many other Italian city gems, Milan is a bit of a disappointment.

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2 HOURS AGO

The photo of the Pantheon seems to have been taken during the pandemic. Otherwise, the place is crowded with thousands of tourists. There was a window during the summer, during the pandemic, when Rome was fabulous. There were few tourists, and all the monuments could be visited and enjoyed. The Colo...

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