

TURIN



Italy's Forgotten First Capital



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WHERE
TO GO



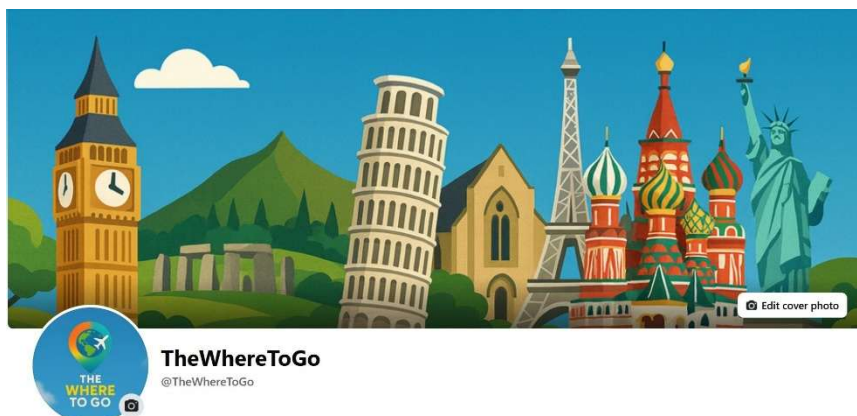
The inside cover for your information.....



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Turin - Italy's Forgotten First Capital

Introduction

It is near the end of March and I am 79 tier miles away from renewing my silver status.....with BA which explains why I am taking this quick break in Turin in the hope that the accrued tier miles will do it...although I still haven't got a clue about how BA award their tier miles (not avios) so I am keeping my fingers crossed that I will reach the magic 7500 on this trip.

Turin is a city of deceptive grace with its formal arcades and baroque piazzas belying a turbulent history as the engine room of Italian unification and, later, industrial might. As the first capital of a unified Italy, Turin offers Roman gates and Fiat factories as well as the much-discussed Turin shroud (more on that later) lying a short distance away from repurposed palaces with multiple names.

Turin was originally founded as the Roman settlement of *Augusta Taurinorum* in the 1st century BC. It grew into a powerful political centre during the Middle Ages. Its greatest transformation came under the House of Savoy, the royal dynasty that made Turin their capital in the 16th century. Grand boulevards, elegant piazzas and baroque palaces soon followed, giving the city much of the refined character it retains today.

In 1861, Turin briefly became the first capital of a unified Italy before the role passed to Florence and later to Rome. During the 20th century, it emerged as Italy's industrial powerhouse, largely through the influence of FIAT, attracting workers from across the country and helping shape modern Italy. Today, Turin combines aristocratic elegance with creative energy.

Visitors are drawn to landmarks such as the iconic Mole Antonelliana, the former royal residences of the Savoy family, and the atmospheric arcaded streets lined with cafés and chocolate shops. What makes Turin especially worth visiting is its balance. It offers the grandeur of Italy's great historic cities without the overwhelming crowds of Rome, Venice or Florence.



Turin is rightly proud of its history and culture. English is spoken widely but place names are invariably offered in Italian, and many places are known by multiple names. For the purpose of this guide, I have offered the place names in Italian and tried to offer the best possible translation or else the English name that is most commonly used. I hope that helps.

- ***Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata (Church of the Most Holy Annunciation)***
- ***Mole Antonelliana (Antonelli Tower)***
- ***Piazza Castello (Castle Square)***
- ***Palazzo Madama (Madama Palace)***
- ***Palazzo Reale di Torino (Royal Palace of Turin)***
- ***Cattedrale di San Giovanni Battista (Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist)***
- ***Porta Palatina (Palatine Gate)***
- ***Santuario della Consolata (Sanctuary of Our Lady of Consolation)***
- ***Mastio della Cittadella (Keep of the Citadel)***
- ***Palazzo Carignano (Carignano Palace)***
- ***Museo Egizio (Egyptian Museum)***
- ***Piazza San Carlo (Saint Charles Square)***
- ***Arco Monumentale all'Artigliere (Monumental Arch to the Artilleryman)***
- ***Parco del Valentino (Valentino Park)***
- ***Castello del Valentino (Valentino Castle)***
- ***Centro Storico Fiat (Fiat Historic Centre)***
- ***Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile (National Automobile Museum)***
- ***Lingotto (Lingotto District / Former Fiat Factory Complex)***

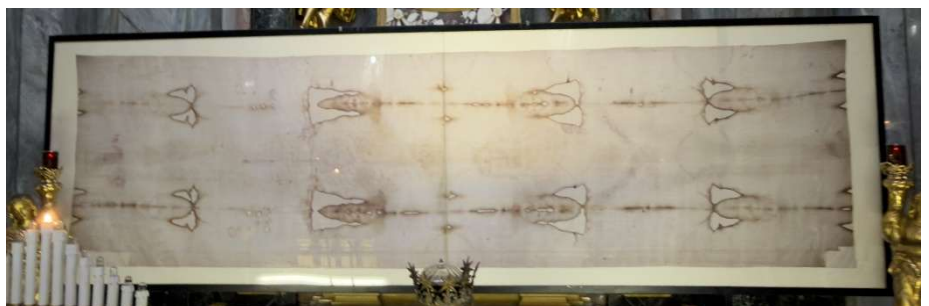
The order of the places described is offered as a suggestion of an order which you might use to minimise the distance travelled. I hope that helps and allows you to see as much of this beautiful city as time will allow.

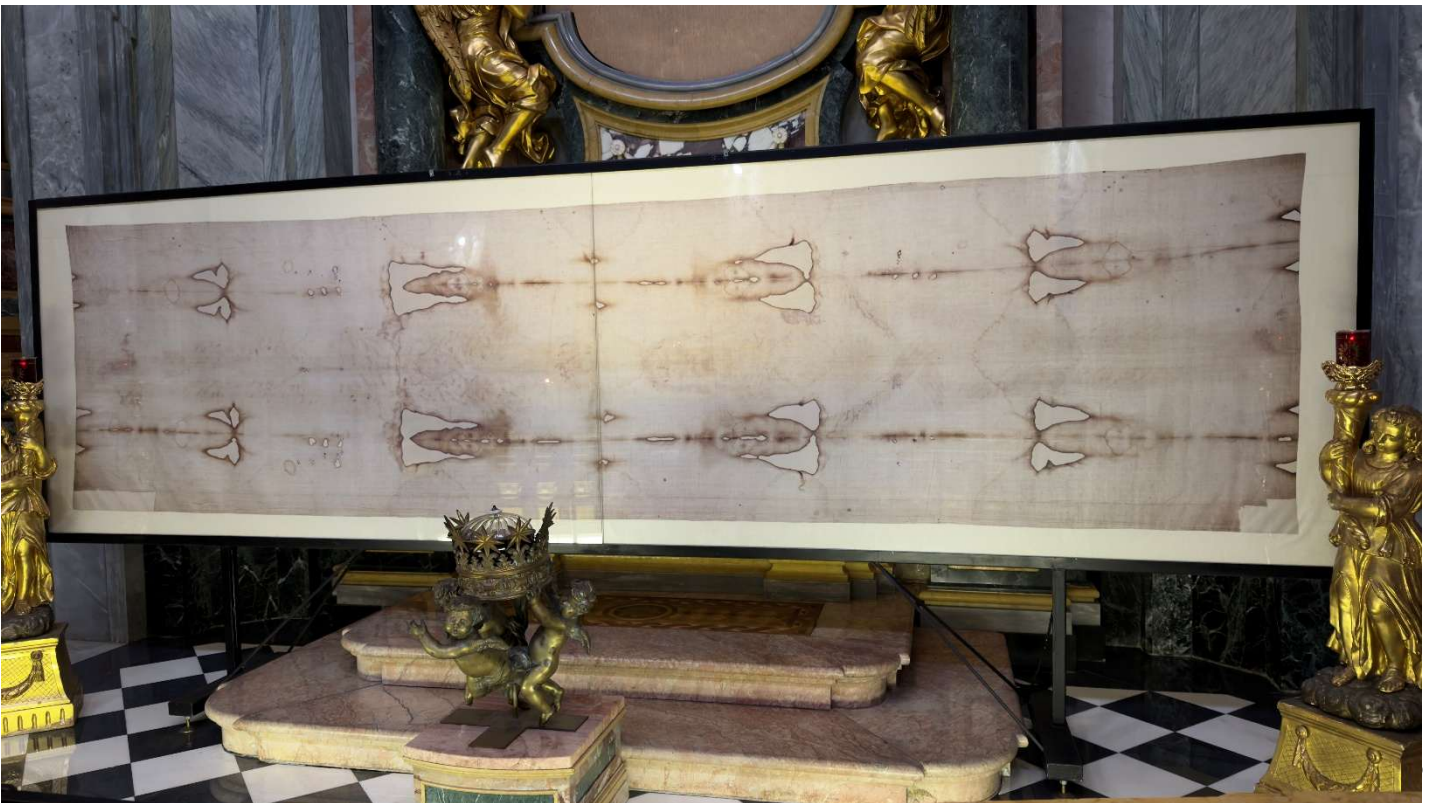
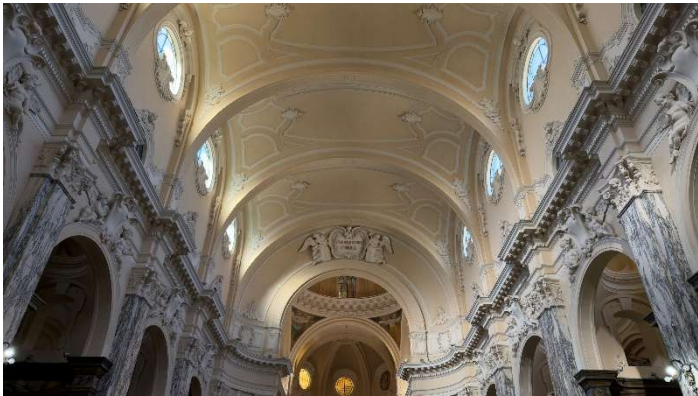
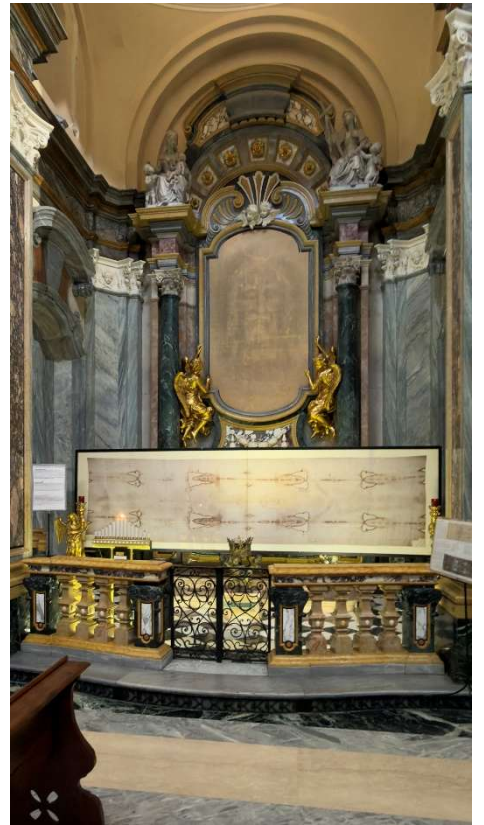
Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata (Church of the Most Holy Annunciation)



The Chiesa della Santissima Annunziata was completed in 1658 for the Theatine order although its façade was a much later (19th-century) addition by Giuseppe Pollak. The church is a relatively understated Baroque church, which is often missed despite its central location. The church reflects Turin's transformation under the House of Savoy when the city was being reshaped into a European capital.

This is a functioning parish church rather than a monument. It sits in an area tied to the city's political and religious administration, reinforcing how closely church and state were linked. Inside the church, you will find a full-size replica of the Holy Shroud which is probably as close as you will get to the real thing which is stored elsewhere in a climate-controlled and bulletproof box with viewings only on special occasions.





Mole Antonelliana (Antonelli Tower)



The name Mole Antonelliana derives from two Italian words..... Mole, meaning a building of monumental proportions or enormous size, and Antonelliana, which refers to the name of its architect, Alessandro Antonelli. The project was started in 1863 and originally intended as a synagogue for Turin's Jewish community, but due to escalating costs the project was taken over by the city in 1876.

The building was finally completed in 1889 as a monument to Italian unification. Its original height was intended to be 154 feet (47 metres), but this was pushed to 550 feet (167 metres) making it the tallest brick-built building in Europe at the time which was a point of considerable civic pride even though it had nearly bankrupted the Jewish community.

Nowadays, the Mole Antonelliana houses the Museo Nazionale del Cinema (National Museum of Cinema) and offers panoramic views from the viewing platform which is reached by a glass lift which can be seen disappearing into the void above. The ride in the glass lift (installed by a British company) and the view from the top is not to be missed and offers an excellent introduction to the city of Turin.

The Museo Nazionale del Cinema is one of the most immersive film museums in Europe. Rather than a static display, it uses projections and themed spaces to walk you through the history of cinema.....from early optical illusions to modern blockbusters. Italy played a leading role in early film production, and Turin was one of its first centres, which probably explains why the museum is here.



Piazza Castello (Castle Square)

The Piazza Castello is the political and historical centre of Turin and has been the city's main square since medieval times. The layout reflects Turin's transformation under the Savoy dynasty, particularly in the 17th century when the city was redesigned with grand Baroque streets and arcades. The square is surrounded by major landmarks, including palaces, theatres and government buildings, showing the power once held here.



The piazza sits directly above the site of the eastern gate of the Roman city of Augusta Taurinorum which was founded around 28BC and was the original name for Turin. At its centre stands the imposing Palazzo Madama, a unique structure that combines Roman foundations, medieval towers and an elegant Baroque façade.



Palazzo Madama (Madama Palace)



The Palazzo Madama sits on the Piazza Castello and tells Turin's history in one building. It started as a Roman gate, became a medieval fortress, and was later transformed into a Baroque palace with an elegant façade by Filippo Juvarra. That layering is still visible and, from the back of the building, you can clearly see the different buildings representing its architectural history.

The white stone façade, which was added in 1718 when the building was repurposed as a home for two powerful royal women including Madame Reale from which the building's name is derived. The building also served as Italy's first Senate after unification and the (very) grand staircase was said to have inspired British neoclassical architects who visited Turin as an essential stop on their architectural pilgrimage.





Palazzo Reale di Torino (Royal Palace of Turin)

The Palazzo Reale di Torino which is just as well known as the Royal Palace is the official residence of the House of Savoy. The palace was built in the 16th century and expanded over three centuries befitting the importance of Turin when it was the capital of the Duchy and albeit briefly, the Kingdom (of Italy). The palace includes royal apartments, an armoury, and the Chapel of the Holy Shroud.



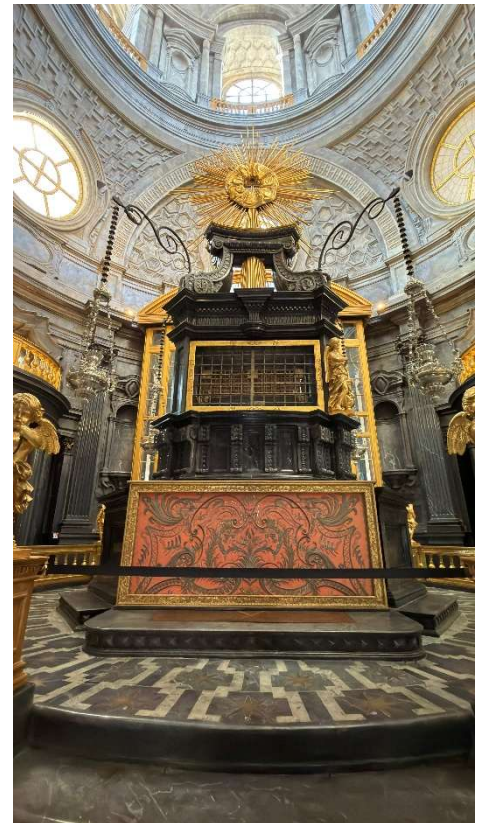
The military-like facade looks somewhat bland and understated but that is more than made up for by the interior which is grossly over the top and clearly designed to inspire awe and celebrate the dynasty. Buckingham Palace might look more ornate externally, but this palace wins easily when it comes to gold walls, crystal chandeliers, frescoed ceilings and stunning architecture....and the entry fee is a whole lot cheaper too.



The admission charge includes the art museum and an archaeological museum. The latter is focused on the past with artefacts from Augusta Taurinorum, the Roman settlement that became Turin. Additionally, you can visit the Cappella della Sacra Sindone, better known as the Holy Shroud Chapel, which was designed to be the final resting place for the Shroud of Turin. The chapel was restored following a devastating fire in 1997 but the (slightly singed) Holy Shroud was moved.



Cappella della Sacra Sindone, better known as the Holy Shroud Chapel



Cattedrale di San Giovanni Battista (Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist)

Tourists (and tour guides) are often confused by the fact that many local attractions are often known by two (or more) different names. The Cattedrale di San Giovanni Battista (named after the city's patron saint) is also commonly known and identified as the Duomo di Torino. The cathedral was commissioned in 1491 by Cardinal Domenico della Rovere and was consecrated in 1505. It is the only Renaissance church in the city.

Not surprisingly the cathedral is best known as the home of the Turin Shroud, which is one of the most debated religious artefacts in the world. The cathedral itself is relatively restrained and a rather unlikely resting place for the Turin Shroud unlike the adjoining Cappella della Sacra Sindone (also known as the Guarini Chapel after the architect Guarino Guarini).

Unfortunately, if you want to see the shroud then you are out of luck because it is preserved in a climate-controlled case in a chapel behind the main altar. The shroud is not on public display, except during special 'ostensions' authorised by the Pope, but you are very welcome to come along and have a look at the climate-controlled box which contains the shroud which is positioned behind a large glass screen in the far corner of the cathedral.



Porta Palatina (Palatine Gate)

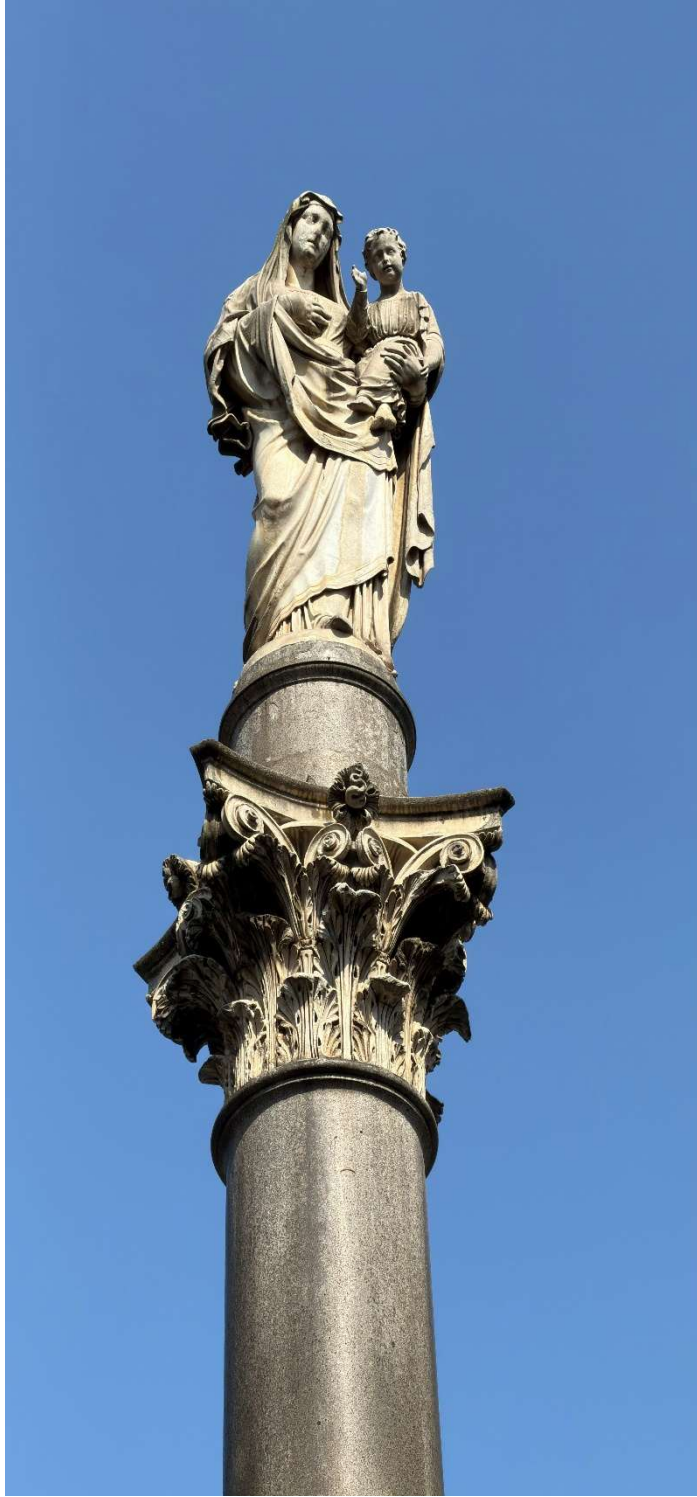
If the architectural museum (also known as the Museo di Antichità di Torino) in the Palazzo Reale di Torino (better known as the Royal Palace) has whet your appetite on the city's Roman history, then Porta Palatina is a short walk away from the cathedral and can be seen from the cathedral's stairs. The Porta Palatina is one of the most complete Roman city gates still standing anywhere in the world.

The gate, which dates back to the 1st century BC, formed part of Augusta Taurinorum's defensive walls. The gate managed to stand intact until the early 1700s when King Vittorio Amedeo II's urban renewal plan called for it to be torn down. It was saved thanks to the royal military engineer, Antonio Bertola, who convinced the king of its historical importance.

Following its reprieve, the wall was incorporated as part of a military prison and, later a women's prison which closed in 1860. The Porta Palatina underwent significant restoration to remove the prison's architectural additions and return it to its original Roman appearance which is what you see today.



Santuario della Consolata (Sanctuary of Our Lady of Consolation)



The Santuario della Consolata is one of Turin's most important religious sites. It is dedicated to the Virgin Mary as the 'Consoler of the Afflicted' and its origins go back over a thousand years, although most of what is seen today was shaped heavily by architect Guarino Guarini.

During the 19th century the church attracted pilgrims from across Europe and remained one of Turin's most important centres of devotion. Turin was a city known for its religious tolerance in stark contrast to the more austere Protestant churches elsewhere.

The church is a pot-pourri of different architectural styles with a Romanesque crypt, a baroque sanctuary by Filippo Juvarra, and a later 19th-century neoclassical façade by Carlo Ceppi. The interior is small but packed with lots of marble and gold to feast your eyes on.



Mastio della Cittadella (Keep of the Citadel)

The Mastio della Cittadella is the remaining part of a once vast star-shaped 16th-century fortress built in 1564 to defend Turin. The citadel itself was mostly demolished during the Napoleonic period, leaving this keep as a reminder of the city's military past. The place is strongly associated with the 1706 Siege of Turin during the War of the Spanish Succession, when the city resisted French forces. Much of the original fortress lies preserved underground but the remaining building houses the Museo Storico Nazionale d'Artiglieria (National Historical Museum of Artillery) although this was closed on the day I visited.



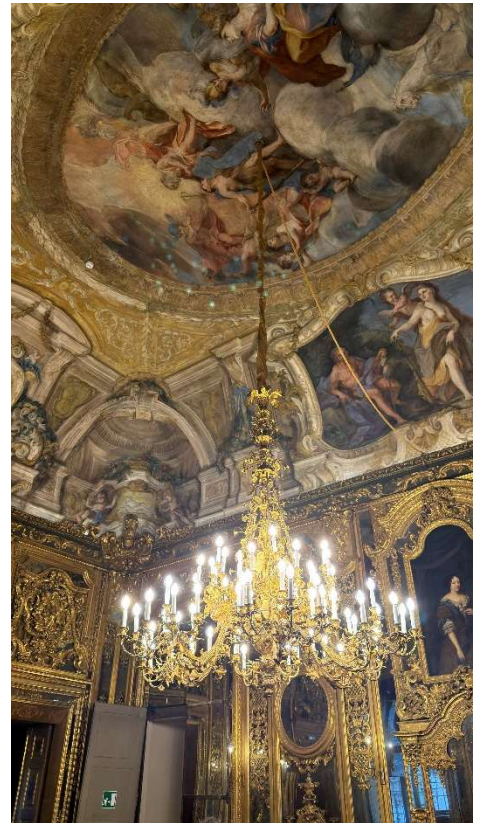
Palazzo Carignano (Carignano Palace)

The Palazzo Carignano is unusual in that it features two facades which is why so many guidebooks seem to be so confused. The Baroque frontage on the Piazza Carignano is the original 17th-century design by Guarino Guarini. This frontage consists of a dramatic, undulating brick façade and dates back to 1679. This was the birthplace of the first king of unified Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II, in 1820.

At the back (?) on the Via Accademia delle Scienze is an equally impressive Neoclassical frontage which was added in the 19th century when the building took on a new national role, and the palace became the seat of the first Italian parliament after unification. This façade is more formal, symmetrical, and restrained and includes the Museo Nazionale del Risorgimento Italiano focused on Italian unification.



In the central courtyard, you can see the join between the two buildings although the match is totally seamless. You can also visit the museum and marvel at the former ballroom which was subsequently converted into the Chamber of Deputies of the Subalpine Parliament between 1848 to 1860. If you get the opportunity, the elegantly decorated Princes' Apartments are worth a visit although my tour was conducted entirely in Italian, so I have no idea what I was looking at.... but it was spectacular!!!



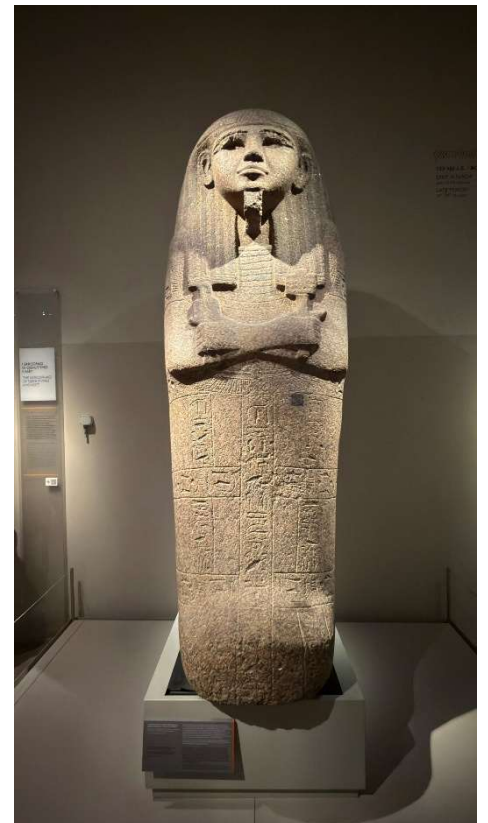


Museo Egizio (Egyptian Museum)



The Museo Egizio is widely regarded as one of the most important Egyptian museums outside Egypt. The museum was established in 1824 and is the world's oldest museum dedicated entirely to Egyptian culture.....predating even the museum in Cairo. The extensive collection of over 30 000 artefacts was acquired by King Carlo Felice from the antiquities assembled by local diplomat Bernardino Drovetti.

The collection helped scholars better understand ancient Egyptian civilisation, religion and daily life. Many of the objects were excavated during Italian archaeological expeditions in Egypt in the early twentieth century with the Italians working very closely with British Egyptologists and institutions such as the British Museum. Spread over three floors, you will find statues, papyri, mummies and entire tomb reconstructions. This is not a quick visit, but it is probably worth the admission costs.





Piazza San Carlo (Saint Charles Square)



The Piazza San Carlo, often called Turin's 'drawing room,' is one of the most elegant squares in Italy and an excellent example of Baroque urban planning.....symmetrical, elegant and controlled with the individual buildings having unified frontages while being totally different inside. This beautiful square was laid out in the 17th century by Carlo di Castellamonte and is completed with twin baroque churches called San Carlo Borromeo and Santa Cristina.



San Carlo Borromeo, begun in 1619, is the older church and is closely linked to the House of Savoy and devotion to the Holy Shroud. Santa Cristina, commissioned by Christine Marie of France in 1639, is best known for its magnificent Baroque façade designed by Filippo Juvarra. Although similar from outside, the interiors have quite different characters. Together, the two churches symbolise Turin's rich Baroque heritage and remain among the city's most photographed and admired architectural treasures.

In the centre of the square stands an equestrian statue of Duke Emmanuel Philibert by Carlo Marochetti who was also responsible for the equestrian statue of Richard the Lionheart which stands outside the Palace of Westminster.



Arco Monumentale all'Artigliere (Monumental Arch to the Artilleryman)

Standing close to the entrance to Parco del Valentino along Corso Vittorio Emanuele I, is one of those monuments which people often walk past without a second glance. It is hard to find out much about it in the guidebooks, but it was built in 1930 and honours Italy's artillerymen and the victory in the Battle of the Piave in 1918.

Architecturally, it echoes the triumphal arches of ancient Rome, but it is much smaller, strangely placed and finished in some pretty gory colours. The arch has four reliefs inspired by other military corps on the outside, while in the centre of the work there is a statue dedicated to Santa Barbara...who I understand is the patron saint of bomb disposal experts?

Parco del Valentino (Valentino Park)

Turin's premier public park lies alongside the River Po and dates back to the 17th century when it was a royal hunting ground. It was formally opened to the public in the 1850s with scenic views of the river, tree-lined avenues, winding paths, artificial grottoes, and a rustic bridge.....a radical departure from the formal French-style gardens that had previously dominated, the area. Needless to say, it quickly became a favourite place for walking, cycling and relaxing.

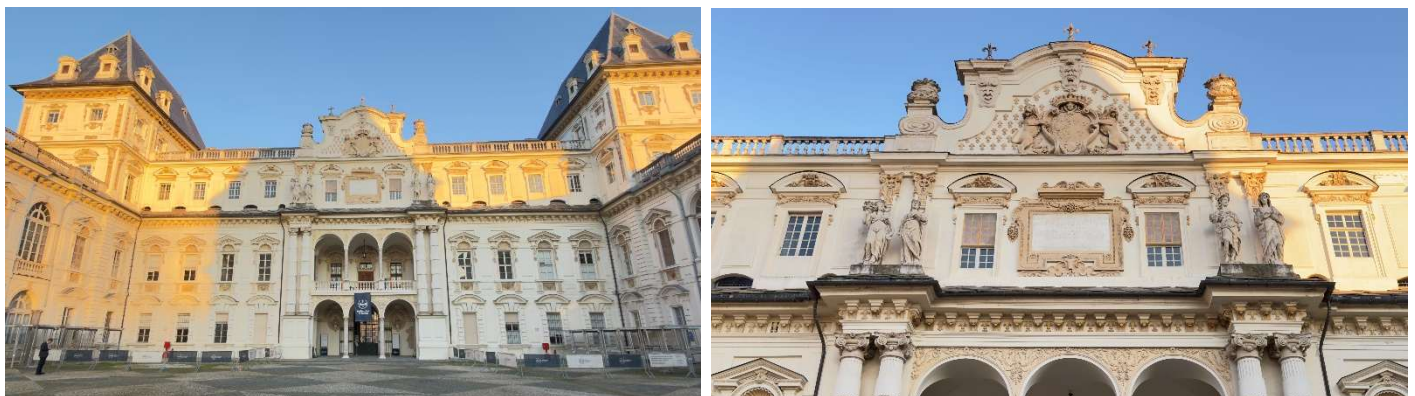
The park is also home to the Borgo Medievale or Medieval Village which is an authentic reconstruction of a 15th-century medieval village including a castle, ramparts, streets and artisans' workshops. The village was built in 1884 for an international exhibition, but was temporarily closed in January 2024 for 'extensive renovation works' so not much to see when I visitedbut you can find some pretty pictures in various guide books who still think it is open to the public so please check before you go.



Castello del Valentino (Valentino Castle)

The Castello del Valentino sits within Parco del Valentino and dates back to the 16th century, although it was later redesigned in a French-inspired style. Architecturally, its four corner towers and sloping roofs offer a distinctive French-château style. Compared to UK castles, it is less defensive and more residentialmore of a stately home than a fortress.

Today the castle has been repurposed as the Architecture Faculty of the Politecnico di Torino, but you can still access the buildings and enjoy the ambience. You might be interested to know that the grounds also include the historic botanical garden, Orto Botanico di Torino, which was originally built so that medical students might identify medicinal plantsbefore modern pharmaceuticals.





Centro Storico FIAT (FIAT Historic Centre)

My last day in Turin and I am travelling outside the city centre to an area called the Lingotto district to visit Centro Storico FIAT which translates as the FIAT Historic Centre. The building was opened in 1963 during Italy's post-war economic boom and designed by architect Vittorio Bonadè Bottino, who was deeply tied to FIAT's industrial identity as a corporate archive and documentation centre.

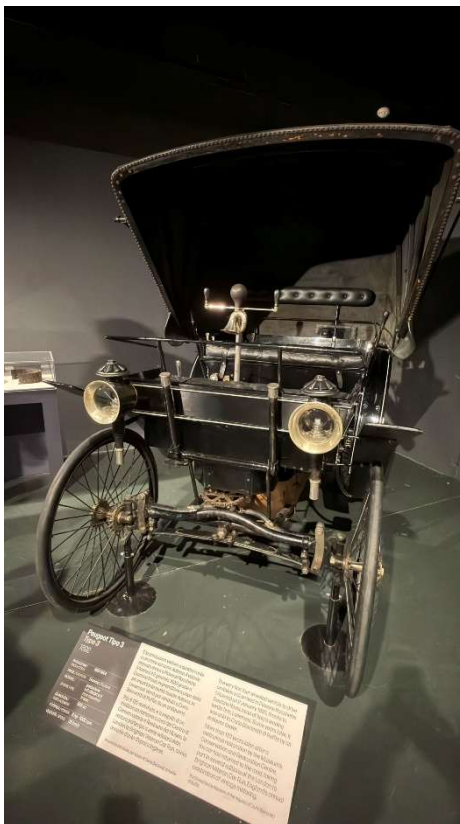
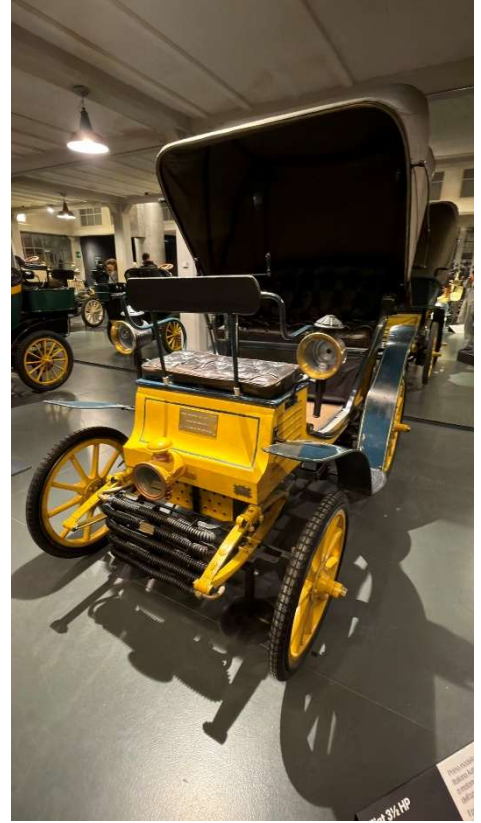
Over time it evolved into a museum with countless vintage cars (from early 1900s models to mid-century icons) as well as aircraft engines, bicycles, appliances, design drawings, advertising material and an assortment of appliances.... I had no idea that FIAT made washing machines, refrigerators, ovens and dishwashers. There is even a full-size fighter jet built by Fiat Aviazione on the first floor.



Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile (National Automobile Museum)

Not too far away from the Centro Storico Fiat is the Museo Nazionale dell'Automobile which was opened in 1933 making it one of the oldest car museums in the world. Today the museum is housed in a striking modern building by Cino Zucchi which opened in 2011 and charts the evolution of the automobile from its origins to the present date...and beyond.

Its collection includes over 200 vehicles, from 18th-century steam carriages to futuristic prototypes. While Fiat is heavily represented, the collection is international, including British cars such as the Rolls-Royce and the Jaguar. The layout is chronological, mapping the technological progression of automobiles across time as well as exhibits featuring engines, gearboxes, wheels, tyres, seats and (wooden) body panels.





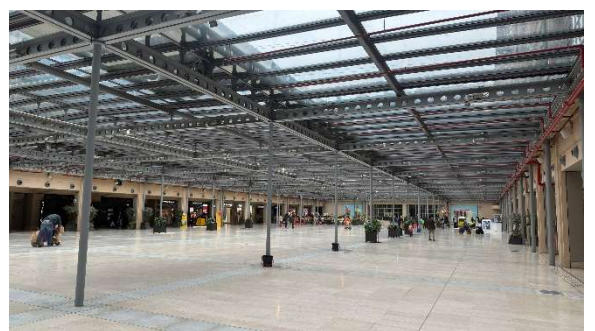
Lingotto (Lingotto)

The Lingotto Building is one of Turin's most iconic landmarks which was built between 1916 and 1923 as a flagship factory for Fiat. At the time, it was revolutionary with a vertically organised production line where raw materials entered at ground level and finished cars emerged on the roof. The rooftop test track, which is still intact today, is where newly built vehicles were driven at speed around a tight oval.

The building was designed by Giacomo Matté-Trucco and FIAT engineers, using massively reinforced concrete in a modernist style that combined form and function. Its rooftop track became a symbol of industrial ambition, capturing the imagination of engineers and the public alike. By the 1980s, however, the building had become obsolete and Lingotto was transformed into a multipurpose complex.

The complex includes a shopping mall, a hotel, exhibition spaces, a concert hall, a cinema and a convention centre, while retaining its historic character. The roof also includes an art gallery created by the Agnelli family, long associated with the leadership of Fiat, to display their private art collection including masterpieces by artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Canaletto.

The Lingotto Building offers a suitable conclusion and walking the rooftop track, you can still sense the scale and innovation of early 20th-century automotive engineering. In addition, the carefully curated art collection makes the gallery one of Turin's most distinctive cultural attractions.





Reflection

Turin had long been on my list of places to visit. Often overshadowed by Rome, Florence and Venice, Italy's first capital seemed to offer something different: a city rich in history, culture and architecture, yet without the crowds that dominate many of the country's better-known destinations. Having finally visited, I can confidently say it exceeded my expectations.

What struck me most was Turin's understated elegance. Its wide boulevards, arcaded streets and grand piazzas create an atmosphere of refinement, while its history is woven into almost every corner of the city. From the Roman remains of Porta Palatina to the magnificent Royal Palace and Palazzo Carignano, Turin tells the story of Italy's development in a way that few cities can match.

I was fascinated by the layers of history visible throughout the city. Roman foundations sit beneath Baroque palaces with the story of the Turin Shroud adding another dimension to the visit. Although the famous relic itself remains hidden from public view, exploring the cathedral, chapel and associated sites provided an insight into the enduring fascination and debate surrounding one of Christianity's most famous artefacts.

Beyond the major attractions, Turin's greatest appeal lies in its atmosphere. There is a confidence about the city that comes from knowing its own importance without needing to proclaim it. Cafés spill into elegant squares, locals go about their daily lives beneath centuries-old arcades, and the snow-capped Alps provide a dramatic backdrop to the skyline.

Turin may no longer be Italy's capital, but it remains one of its most rewarding cities. It is a place of history, character and quiet beauty that deserves far greater recognition than it often receives.



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



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