



American Express
Travelcast
Beyond Sightseeing

Mystery & Mysticism in Turin
Transcript

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Welcome

Buongiorno. Welcome to The American Express travelcast of magical Turin.

It's a city of plazas and palaces – as well as fine museums, elegant arcades and designer shops. Most visitors are content to enjoy it's obvious pleasures, without going below the surface. But Turin is also a city of spirits, a mystical place, filled with the ghosts of the people who shaped it – and the supernatural forces they frequently invoked.

I'm Roberto and I'll be introducing you to just some of those people during this walking tour. Their stories reveal insights into Turin's mysterious reputation as a centre point of both black and white magic.

The surrealist painter, Giorgio de Chirico described Turin as:

"the most profound, most enigmatic, most disquieting city not only of Italy, but of the world."

If black magic seeks supernatural power and white magic seeks to heal, not harm, it is natural to find both here, just as both coexist in traditional religions. Our travelcast is designed to let you discover Turin's magic at your own pace. Like de Chirico, you too may find that:

"Turin reveals its beauty little by little, like a good and honest Gorgon, who knows the cost on the beholder if she all at once unveils her face."

The only Gorgons, like Medusa, that we will see today will be medallions on the gates of the Palazzo Reale. But the beauty of Turin is alive for you to discover.

Our stops are all marked on the companion map. Of course you can follow your own path or start in the pedestrianised part of Piazza Castello, labelled Stop 1 on your map.



STOP 1 – Piazza Castello: Dukes, alchemists and gods

This spacious, pedestrian piazza is the historic heart of the city. It was turned into the showpiece you see today after Duke Emanuele Filiberto made Turin the capital of his realm in the 16th-century. Emanuele was a member of the powerful Savoy dynasty that ruled Turin from the Middle Ages to the 19th-century.

A skilled military leader he ousted rival French forces occupying Turin. Recognising that Turin was easier to defend than the Savoy lands in Chambery, France, he moved the family seat here. Emanuele, and then his son, transformed Turin from a medieval market town to a capital city, with fortifications, grand piazzas and palaces.

But Emanuele was not just a military man, he had wide interests – including alchemy. The Palazzo Madama is the unusual building on this Piazza, with a baroque façade tacked on to a red brick castle. Somewhere, deep beneath this palace, are caves, or Grotte Alchimiche, where Emanuele and his sorcerers used to brew mysterious potions, trying to turn base metals into gold.

Emanuele was also a friend of Nostradamus, who prophesied that the duke and his wife would have a son – Carlo Emanuele the 1st. He also predicted that this son would die:

'When a nine comes before a seven'.

Carlo Emanuele died aged 69.

Before you leave, take a look at the magnificent green and gold gates guarding the Palazzo Reale – the royal palace on the north side of this Piazza. They're said to stand on the 'white heart' of the city. Turin is a point on an international triangle of white magic: the other points being Prague and Lyon. The equestrian statues represent Castor and Pollux, the Dioscuri twins of Greek and Roman mythology and of the zodiac sign Gemini. When Castor was slain in battle, Pollux begged his father, Jupiter, to let him follow Castor into the underworld. Moved by Pollux's love for his twin, Jupiter instead decided the two would share the fate of life and death by spending one day under the earth and the next in the heavenly abodes. Here in Turin, they guard an invisible line where the sacred and diabolical parts of the city meet.

Walk around the north west side of the Palazzo Reale to the nearby Stop 2.



STOP 2 - Duomo: The Shroud and the Savoy

Turin's Duomo, or cathedral, stands in Piazza San Giovanni. The stone steps that lead up to it have been trodden by thousands of pilgrims over the years - for this is the home of the Holy Shroud, the linen cloth that many believe was Christ's burial sheet.

It was the Savoy ruler Emanuele Filiberto who brought the Shroud to Turin. It had come into his possession by a roundabout route. Legend has it that crusaders took the fragile cloth from the Holy Land, after which it was hidden away for years by the Knights Templar, a powerful order of warrior priests. Before one of the Templars, a French nobleman, was burnt at the stake he managed to smuggle the Shroud to his family – and they eventually gave it to the Savoyes for safekeeping. When Emanuele moved the family seat from Chambery to Turin, the Shroud came too – protected in a silver casket.

The Shroud is a controversial relic. It bears the front and back images of a crucified man, and contains traces of human blood. In the 1980s, radio-carbon dating led some experts to conclude that it was a medieval fake – perhaps an early photograph by Leonardo da Vinci. However, experiments have now found ancient pollen grains embedded in the cloth - from a plant that grows in Jerusalem.

Forgery or not, Emanuele Filiberto thought that the Shroud symbolised divine protection for his dynasty and kept it here in the cathedral, where everyone could see it. The Shroud is fragile and rarely displayed now – but you can see the bullet proof case in which it is kept.

From here we can see Stop 3, the Roman gates just to the north-west.



STOP 3 – Porta Palatina: Caesar Augustus

The Turin you see today was founded two thousand years ago, by the Roman emperor Caesar Ottaviano Augustus. This imposing red-brick arch is the Porta Palatina, the north gate of the four entrances to the original walled city. Each gate represented a cardinal point, one of the four principal directions on a compass, as the Romans believed this was lucky. Augustus built the settlement, named Augusta Taurinorum, as a fortified base for his troops – it was strategically situated on the main route that linked Rome to France. But it also had a mystical location: it stood at the confluence of the Po and the Dora. These rivers symbolised the Sun and the Moon, and formed a protective ring of water around the city. Druids were said to gather at the meeting of the rivers to celebrate the summer solstice.

Under Augustus, the city was laid out to a checkerboard plan, with straight, parallel streets known as decumani. He was an enthusiastic patron of the arts so poets, writers, artists and architects flourished under his rule. You can see the remains of a Roman theatre nearby, close to the Duomo; it was probably built during his reign. Augustus also worshipped the ancient gods, especially Apollo, and encouraged others to do so. Religion and ritual played a central part in the daily life of the Romans. The cult of Mithras, for example, was favoured by soldiers who would sacrifice bulls to gain strength from the blood.

Travellers coming to Augusta Taurinorum from the Po Valley would have passed through this mighty gateway, before turning into the narrow streets of the area that's now known as the Quadrilatero Romano – the Roman Quarter. It's one of the most fashionable areas in the city – filled with bars, restaurants and independent shops.

You can follow in the footsteps of these ancient travellers, taking Via Basilica west on your way to our next stop.



STOP 4 - Santuario della Consolata: Pilgrims and Priests

Tucked away in this serene piazza with its historic cafés, the Santuario della Consolata is dedicated to Mary, in her role as Comforter. It's been altered many times over the years, but dates back to the 11th-century. Pilgrims have been coming here since medieval times, as Turin provided a convenient stop on the long pilgrimage route from Canterbury to Rome. Stand facing the church and you'll see the Romanesque bell tower that would have greeted them – it's on the right.

Once you step inside you'll find yourself in a baroque jewel box - filled with marble, statues, and lavish frescoes. Pride of place goes to an icon of the Madonna. The Torinese people love the Santuario della Consolata – in fact it's their favourite church. But it would have disgusted one 8th-century clergyman - Claudius of Turin.

Claudius, who was Spanish, disapproved of the medieval enthusiasm for saints and holy relics and proclaimed:

"The departed saints...do not wish to be worshipped by us and cannot help us."

Louis, the influential King of Aquitaine, agreed with him and Claudius spent 3 years as his court chaplain. When Louis became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, he made Claudius Bishop of Turin. When Claudius arrived in the city, he used his power to smash relics, images of saints & crosses – he didn't even allow people to light candles, except for practical reasons. He also disapproved of pilgrimages – and tried to ban them.

But it didn't work – the church continued to venerate saints and the pilgrims continued to come, increasing in number over the centuries – especially after the arrival of the Holy Shroud. And if you go into the Santuario della Consolata today you'll find a wall filled with ex-voto offerings, placed there by local people thanking Mary the Comforter for her help. Bishop Claudius certainly wouldn't approve.

To get to Stop 5, you will have to leave the Quadrilatero Romano and cross the Corso Regina Margherita to the north. Look for the gold statue on the dome of the church peeking over the modern rooftops.



STOP 5 – Santa Maria Ausiliatrice: Don Bosco

The columns and statues that decorate the façade of this church, Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, are a suitably flamboyant memorial for its founder, a priest who used magic to get his religious message across. Giovanni Melchior Bosco was born in 1815, in a small village outside Turin. He was a lively child and loved entertaining people: he learned to walk the tightrope, juggle and do conjuring tricks – he could make red or white wine flow from the same bottle, or pull coins from the ears of startled onlookers. By the time he was 10 he was preaching, pulling crowds by mixing prayers with magic. A special trick was to tie 3 ropes together and make one seamless rope – it illustrated the concept of the Trinity.

Don Bosco (or Father Bosco) was later ordained and served in Turin, where he was so shocked by the plight of the city's street children that he devoted his life to helping them. He set up schools, dormitories and workshops and eventually established the Salesian Society, a branch of the Catholic church.

He decided to build an Oratory in Turin, and chose this spot after a lady appeared to him in a dream. Don Bosco described his vision:

“... I saw a small low church, a bit of courtyardThen, leading me on a bit, still by my side, in a piece of cultivated land....she (said): “Here, where the glorious martyrs of Turin – Avventor, Solutor and Octavius offered their martyrdom.” ...she put out a foot, resting it on the place ...and marking it precisely.’

Look up at the church gable and you'll see marble statues of these martyrs, together with St Massimo, the first bishop of Turin – above the clock on the right, and St Francis of Sales, patron of the Salesians, above the clock on the left.

Don Bosco was canonised in 1934 and became Saint Giovanni Bosco. He's buried inside this church.

Walk back south on the Corso Valdocco to get to Stop 6.



STOP 6 – Piazza Statuto: Light, dark and Di Chirico

This grassy square, at the western end of Via Garibaldi, is Piazza Statuto. Its most eye-catching feature is the angel topped monument to the workers who built the Frejus tunnel through the Alps - a jagged pile of dark boulders dotted with stark white figures. But there's much more to this square than meets the eye. Turin, together with London and San Francisco, is said to form a 'black magic' triangle – and Piazza Statuto is the 'black heart' of the city.

The piazza's grim reputation dates back to Roman times - for the Romans believed that the west, where the sun sets, was the meeting point for light and dark; for good and evil. And this was the most westerly point of Roman Turin. So they chose this spot, the vallis occisorum, to hold executions and to bury their dead. The remains of their cemetery lie deep beneath your feet.

The metaphysical painter Giorgio di Chirico was inspired by this piazza's mystical atmosphere. He was born in Greece in 1888, to Italian parents, and while studying art in Munich he became influenced by the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. He visited Turin in his twenties and began to paint barren cityscapes – his work characterised by deserted squares, deep shadows and an exaggerated perspective. He believed that objects were filled with hidden meanings; meanings that they somehow 'soaked up' from the memories of onlookers and could acquire:

"...a ghostly and metaphysical aspect that only a few individuals can see in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction."

Giorgio di Chirico had a long career, but some of his finest works were those he created as a young man, inspired by this place..

To get to our next Stop, take Via Garibaldi, Turin's main shopping street, then turn down the narrow via Botero.



STOP 7 – Piazza Solferino: Masons and Mystery

As you can see, Piazza Solferino has a contemporary appearance, dominated by two large glass domes that house Turin's main tourist information offices. But although it looks bright and modern, this square has a connection with the darker side of city life – provided by a mysterious sculptor.

Take a look at the large fountain that sits in the semi-circle at the northern end of the piazza, just across from Teatro Alfieri. This is the Fontana Angelica, and represents the 4 seasons – the 2 male figures in the centre are Autumn and Winter; the female figures on either side are Spring and Summer. It was created by Giovanni Riva in 1930 and was commissioned by a city official in memory of his parents. It was meant to sit near the cathedral. However the church discovered that Riva was a freemason, and knew that anything he made would be filled with disturbing masonic symbolism. They refused to allow the fountain anywhere near the cathedral – and it ended up here.

The clergy certainly had a point, for some say this is a Porta dell'Infinito – a gateway to infinity. Look at the rectangular space between the 2 male figures, where the water spouts into the air. It's intended to represent a threshold to an unknown dimension, beyond the Pillars of Hercules. Step over it and a selected few will enter a caverna luminosa, or Cave of Light, containing the solutions to the secrets of alchemy that govern the world.

To reach Stop 8, you might travel down Via Alfieri on the east side of the piazza. Look out for Number 15; it was once the Savoy dynasty's Casa dei Tarocchi – the palace where they had their tarot cards printed.



STOP 8 – Egyptian Museum: Archaeologists and Antiquities

This forbidding looking building, on Via Accademia delle Scienze, is the Egyptian Museum. It contains the finest collection of Egyptian antiquities outside Cairo. Many of the artefacts were discovered in the 19th-century, by Turin University graduate – Bernardino Drovetti.

Drovetti studied law, then became a soldier in the Piedmontese army. When Piedmont was annexed by France, he found himself serving Napoleon – who made him his Consul and sent him to Egypt. There was enormous interest in Egyptian antiquities then– the French had already discovered the Rosetta Stone – and, like many other diplomats, Drovetti started his own collection.

There was great competition to acquire prize artefacts, and Drovetti frequently fell out with rivals – especially another Italian, Giovanni Belzoni. On one occasion he was accused of destroying one of Belzoni's finds. His agents beat up Belzoni, which 'encouraged' him to drop legal action.

Drovetti bought many of his antiquities. But he also excavated tombs and found statues, artworks and papyrus scrolls. His reputation spread. One British contemporary wrote a letter saying:

'I cannot dismiss the subject of Egyptian antiquities, without saying a word of Mr Drovetti's collection. It is certainly at present the finest of all ...His rolls of papyrus are particularly valuable.'

The Savoy duke Carlo Felice bought the collection, and so brought it to Turin. Many of the artefacts are said to be cursed – some people have even requested that certain papyruses be locked in a basement to protect visitors.

Why not stroll by the antique shops on Maria Vittoria to visit Stop 9. It is across the Po, Italy's longest river, and is the furthest Stop on our walking tour.



STOP 9 – Gran Madre di Dio: Faith and the Holy Grail

You will have had to cross the Po to reach this imposing Neoclassical church - Gran Madre di Dio. It was built to celebrate the end of Napoleonic rule and the return of the Savoy king Vittorio Emanuele the 1st – that's a statue of him in front of the steps. The architect was Ferdinando Bonsignore, who trained in Turin and later in Rome. He was strongly influenced by Rome's ancient buildings, and this church bears a strong resemblance to the Pantheon, which was built as a temple to 7 major gods.

But the mystical links go deeper than that. Bonsignore seems to have filled the church with occult symbolism. For this spot, high on the banks of the Po, is said to be the site of a temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis – some even think the name Gran Madre di Dio, or Great Mother of God, refers to her. And there are the statues that you can see on either side of the steps – Religion on the right and Faith on the left. Look carefully and you'll see that Faith is holding a chalice – a reference to the notion that the Holy Grail is buried nearby.

Like the Shroud of Turin, the Holy Grail is one of the featured relics in Christian mythology. It was the vessel used by Jesus at the Last Supper, and many quests, both fact and fictional, chased its reported miraculous powers.

By the way, if you think the grand staircase looks familiar, it probably is. Michael Caine's minis raced down it to escape the carabinieri in the film *The Italian Job*.

Cross back over Il grande fiume, the great river, and walk straight up Via Po to reach stop 10 – the covered Gallery Subalpina. To find it, turn left under the porticoes of Piazza Castello.

Via Po is one of Turin's fashionable shopping streets. It's covered with arcades, built to shelter the Savoy rulers as they walked from their palace to the banks of the Po.



STOP 10 – Galleria Subalpina: Nietzsche

This is Galleria Subalpina - the elegant, glass-roofed arcade that links Piazza Castello and Piazza Carlo Alberto. It was built in 1874, at a time when shopping had become a social event – a chance for fashionable people to promenade in their finest clothes, stopping for coffee and pastries in decadent cafes. But this gallery is also filled with the memory of one of Turin's most enigmatic characters, the metaphysical philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, whose dark thoughts led him to reject the idea of immortality or the existence of a separate soul.

You can see one of the rooms in Nietzsche's apartment if you stand in the corner with your back towards Piazza Castello. It's one level up, in the left hand corner, and the lights are usually on. Nietzsche came to Turin in 1888 and was immediately impressed. He wrote:

"What a worthy and serious city"

"What solemn and earnest piazzas!... . The most beautiful cafes I've ever seen. These arcades are necessary here, given the changeable weather: yet they are spacious, not at all oppressive. Evenings on the bridge over the Po: splendid! Beyond good and evil!"

Nietzsche wrote many of his best-known works here, including *The Antichrist*. He was an enthusiastic patron of the city's cafes – including Barratti and Milano, located just beside this gallery in Piazza Castello.

I do hope you have enjoyed listening to our travelcast as a new way to explore and enjoy the city. Thank you for joining American Express on our tour of Mystery and Mysticism in Turin.

Arrivederci!