

Press Release

## Merano and Environs

### History and Culture

Capital of the historic region of Tyrol, a thriving spa town of the Belle Époque and a hospital city during World War II: the history of the town of Merano/Meran is long and eventful. It is reflected until this day in its abundance of architectural and cultural treasures.

The Merano basin can be found at the intersection of the Vinschgau Valley and the Ultental and Passeiertal Valleys. The town of Merano lies at 324 meters above sea level, at the foot of the Texelgruppe mountain range, which reach up to 3,335 meters in altitude. It is best known as a health resort and for its mild climate, which enables Mediterranean and exotic plants to thrive along its many walkways and large landscaped parks.

### From Marshland to the Capital of Tyrol

Even in the time of the glacier mummy Ötzi over 5,000 years ago, there were farmers settled in the region. With the current appearance of the Etschtal Valley, as the Merano region is called by South Tyroleans, it is hard to imagine that there was once a swamp here and that farmers were only able to live further up in the hills.

Above Merano is the historic **Tyrol Castle**, which the Counts of Tyrol gave their name to. Around the year **1200**, when the Count of the Vinschgau Valley made Tyrol Castle his administrative headquarters and began to use the title of Count of Tyrol, Merano and its surrounding area became increasingly important, not only in the Alpine region, but throughout Europe. In Merano itself, Meinhard II built arcades and weirs as well as city walls and gates. Three of the four city gates remain today: the *Vinschgauer Tor*, the *Bozner Tor* and the *Passeierer Tor*. The *Ultner Tor*, formerly located at what is now the Theaterplatz square, no longer exists.

Additionally, at that time a mint was also founded in Merano, and small silver coins with an embossed double cross, the *Meraner Kreuzer*, were minted here. The name "Kreuzer" used to refer to these coins as a monetary unit can be traced back to Merano, and soon prevailed throughout southern Germany.

Tyrol Castle is probably the most well-known landmark in Merano and Environs. As early as the year 1000, there was a castle building on the site. Numerous additions, renovations and a major renovation took place in the 19th century, which provide the castle with its present appearance. Inside, the richly decorated Romanesque porches and the frescoes in the chapel are particularly worth seeing. The castle also houses the **South Tyrolean Museum for Culture and Provincial History (Südtiroler Landesmuseum für Kultur- und Landesgeschichte)**, which is dedicated to the history of South Tyrol and its changing historical and cultural legacy.

Apart from Tyrol Castle, there are numerous other well-preserved castles and manor houses that bear witness to this local heyday in the Middle Ages – some can be found even in the middle of the town of Merano: for example, the ivy-covered Prince's Castle (**Landesfürstliche Burg**), a small building which served less of a defensive purpose than as a pleasure palace for Prince Sigmund the Wealthy. The **minstrel Oswald von Wolkenstein** died here while on a visit to the castle in 1445. Situated among picturesque vineyards, **Lebenberg Castle** above Cermes/Tscherms is one of the most photographed sites in the area. It was built in 1260 by the Lords of Marling. Built in the 14th century, **Schenna Castle** lies directly on the opposite side of the valley to the village of Tirol/Dorf Tirol, and even today serves as the **residential castle of the Counts of Merano**. Aristocratic families also live at **Stachlburg Manor** in Parcines/Partschins and the medieval **Gut Kränzelhof Estate** in Cermes, which is renowned for its winery and labyrinth garden.

Below Tirol is **Brunnenburg Castle**, currently the home of the Counts de **Rachewiltz**. Mary de Rachewiltz was the daughter of the **famous American writer Ezra Pound**, and in the 1950s, she and her husband inherited Brunnenburg and took up residence there. Today the "**Ezra Pound**

**Center for Literature**” is located at Brunnenburg Castle, visited by students from all over the world in order to familiarize themselves with the work of the controversial poet. When Pound lived in Italy in the 1920s and 30s, he was an ardent admirer of Mussolini. In 1945 he was arrested by American troops, and sentenced to death in the USA. He was later classified as insane and committed to a mental hospital in Washington D.C. At the end of the 1950s, when he was released after twelve years in prison, he moved to South Tyrol to live with his daughter at Brunnenburg, and he lived between there and Venice until his death.

**The present owner** of Brunnenburg Castle is Ezra Pound’s grandson, the **ethnologist, art historian and writer Siegfried de Rachewiltz**. After studies in New Jersey, Bologna, Harvard and Cambridge, this sophisticated scholar moved back to the Alps. He became involved in various clubs, served as **director of the Museum for Culture and Provincial History at Tyrol Castle** and founded the Agricultural Museum at Brunnenburg, which deals with the life of mountain farmers in Tyrol. Special animal species such as Racka sheep or Mangalitza pigs, also known as wooly pigs, are bred there. The thick fat deposits of the latter species make for a unique type of bacon, which is also sold at the *Pur Südtirol* shop in the Kurhaus building in Merano.

### From the Middle Ages to the Freedom Struggle of Andreas Hofer

Whereas Meinhard II helped Merano to shine, his son and then his daughter **Margarete Maultasch** ruled the country with little success. Soon Tyrol was assigned to the possessions of the Habsburgs, and the residence of the princes moved to Innsbruck and the mint to Hall in Tirol. Traditional industries started again in Merano, particularly agriculture and crafts, and the town became impoverished. The “Burggrafenamt” region was battered by floods, fires and the freedom struggle which commenced at the beginning of the 19th century.

After Napoleon’s defeat of Austria in 1805, he deprived them of Tyrol, giving it instead to his allies, the Bavarians. The Bavarians sought to impose reforms on Tyrol, thereby reducing the influence of the church. Fierce riots took place as a result, “for God, Emperor and Fatherland.” An innkeeper from Passeiertal Valley went down in history as the leading hero of this fight: **Andreas Hofer**. Today the **myth of his heroism** is not without controversy. The MuseumPasseier in S. Leonardo/St. Leonhard focuses in a slightly ironic way on the history and devotion of Hofer, and questions why we even need such national heroes. A lesser-known and final major battle for Hofer took place in November 1809 at the Küchelberg Hill in Merano: If you walk down the Tappeinerweg trail today, you are literally walking along the battlefield. Today there is a monument at Pulverturm Tower dedicated to the more than 2,000 casualties of the battle.

### Spa Town in Bloom

Merano celebrated a **second spring in the 19th century**. Scientists and doctors became increasingly aware of the **climatic advantages** of the town, and in 1827 Merano welcomed its first spa guests. The forward-thinking mayor Joseph Valentin Haller and the school teacher Beda Weber were instrumental in the development of the new health resort. “**Touriseum**”, the **museum of tourism** at Trauttmansdorff Castle, illustrates the history of South Tyrolean tourism in an entertaining way, using films, models, old signs and more.

In 1868 Merano officially received the title of “**climatic health resort**”. Because of its mild temperatures, Merano was known primarily as a winter resort, with the period from fall until spring being more popular with guests than the hotter summer months. When the **Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary** visited the town for the first time in 1870, she helped promote Merano to a higher level. During the **Belle Époque** of the late 19th century, in addition to numerous nobles, the city was also host to many **writers and musicians** of world renown, including Arthur Schnitzler, Sigmund Freud, Christian Morgenstern, Clara Schumann, Edvard Grieg, and many others. Innumerable **villas and grand hotels** were built, and it was at this time that the construction of the Kurhaus building and the Stadttheater municipal theatre took place. This boom was the result of the numerous high-profile guests, who required suitable accommodation and entertainment.

Promenades, walking trails, and parks were all created at this time, local folk theatre was staged, and the *Kurorchester* spa orchestra gave daily concerts. As a result, until today **Merano is international in character**: kosher restaurants and hotels, a synagogue, a Russian Orthodox and a Protestant church all stand together in close vicinity.

**The world wars** of the 20<sup>th</sup> century interrupted this promising development in Merano. After **1918, South Tyrol became part of Italy**, and Merano became increasingly open to the influence of the south. With the rise of fascism, this soon became compulsory. Although the progress of the town was slowed at this time – except for the Maia Race Course, a few barracks and the Merano City Hall, very little construction took place – what did occur was what makes South Tyrol unique today: the **fusion of Italian culture with South Tyrol's Austrian heritage**.

The town of Merano experienced blessings in disguise. As a **hospital city during WWII**, it was mainly spared from bombing, and destruction was limited. Italian military operations left their mark architecturally, as well as in the rural areas around Merano: There are several mausoleums and bunkers used by Italian troops in the area. Two such bunkers in the Merano region have been expanded in recent years into museums of interest. The **Bunker Mooseum** in Moso/Moos in the Passeiertal Valley is dedicated to the history of the valley and also offers visitors the opportunity to climb the 30 meter high rock at the site. In addition, an outdoor enclosure for ibex was created. In addition to the bunker in Moso, the museum at the **Gampenpass mountain pass** in Alta Val di Non/Deutschnonsberg area is also worth seeing. Here, the Italian military dug four floors and two kilometers of tunnels directly into the rock. The Gampen Gallery, one part of this system, is open to the public as a showroom. Currently on display are historical images of the Gampenpassstraße road, an important link between Lana near Merano and Fondo in Trentino.

### Discovery of the Ice Man

One episode in recent history also changed the long-term importance of Merano and Environs in terms of archaeology: the discovery of **Ötzi**, the ice man. At Tisenjoch ridge on the **Schnalstal Glacier**, at over 3,200 meters above sea level, a couple from Nuremberg found a mummified corpse in the glacier in September 1991. The two extreme mountaineers **Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander** also happened to be on the glacier and stumbled upon the scene as attempts were being made to retrieve the body – still believing it to be a lost climber. Messner and Kammerlander were the first to notice the details of the equipment which stood out. It was immediately clear to them that this death had occurred much longer ago than initially thought. The body was recovered without the help of archaeologists and taken away with its accompanying objects in a garbage bag. It was not until a week after its discovery that it became clear that this was a sensational discovery – a 5.000 year old, well-preserved mummy.

The **archoParc** in Madonna di Senales/Unser Frau in Schnalstal Valley, provides visitors with insight into Ötzi's life. A Stone Age building and Ötzi's clothing and equipment have been reproduced here. Baking bread over an open fire, archery and pottery are all part of the active program and particularly interesting for children.

**Reinhold Messner made his name** over the past ten years mainly because of his major project, the **Messner Mountain Museum**. Six museums were combined, including Juval Castle at the entrance to the Schnalstal Valley. Messner acquired the almost ruined castle in the 1980s. Its restoration caused a sensation, as a glass roof was built over the late medieval building to cover the sensitive wall structures, which were exposed to the elements without protection. Today the castle is Messner's main residence in the summer, and the exhibition in the public area displays memorabilia of his expeditions on five different continents.

The cultural treasures that Merano and Environs has to offer are varied and shaped by its long history, but also by the close vicinity of the town of Merano to the mountains: If you visit one of the



bunkers in the Passeiertal Valley or the Gampenpass mountain road in the morning, you can visit one of the many castles in the afternoon, and still go for a walk around the town at night after dining. Everything is close: Alpine and Italian culture, north and south, mountains and valleys, town and country.

[www.merano-suedtirol.it](http://www.merano-suedtirol.it)