



Bergamo: rich history.

Bergamo — a visitor's delight that's still off the touristic radar

by Denise McNamara

With more and more of these one-cent deals on the net, there's more reason than ever to jump on a plane to explore our backyard.

While we may be lured to the famous temples of tourism like Paris, Rome and London, there are other places worthy of consideration that might not be so clearly on the radar.

Bergamo is one of those places visitors to Italy often pass by on bus if flying Ryanair to Milan or Venice.

Yet it is surely worth a trip all on its own, now even more so with hotspots like the Amalfi Coast, Cinque Terra and Sardinia ludicrously overrun and overpriced due to the onslaught of the teeming masses of cheap flight junkies.

Nestling in the foothills of the Alps, the picturesque Bergamo is literally a modern tale of two cities — 'Città Bassa', the busy and modern lower city, and 'Città Alta', the upper city with its rich heritage of art and history.

While most of the population of 120,000 live and do business down below, it is the old city famous for its artistic treasures and medieval atmosphere that attracts the Italians and French every summer.

It is the perfect size for exploring by foot, but the steep and winding streets between both parts may prove a bit arduous for the less energetic. Catching the funicular or cable car is a quicker and equally view-catching option.

The Piazza Vecchia is the heart of the old town, displaying a mix of medieval and Renaissance architecture.

Even if you're not a fan of churches, there are two here that will take your breath away.

Basilica di Santa Maria Maggiore (Saint Mary's Church) contains a fresco by Giotto (1347), depicting the Tree of Life. Our guide is terribly excited about the presbytery, the great Crucifix and the tomb of Gaetano Donizetti. The dome has frescoes by Giovanbattista Tiepolo.

Beside the basilica is the Cappella Colleoni (Colleoni chapel), a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture and decoration art.

Elsewhere in the square is the Palazzo della Ragione from the 12th Century, which boasts a St. Mark's Lion on its façade and a well-preserved 18th century sundial on the atrium.

Cafes and restaurants abound in this part of Bergamo and forget rip-off Rome when it comes to picking up the tab. A massive slice of pizza akin to a small takeaway size can be in your gullet for as little as a euro, while a pleasant three-course meal with wine will cost under a tenner.

For typical dishes of the region we had a pleasant lunch surrounded by local business people in the taverna-style Ol Giopi' e la Margi.

It is, however, wise to know what exactly you are ordering. During our two-day sojourn, we had a rather exotic variety of meat put out way — horse, wild goat, wild boar and (gasp) even donkey. Certainly not to everyone's taste or indeed sensitivities, but the Italians will encourage you to stretch your pallet and imagination. Whatever about the meat, the marinated vegetables in the antipasti was impeccable everywhere we went.

You could easily spend a day or two wandering around Bergamo, checking out the boutique-style shops and stopping off for coffee and

croissants.

If you decided to hire a car, you'll find yourself surrounded by breathtaking valleys, lakes and mountains — all green in summer and under a blanket of snow in the winter.

One lovely day trip is a jaunt to a family-run vineyard the Tenuta degli Angeli estate in Val Calepio. Tours can be arranged by arrangement. We got to taste the lovely prosecco (Italian champagne) and white varieties of the vineyard as well as the 10-year aged balsamic vinegar and olive oil, which last year won second best olive oil in the country — no mean feat in the spiritual home of olive oil.

Winter favourite

Bergamo is a perennial favourite winter destination for Italians.

The town is a gateway to a host of skiing resorts just 60km from the airport Orio al Serio, that up to now have been largely ignored by Irish tour operators. In the spectacular Brembana Valley resorts such as Foppolo, the most well-known in the Orobic Alps, and San Simone, Carona-Carisole which has more than 120 km of tracks between them. In the western Brembo Valley, are the resorts Piazzatorre, Valtorta and Val Brembana. Every age group and skill is catered for.

For this year's season — which was later than normal due to the strange lack of snow — there are packages for adults in a three-star hotel for six days costing €407 — including round trip transportation, accommodation and a five-day ski pass.

Ski lovers can also buy a single ticket called the Orobic Skipass and use it on several different ski resorts — Colete, Monte, Forà, Presolana, Spiazzi di Gronio, Lizzola,

Bono, Schilpario

Another town worth visiting in the Lombardy region is the thermal water resort of San Pellegrino, home of the famous sparkling water. With its beautiful stone bridges this was a fashionable resort of the European and international aristocracy at the beginning of the 20th Century. The Casino, the Grand Hotel and the Spa are a throwback to that decadent era. The spa was closed for renovations when we visited but the casino is worth a visit even though now it is no longer a den of iniquity, rather a venue for weddings and town events.

If you have the kids, a short trek out to the Ferdy farm on the banks of the river Brembo should be on the itinerary, where overnight accommodation is available as well as unbelievably priced meals in the farmhouse dating back to the 800s. We were afraid to ask if the donkey they had the on the menu the night we visited came from Noddy that was carrying the kids for rides around the farm. Such peculiarities didn't detract from the amazing home-grown goats cheese laid on.

It just made us feel like we were far from home.

The Connacht Tribune flew courtesy of Ryanair

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Association of Hotels in the Orobic Ski Resort Tel: 0039 0346 31136 Web: www.cooralltur.it

Ristorante Ol Giopi' e la Margi — Via Borgo Palazzo, 25G Tel: 035 242366

Tenuta degli Angeli in Val Calepio Tel: 0039 035 951489 E-Mail: info@triplok.it

Terme San Pellegrino (Spa) Tel: 034 522455

Ferdy Farm — Scalvino-Lenna. Tel: 034 582235 Web: www.agrituristioferdy.com