



Bergamo, Brescia & Cremona

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Why Go?

Medieval towns, gentle lakes hemmed in by steep hillsides, vast plains, prehistoric rock art and mighty mountains make this part of the Lombard region one of northern Italy's most underrated corners. You'd need a couple of weeks to cover the area well, so you need to make choices. Bergamo, with its medieval Città Alta (Upper Town), is a must, and it's an inspired choice if this is your point of arrival in Italy. Townies and church lovers might concentrate on the main centres (Brescia, Cremona, Crema and Lodi), which all have fascinating medieval cores. An alternative tour of plains settlements will turn up palaces, castles and forts. Wine buffs may prefer touring the Franciacorta, south of Lake Iseo. North of Bergamo, several valleys lead deep into the picturesque Orobic Alps.

Road Distances (km)

| | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|------|
| Brescia | 59 | | | |
| Cremona | 98 | 55 | | |
| Iseo | 36 | 21 | 76 | |
| Lodi | 52 | 88 | 77 | 95 |
| | Bergamo | Brescia | Cremona | Iseo |

BERGAMO

📍 035 / POP 121,000

This eastern Lombard city offers a wealth of art and medieval Renaissance and baroque architecture, a privileged position overlooking the southern plains, breathtaking views and some fine dining. Bergamo is one of northern Italy's most beguiling cities.

The city's defining feature is a double identity. The ancient hilltop Città Alta (Upper Town) is a tangle of tiny medieval streets, embraced by 5km of Venetian walls. It lords it over the largely (but not entirely) modern Lower Town (Città Bassa). A funicular connects the two.

Sights

The best way to explore Bergamo's old town is to simply wander without haste. Via Bartolomeo Colleoni and Via Gombito are lined with all sorts of curious shops and eateries. Wander along the perimeter streets of the old town too, for rewarding panoramas from the city's Venetian-era defensive walls.

★ Accademia Carrara

GALLERY

(📍 035 23 43 96; www.lacarrara.it; Piazza Carrara 82; adult/reduced €10/8; 🕒 10am-7pm May-Nov, 9.30am-5.30pm Dec-Apr) Just east of the old city walls is one of Italy's great art repositories. Founded in 1780, it contains an exceptional range of Italian masters. Raphael's *San Sebastiano* is a highlight, and other artists represented include Botticelli, Canaletto, Mantegna and Titian.

The collection was started by local scholar Count Giacomo Carrara (1714-96) and has now swelled to 1800 paintings dating from the 15th to 19th centuries. Reopened after a seven-year renovation, the gallery's displays revolve around 28 rooms. Highlights include the sections on Giovanni Bellini, Florence and the major local artists Lorenzo Lotto and Giovanni Battista Moroni.

★ Torre del Campanone

TOWER

(📍 035 24 71 16; Piazza Vecchia; adult/reduced €3/free; 🕒 9.30am-6pm Tue-Fri, to 8pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, reduced hours winter) Bergamo's colossal, square-based Torre del Campanone soars 52m above the city. It still tolls a bell at 10pm, the legacy of an old curfew. Taking the lift to the top of the tower reveals sweeping views down onto the town, up to the pre-Alps and across to the Lombard plains.

Piazza Vecchia

PIAZZA

(Old Square) The Upper Town's beating heart is the cafe-clad Piazza Vecchia, lined by elegant architecture that is a testament in stone and brick to Bergamo's long and colourful history. Its highlights include the Palazzo Nuovo, Palazzo del Podestà, Palazzo della Ragione and the Torre del Campanone. Tucked in behind the secular buildings of Piazza Vecchia, **Piazza del Duomo** is the core of Bergamo's spiritual life.

Le Corbusier apparently described Piazza Vecchia as the 'most beautiful square in Europe' – good thing they didn't let him try out any of his ideas on it. Had he done so, he'd have been following a certain precedent. The Renaissance square was created by levelling the huddle of medieval housing that once stood there.

The white porticoed building on Via Bartolomeo Colleoni, which forms the northern side of the piazza, is the **Palazzo Nuovo** (Angelo Mai Library). Designed in 1611 by a brilliant architectural mind from Vicenza, Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548-1616), it was not actually completed until 1928. Long the seat of the town hall, it has been a library since 1873. Diagonally opposite, on the northwest side of the square, the **Palazzo del Podestà** (Museo Storico dell'Età Veneta; 📍 035 24 71 16; www.palazzodelpodesta.it; adult/reduced €7/5; 🕒 9.30am-1pm & 2.30-6pm Tue-Sun) was long home to Venice's representative in Bergamo.

Looming overhead, the massive, square-based Torre del Campanone tolls the old 10pm curfew. Originally raised in the 12th century and partly used as a jail in the 14th, it has undergone numerous alterations. In 1486, cheerful citizens lit a bonfire atop the tower to celebrate a religious holiday. Oddly, they didn't foresee that this would lead to the timber roof catching and burning to a crisp, leading to one of many renovations. Lighting fires is no longer allowed but you can take a wheelchair-accessible lift to the top, from where there are splendid views.

Turn south and you face the imposing arches and columns of the **Palazzo della Ragione**, built in the 12th century. The lion of St Mark is a reminder of Venice's long reign here. It's an early 20th-century replica of the 15th-century original, which was torn down when Napoleon took over in 1797. Note the sun clock in the pavement beneath the arches, and the curious Romanesque and Gothic animals and busts decorating