

OVERNIGHTER

Bergamo, Italy, a Medieval Town of Art and Architecture Near Milan

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THE moon gently illuminated Piazza Vecchia, in the northern Italian town of Bergamo, one late October evening. Shadows speckled Renaissance-era buildings, houses with wrought-iron balconies and grand arched columns, while light created a glimmering sheen over the red brick squares of the plaza. From a 12th-century bell tower came the final echoes of the 100 tolls that once signified this town's 10 p.m. curfew.

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Dave Yoder for The New York Times

The Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore is a 12th-century church with a stunningly ornate interior.

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Accompanied by my sister, Aditi, I stood in the middle of what could have been just another enchanting, tranquil Italian piazza. But underneath the quietude, we were surrounded both by centuries of history and a thriving modern cultural life.

Bergamo (pronounced BARE-gah-mo), less than an hour by car or train northeast of Milan, is at the foothills of the Orobic Alps, popular with Italian skiers. But those who simply pass through risk missing a world-class mix of diverse [architecture](#), impressive [art](#) collections (often tucked away in unlikely spots) and special gastronomy.

A great place to start an exploration of Bergamo is Piazza Vecchia, the heart and center of Città Alta, the medieval part of the city, which sits on a hill above the rest of town. For nearly 400 years, starting in the early 15th century, Bergamo was part of the Republic of Venice; it was the Venetians who built the stone walls around Città Alta. And indeed, the areas around the square look distinctly medieval, with narrow and winding cobblestone streets.

But the 1400s are just the beginning in Città Alta. The centuries before and after are all around you in Bergamo. This historical richness came alive for us when Guja Ajolfi, curator of Palazzo Moroni, a museum housed in a 17th-century palace, took us on a walking tour.

We started at the Palazzo della Ragione, a Romanesque structure that dates from the 12th century; it is said to be the oldest existing town hall in northern Italy, though it ceased operating as one in the 17th century. We then saw Romanesque fused with Gothic at the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, a 12th-century church with a stunningly ornate interior.

Following a leisurely lunch, we wandered to Palazzo Terzi, one of the city's several small palaces dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. The palace is perched gracefully on the side of a hill overlooking the surrounding plains. When the writer Hermann Hesse visited Bergamo in 1913, he called the palazzo and the square that surrounds it "the most beautiful corner of Italy." It hasn't lost any of its loveliness in the years since.

A funicular connects the upper and lower towns, but during our three-day trip, we opted for walking routes, down wide cobblestone steps and curving roads lush with overhanging ivy, that join them. Città Bassa, the city's lower section, the core of which was designed in the early 20th century, has a more spacious, modern feel. But whichever part of town you are in, the art, much of it housed in small museums, mansions and churches, is exceptional.

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“People come to medieval towns like Bergamo because they are beautiful, but there are so many of these throughout Italy,” Ms. Ajolfi told us. “Bergamo is different than many because it’s essentially an open-air museum with important artworks everywhere.” In fact, Bergamo has one of the more under-the-radar collections of Renaissance and Baroque art in the country. Ms. Ajolfi showed us several examples within steps of Piazza Vecchia, including Baroque stuccos and Florentine and Flemish tapestries at Santa Maria Maggiore.

But some of the city’s best art can be found at the Palazzo della Ragione, in the Città Alta, which is showing a rotation from the collection of the Accademia Carrara — nearly 2,000 works from masters like Botticelli, Raphael and Bellini — as that gallery undergoes a renovation, due to be completed next year.

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