

Peaceful Parma

Northern Italian town provides respite from crowds

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The crisp stucco houses of Parma sport a cheery shade of yellow - - a lemony hue a bit more lively than egg yolk and a touch happier than mustard. As I walk Via Garibaldi, the brilliant color abounds.

Store windows on every corner display enormous wheels of Parmigiana-Reggiano, the gold standard by which all other cheese is measured. The boulevard is deserted until a university student with chunky glasses whizzes past on a neon Vespa with a muffler more polite than its noisy Roman cousins.



When I catch a city bus, the driver instantly recognizes me as a tourist and waves away my fare. He tells me to stand next to him, and though I enjoy his wordy monologue on the many virtues of the composer Verdi -- a hometown treasure -- I can't help but pray he'll return his gesturing hands to the steering wheel soon.

I take a long, solitary walk through the city's French gardens -- the finest in Italy. Though I stroll the manicured pathways for nearly a half-hour, I have the entire

park to myself until a signora approaches on her bicycle, gravel crunching beneath her tires.

As she whisks past with a basket stuffed with flowers and fresh bread, she turns her bronze smile upon me before digging her python stilettos into the pedals and turning down a verdant path inhabited by marble statues.



After another hour exploring, I begin to realize why Parma is so different from other Italian cities I've visited this trip. People are being friendly. With wide-eyed travelers few and far between, the Parmigiani have no end of patience for the occasional tourist. This leaves me with just one question: Why didn't I bypass the smog and traffic of Rome and the impossible overcrowding of Venice and come straight to Parma?

A city with Etruscan roots, Parma became a Roman settlement around 183 B.C. Rulers from the ruthless Sforza and Farnese clans turned the town into a center of trade and commerce, but it was the city's period under Bourbon rule that left its lasting French influence behind.

Impressive citizenry

French notables such as Stendhal ("Charterhouse of Parma") and Proust made the city a literary Mecca for a time. The city has been home to musical luminaries such as Paganini, Toscanini and, of course, Verdi. Painters Correggio and Il

Parmigianino were native sons, and their work is seen as a transitional period between the Renaissance and Baroque.

Napoleon's second wife, Marie-Louise, was Duchess of Parma in the 1800s, and the city still loves her so much they wear her face emblazoned on their T-shirts and bags like she's a local rock star.

Two marble lions guard the entrance of the Romanesque cathedral. The humble facade may fail to impress at first glance, but once inside, you will understand why the Parma duomo is known as the finest example of this style to be found in Italy. Don't be surprised if you have Correggio's soaring fresco, "Assumption of the Virgin," all to yourself like I did. The cathedral is open every day from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., and 3 to 7 p.m. Admission is free.

The warm-hearted man who runs the cathedral's museum shop next door continues the monologue on Verdi where my bus driver left off. Tickled to meet an American who speaks Italian, he congratulates me with a bag of free postcards, making all those hours of study seem suddenly worthwhile.

One of the cards depicts the "three great loves" of Parma's favorite son. Pictured are both of Verdi's wives and his beloved dog Lou-Lou. He treats me to an impromptu aria, then grows somber describing how Verdi's first wife, Margherita Barezzi, and both their infant children died within the span of a year. He digs into a pocket for a handkerchief to wipe away tears that have sprung to his eyes as though this tragedy occurred last Tuesday.

Savoring the sights

I arrive just 45 minutes before the Romanesque baptistry closes, and the ticket taker allows me to go in without paying because I won't have enough time to fully absorb the building's majesty. The octagonal building is rendered in pink marble quarried near Verona. In the golden light of early evening, the baptistry's lace-like exterior becomes a meeting place for city dwellers young and old.



Baptistry hours vary, so contact the tourism office when you arrive.

Forget waiting in line for hours to get into the Uffizi. At the National Gallery or Pinacoteca, you will enjoy hip, modernized gallery spaces and have Leonardo da Vinci, Correggio, El Greco and Canaletto to yourself. A good-natured museum guard might sidle up to offer a well-formed opinion on a painting's history.

Sacred cows

If you are traveling with children, a tour of the Parmigiana- Reggiano cheese factories and farms is a must. The local consortium arranges these free tours, and my 3-year-old daughter got a kick out of watching the milk and whey churning in immense caldrons straight out of the Middle Ages. Our consortium

guide, Cristiana Clerici, explained that nothing has changed in the process since Benedictine monks began making Parmesan in the 13th century.



At dawn, workers skim the milk from the night before, pouring it into enormous vats. They stir it constantly until the cheese forms, as if by divine intervention, right before our eyes. Wooden cheese molds are then used to shape the cheese into its famous wheel. The fledgling cheese now takes a salty three-day soak in brine.

The next step is an 18-month stay in a maximum-security warehouse, where the wheels age before testing. The ultimate goal is the hard-won Parmigiana-Reggiano approval stamp that is fire-branded on the wheels that pass muster. If an inspector fails a cheese, it is branded with a sorry-looking "X" and relegated to what I imagine to be a devil's island of spurned cheeses. Some of these unsatisfactory wheels are deemed good enough for grating, but they won't carry the coveted Parmigiano seal.

Gone are the days when Uzi-toting guards surrounded the entrances to Parmesan factories. After several highly publicized robberies in the 1980s and

1990s -- scores that were worth millions on the black market -- factory owners got serious about protecting their cheese. While the details of the new high-tech security are as jealously guarded as the formula for the Parmigiana-Reggiano itself, one thing is certain: farmers and owners can finally sleep with both eyes shut.

The cheese-makers are contractors, and judging by the good-natured clowning my family witnessed, the artisans are a fun-loving yet hardworking group.

Close-knit fraternity

To be admitted to one of these close-knit teams, a young man is subjected to a rigorous apprenticeship process, often likened to taking religious orders. The craft is often passed from father to son. Though women are not welcome, an African-Italian man recently made national news when he was accepted into the highly competitive ranks of the artisan cheese-makers, where he quickly became a favorite.

Make cheese tour arrangements well in advance of your visit and note that the consortium offices are closed from late July to mid-August when Italians traditionally take their annual summer break. Our delightful guide sent us packing with two enormous chunks of Parmesan that we enjoyed for months. You can contact them via their informative Web site, www.parmigiano-reggiano.it/

A saleslady perched outside for a smoke looks amiable enough to ask for advice on a good restaurant. She suggests La Greppia, but after what I'm convinced was a quick glance at our footwear, she deems this a bit out of our price range. Besides, her other favorite, Trattoria Corrieri, has an actual mamma in the kitchen, she assures us, and none of that nouvelle cuisine snooty types enjoy, she explains, pushing her nose heavenward with the hand free of a cigarette.



This cozy local hangout is just outside the city's downtown shopping district, nestled between residential apartments. They seat us in a candlelit outdoor garden covered with ivy. We enjoy a plate of perfect Parma ham, or prosciutto, alongside melon and sparkling Malvasia wine the region is famous for. Both the pumpkin ravioli and chicory ravioli dishes were so good we ordered them both nights we dined there.

Market day is Wednesday until 2 p.m. It is set up in the courtyard of the Palazzo della Pilotta. Vendors from Bologna sell leather goods and high-end designer shoes with the lamentable fate of having last year's heel. I ditched my worn sandals in the nearest garbage can and walked away with four new pairs and a marriage proposal -- not bad for 18 euros (\$18).

Parma has more perfume stores per capita than any town in Italy. After visiting at least five, I purchase a bottle of Violetta di Parma, a lavender perfume still manufactured to honor Marie-Louise. The duchess was so notoriously fond of Parma violets they became the symbol of her rule and she often signed official documents with the flower next to her name.

Another memento now widely available, even in the United States, is Acqua di Parma. The perfume with distinctive Parma yellow packaging was made famous by Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn, who were lifelong devotees of the unisex scent.

Violetta di Parma is manufactured in the building that houses the Borsari perfume museum, another good place to spend an afternoon. The museum boasts an impressive collection of the 1930s coin-operated perfume vending machines that were located in cinemas during the Mussolini era.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: The easiest way to reach the city is to fly to Milan and take one of the frequent trains on the Milan-Bologna line to Parma. For hotel and transportation information, visit www.parmaitaly.it.

National Gallery: Piazza della Pilotta 5; telephone 0521-233309. Hours: 9 a.m.-1:45 p.m. Museum shop is open until 2 p.m.

Trattoria Corrieri: Via Conservatorio 1; telephone 0521 234426. Opens at 7 p.m., usually with a group of jovial locals lined up on the sidewalk to get a patio seat. Closed Sunday.

La Greppia: Via Garibaldi 39; telephone 0521 233686, fax 0521 221315. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

La Collezione Borsari 1870: Via Trento 30/A, telephone 0521 771011. Call for hours.

General information on Italian tourism, www.enit.it.