MY ADVENTURES ACROSS THE W
The life and Rants of an Honest Tr

[EUROPE] [ITALY]

WHY I LOVED BERGAMO – AND ANYBODY WOULD

18 February 2016

San Pellegrino, famous for its water and its Thermal Baths

“You should visit Bergamo sometimes, you'd love it here,” Omar, a guy a befriended during my first trip to Argentina and who lives there, had been insisting for the last 4 years.

“I guess I should,” I replied, only half convinced.

Read more about Argentina on my post “Great things to do in Argentina.”

I had heard that Bergamo, a small city in the north of Italy, was pretty. My parents have been there years ago, and told me they enjoyed it. I did want to go, but one thing or another always kept me from actually doing it. There are more popular destinations, more exotic places, and... well, I just didn't know much about the area and hardly made any effort to look for more information.

Then, I decided it was time to be more resolute.

"I can't possibly be traveling all over the world and miss out on what there is too see right in my backyard," I told myself. 2016 will have to be the year of Europe.

So I wrote a post about my travel resolutions for this year, stating that Bergamo was among the places I'd visit and thinking that if I said out loud, if I put it out there for the world to see, I would have to stick to my words and *just go* or lose my credibility altogether.

Read more about my 2016 travel plans on my post "Ten places I would like to visit in 2016."

I always keep my promises. Thus, last week I got a ticket, packed a small bag and I finally made it to Bergamo, much to Omar's disbelief. "Are you seriously here?!" he kept saying, when we finally met again. I must have looked like a mirage.

I was seriously there. And I was seriously falling in love with Bergamo. "Why have I been waiting for so long to visit?" I asked myself when I got the first glimpse of Bergamo Alta, the Old Town. I ended up spending 3 full days in the area – each of them packed with activities – and I truly enjoyed it.

After going, I can confirm that Bergamo is great for a short break and even for a longer vacation. It is a fantastic alternative to more famous destinations in the region, like Milan, Lake Como and Lake Garda, and has retained all of its original charme. The range and quality of attractions in the area is so good that it is impossible not to fall in love with it.

When, upon coming back, my sister (who also is an avid traveler) asked me: "Is visiting Bergamo actually worth it?" I enthusiastically said: "Yes, make sure you visit!" In fact, I may well go there with her, in order explore the area even more in depth.

What is it about Bergamo that made me like it so much? I could just say "everything," but that would be too reductive and would not do it justice. So, here's a few things about Bergamo that will make any traveler want to visit.

Why I loved Bergamo, and anybody would

It is architecturally splendid

Bergamo has a very interesting history, which is reflected in its architecture. Much of its architectural splendor and artistic inspiration are due to the influence of Venice, which ruled it between the 15th and the late 18th century. Bergamo provided as a defense point for Venice, hence the walls that are built around it and which are under examination by UNESCO to be included in its World Heritage Sites. The town is divided in two distinct parts: **Bergamo Alta**, on

the hill, is the cluster of gorgeous medieval and renaissance buildings; and **Bergamo Bassa** below.

Isn't Bergamo darling? How had I missed that?

The unmissable jewel of Bergamo Alta is **Piazza Vecchia**, where the 12th century **Torre del Comune** is located. Even nowadays, every night at 10 pm its bell rings 100 times to announce the curfew and the closing of the city gates. Also located on Piazza Vecchia is the 16th century **Biblioteca Civica** and the 12th century Palazzo della Regione. The archway of the Palazzo della Regione leads to the gorgeous **Piazza Duomo,** with its neo-classical Duomo and the beautifully decorated **Cappella Colleoni**, a real renaissance masterpiece built in 1487 to house the tomb of political leader Bartolomeo Colleoni.

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The gorgeous Cappella Colleoni

Tip: the **Bergamo Card** gives 48 hours access to public transportation and museums, as well as discounts on shopping. It can be bought online for just € 15,00.

It's on the hills, and the views are amazing

One of the things I enjoy the most when I visit a new place is walking around, almost aimlessly, taking in the atmosphere and the views. I find there is something special about cities on the hills and Bergamo is one of them. The view of Bergamo Bassa from Bergamo Alta is gorgeous, even more so the view from the Campanone tower and from the **Torrione della Rocca**.

The gorgeous Bergamo Alta

The funicular that goes from Bergamo Bassa to Bergamo Alta is also a good way to take in the views of the city.

Bergamo Alta at night is beautiful – the tiny alleys perfect for a stroll, as they are closed to traffic. I particularly liked walking from Bergamo Alta to Bergamo Bassa along the walls, crossing small streets, going through the city gates. Come to think of it, it can be quite romantic!

The surroundings are fantastic

Bergamo surroundings are very interesting. Picturesque villages, medieval castles, countryside, lakes and mountains – there literally is something for anybody.

One of the places I truly appreciated visiting is **Crespi d'Adda**, a tiny village in the municipality of Capriate San Gervasio that now counts no more than 600 inhabitants. At about 20 minutes drive from Bergamo, Crespi d'Adda is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a great example of the 19th and 20th century "company towns" which were built in Europe and North America by industrialists in order to meet the workers' needs. The entire village is built around a cotton mill (the factory stopped working in 2004). There was a school, a theatre, a church, a cemetery and a wash-house and houses were built following the model of English architecture. It is a great place to visit, especially for those who enjoy getting off the beaten path.

A fantastic sunset on Crespi d'Adda

Perhaps my favorite place around Bergamo is the **Castello di Malpaga**. I love history, but the way the visit of Castello di Malpaga is conducted is such that I would gladly recommend it to families with children too. Malpaga is a 15th century castle which used to have defensive functions. It was built under orders of Bartolomeo Colleoni, who ruled the area and lived there with his wife and a number of daughters. The rooms are painted by Il Romanino – the most precious frescoes are in what used to be Colleoni's bedroom.

Walking inside Castello di Malpaga

Aside from the gorgeous setting, what makes the visit of Castello di Malpaga particularly interesting and fun is that upon arriving visitors are invited to change into 15th centuries attires and then roam the castle wearing those dresses. There is a good selection of dresses. They are all made according to the style that was in fashion in the 15th century and thus all very heavy to walk around in. I certainly didn't want to miss on that. I think we all looked

Time to act like a princess!

splendid in them. The most hilarious moment was a stolen picture of us, all wearing the dresses and all staring at our smart phones. Call it back to the future!

Should I declare war on Milan?

Read more about my experience at Castello di Malpaga on my post "A day like a princess."

I appreciate wine (I have traveled all the way to Mendoza, in Argentina, just for that!) so I was very happy to visit Scanzo, whose moscato wine has been included in a list of selected Italian DOCG wines (strictly protected). **Moscato di Scanzo** is typically a meditation wine, very thick, rich and fruity in flavour and thus it is not meant to accompany food. I have had the pleasure to tour one of the vineyards (Azienda Agricola Biava) where it is produced – only the best grapes are picked and the production process lasts a minimum of two years. And at the end of the tour, I could try the wine enjoying an incredible view. Anybody who enjoys wine and nature should visit!

Moscato di Scanzo and a great view – perfect way to end a day of exploration

Read more about my love for wine on my post "Why I am going back to Mendoza in 2016."

Bergamo surroundings are perfect for nature lovers. The city has easy access to mountains and great skiing and hiking trails. I had no time to go for a hike (plus it was really cold when I visited) but I managed to squeeze in a visit to **Lago di Endine**. Set between tall peaks, the lake is now a protected area due to its remarkable environmental interest. It is a perfect place for water sports such as kayaking, as well as sailing, windsurfing and canoeing. The east bank of the lake is lined with a few charming villages.

A cold day on the beautiful Lago di Endine

It is a great place to relax

San Pellegrino, in the Val Brembana and close to Bergamo, is where the famous San Pellegrino water comes from. A fabulous example of an art nouveau town, its most iconic buildings are the Grand Hotel, the Casino and its Thermal Baths. These are a fantastic place to relax and get pampered.

Time to get pampered at Terme di San Pellegrino

Sitting in one of the outdoor pools when it is cold and gloomy outside is truly atmospheric. The spa has an incredible amount of rooms and activities, including a music and color pool (where it is possible to listen to music under water); various kinds of saunas; aromatherapy rooms. Guests can also enjoy an aperitivo dinner – a buffet of Italian appetizers and prosecco wine. It is quite amusing to sit in such an elegant environment, sip some great wine and eat delicious food, when everybody is wearing a white bathrobe!

The food is delicious

Food in Italy is very regional, so I wasn't sure what to expect in Bergamo. All I knew about Bergamo before going is that it is where 9 very well known Italian cheeses – such as taleggio and stracchino, which I love – are produced. I was honestly impressed with the food in Bergamo – and coming from a really picky eater that is hardly a foodie, this should not go unnoticed. Everything I had was mouthwatering, to say the least.

Everything I tried was made with only fresh, local ingredients. One of my favorite dishes has been ***casoncelli,*** a ravioli kind of pasta which is filled with (among other ingredients) salami and pork meat and served with a sauce made of butter and bacon. Not exactly light, but oh so tasty and definitely worth a run to burn the calories afterwards. I also loved the various kinds of ***polenta***, cornmeal cooked till firm and served with a variety other ingredients, such as mushrooms.

Can you believe I actually prepared this?

One way regional food in Bergamo can be better appreciated is by taking part in a cooking class and actually preparing the meal. Together with 3 other persons, I enrolled in a cooking course with Food Lab 3.0 and in 3 hours we prepared a fabulous 3 courses meal which consisted of a steak tartare appetizer, a main course of pumpkin ravioli (seriously the best ravioli I have ever had) and a lovely tiramisù dessert. We got to eat our food in a gorgeous setting, accompanied with great wine too.

Carlo, our teacher, showed us how to prepare fresh egg pasta; he unveiled the secrets to a good tiramisù cream and how to chop the meat that goes into the steak tartare, as well as how to decorate a dish. We also discussed the importance of using local, good quality and organic ingredients.

Bergamo is also packed with lovely restaurants. *Giopi e Margi* offers fantastic local traditional (and revisited) cuisine in a cozy setting and with a great selection of wines.

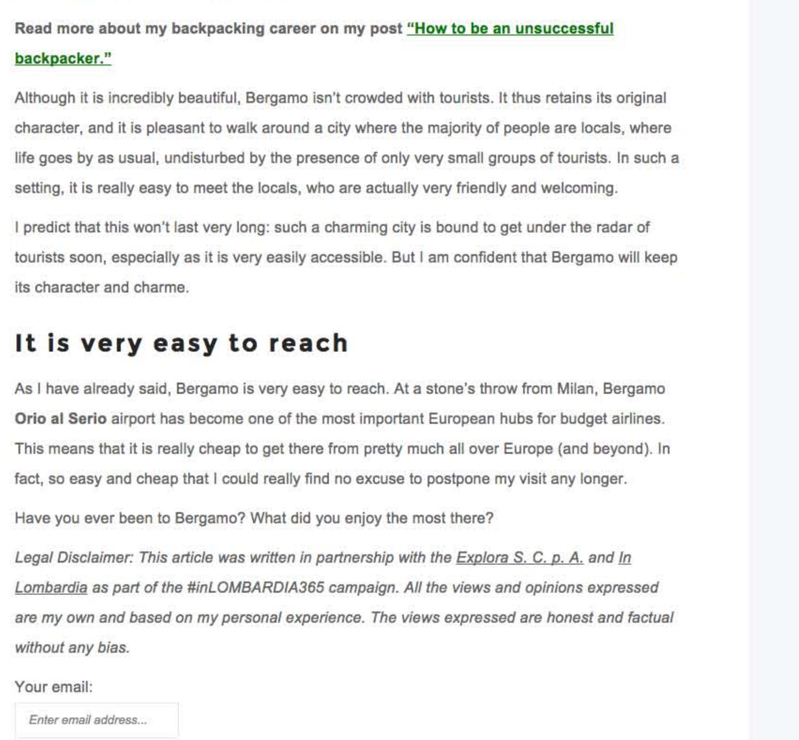
Caffé della Funicolare, in the Old Town of Bergamo Alta, has great daily dishes (such as casoncelli or involtini, a meat roll served with cabbage) and a fantastic view over the New Town.

Cantiere Cucina is a tiny family style restaurant in Borgo Santa Caterina, in the New Town, and offers some of the staples of local cuisine as well as other dishes, in a very relaxed atmosphere.

Ristorante da Mimmo, in Bergamo Alta, takes pizza to a whole new level: the quality of ingredients used for the toppings, the perfectly raised pizza dough, the choice of artesanal beers, the incredible desserts, the nice setting, the elegant yet relaxed environment and the great service make it a great place to have dinner.

It is still quite undiscovered

I don't mind touristy places. In fact, I usually get carried away by the beauty of a place to the point that I don't even notice the presence of other people around me – much to the amusement of "real" backpackers who make it a point to get off the beaten path. Having said so, I do enjoy places that are outside of the typical tourist routes.



Read more about my backpacking career on my post "How to be an unsuccessful backpacker."

Although it is incredibly beautiful, Bergamo isn't crowded with tourists. It thus retains its original character, and it is pleasant to walk around a city where the majority of people are locals, where life goes by as usual, undisturbed by the presence of only very small groups of tourists. In such a setting, it is really easy to meet the locals, who are actually very friendly and welcoming.

I predict that this won't last very long: such a charming city is bound to get under the radar of tourists soon, especially as it is very easily accessible. But I am confident that Bergamo will keep its character and charme.

It is very easy to reach

As I have already said, Bergamo is very easy to reach. At a stone's throw from Milan, Bergamo **Orio al Serio** airport has become one of the most important European hubs for budget airlines. This means that it is really cheap to get there from pretty much all over Europe (and beyond). In fact, so easy and cheap that I could really find no excuse to postpone my visit any longer.

Have you ever been to Bergamo? What did you enjoy the most there?

Legal Disclaimer: This article was written in partnership with the Explora S. C. p. A. and In Lombardia as part of the #inLOMBARDIA365 campaign. All the views and opinions expressed are my own and based on my personal experience. The views expressed are honest and factual without any bias.

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