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From Times Online April 13, 2010

Brescia: not for Napoleon

There's plenty to make this small northern Italian city worth a visit, from Roman remains to the theatre that Napoleon was supposed to open

Lucy Daltroff

2 COMMENTS

Napoleon didn't turn up to the grand opening of the Theatre in Brescia, originally to be named in his honour, so its title was changed to the Teatro Grande. It's superb, inspired by La Scala, Milan and has five tier boxes, gilt, and elegant frescoes on the ceiling and walls.

Not turning up in Brescia seems to be quite a trend, for this lovely little city seems, inexplicably, to be off the tourist map. I can only put it down to being in the shadow of its more famous neighbours - The Italian Lakes and Milan.

It makes a good weekend break destination and is easily accessible, with its own small airport served by budget airlines and a bus that goes to the centre of the town. Brescia is also on a wine route; is full of culture, with a castle, beautiful churches, museums, three splendid piazzas, great restaurants, good shops and at the same time is a bubbly and sophisticated modern university city.

The city's favourable position at the foot of the Pre Alps and bordering on the Po plain has made it a popular area for settlement. The first to come were the Ligurians during the Bronze Age. Slightly more recently, the Iron from the surrounding valleys has brought prosperity to the region as a centre for gun making; Beretta has been based here since 1526 and other firearms firms are also to be found.

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My own first taste of the place was from my hotel bedroom window which overlooked the Piazza della Loggia, the Renaissance heart of the town. I was at eye level with the Torre dell'Orologio (Clock Tower), an astronomical 24-hour clock built in 1546, that not only tells the time but also shows the moon phases and zodiac signs. The hours are marked by the movement of two bronze statues, popularly known as the i macc de le ure, the clock loonies, and the whole thing is very similar to the famous timepiece overlooking St Mark's Square in Venice.

The square is a good first stop, as it is the location of the town's main tourist information office. Here can also be found the Palazzo della Loggia, a Renaissance town hall, which was finished in the late sixteenth century. Through the archway I was able to catch the last half-hour of the busy weekly market.

Chronologically the della Loggia comes last, out of the famous three squares which also includes the Roman (Piazzo del Foro) and the Medieval (The Piazzo Paolo V1). I was soon able to see that walking right through the distinct markings of the town's history is really easy, as all of old Brescia - or Brixia - as it was originally called, is entirely pedestrianised.

Somebody had neatly painted "Have A Nice Day" on the wall opposite the Roman remains, which seemed to show a little bit of stagnation in the progress of civilisation. The ruins are of a totally unspoilt temple built by the Emperor Vespasian over the earlier Republican-era buildings, discovered here in 1830, and partially reconstructed. Just a little further up the road is a Roman Theatre, which in its day held more than 15,000 spectators.

The objects on display in the Museo di Santa Giulia have a close association with the building it is housed in; an 8th Century Monastery, originally built for the unmarried daughters of wealthy families, who were coerced into becoming nuns.

Today it contains archaeological finds and collections from all periods of Brescia's rich past. These include an extraordinary

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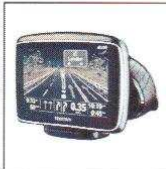
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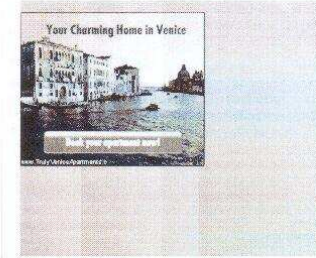
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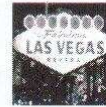
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eighteenth century. Yet, even more sensational, is the neighbouring church of Santa Maria in Solaris, with its vaulted ceiling painted with stars, and, standing just underneath, the great wooden, ninth-century cross of King Desiderius, which is studded on both sides with more than two hundred precious stones.

As a refreshing break from the culture, Brescia is just 20 km from the Franciacorta gastronomy and wine route. I visited the vineyard of Tenuta degli Angeli owned by the Testa family who not only make the different wines of the region but also cheeses, virgin olive oil and their very own vintage balsamic vinegar. I tasted one straight from the barrel that was 30 years old and the honeyed, sweet flavour is unique, delicious and, I was told, really healthy too.

The whole region also abounds with little churches full of beautiful frescoes and other historical sites, so it was not long before I understood why the Italians often sum up Brescia simply as "all of Italy in one city".

Need to know

Grande Theatre
Via Paganora, 19/A 25121, Brescia
Tel: 39 030 297 9311

Hotel Orologio
Via C. Beccaria 17 25121, Brescia
Tel: 39 030 375 5411

Santa Giulia Museum
Via Musei, 81b 25121, Brescia
Tel: 39 030 2977800

Tenuta degli Angeli (wine cellar)
Via P. Fontana Roux, 5
24060 Fraz. S. Stefano, Bergamo
Tel: 39 035 951 489

More information

Lombardy tourism

Brescia tourism, Piazza del Vescovato, 3 Brescia (tel: 39 030 2400835)

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