

# As fabulous as Florence - and not a coach party in sight

Author **Sarah Dunant** set her latest novel in Ferrara, a town that captivated her with its rich history - especially that of its grand medieval convents

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San Giorgio cathedral in Ferrara, Italy. Photograph: Massimo Pizzotti/Getty Images

The first problem I had when I started writing a novel set in a 16th-century convent in Ferrara was that my spellchecker kept trying to turn the city into a car. It was one of many realisations that this history-rich place on the banks of the River Po is one of Italy's hidden treasures.

## **Sacred Hearts**

by Sarah Dunant

Virago,

£14.99

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We'll get inside the convent later - first, Ferrara itself. I arrived there early one summer morning on a train from Florence. My walk to Florence station had been an obstacle course of cars and crocodile files of sweating tourists so busy adjusting

well-nigh perfectly preserved medieval and Renaissance city, with barely a car or a tourist to be seen and with a prevailing soundtrack of bells - the bass ones coming from the churches and the upper register from the hundreds of bicycles that are the lifeline of transport for the modern Ferrarese.

For those with the time and energy to travel outside the accepted tourist trail of Florence, Venice and Rome, north-east Italy is a goldmine. Padua, Verona and Mantua are each treasures in their way, but for my money Ferrara is the best of them all. An energetic, aggressive city state until the Papal States gobbled it up in 1597, it was run for centuries by the d'Este clan, who started out as barely concealed thugs but morphed into sophisticated Renaissance patrons, with an eye for town planning and an ear for fabulous music. The buildings you can still see; the music takes a bit more imagining.

A great boulevard divides the medieval quarter from the Renaissance side, conceived and built in the early 16th century by Duke Ercole d'Este. In the Renaissance city all is space and dignity: parks, palazzi and grand houses. In the medieval quarter the humble Ferrarese brick (one of the many wonders of this city is that much of it is built from warm brick rather than the colder glory of marble or stone) lights up a criss-cross of tiny jumbled roads, packed with churches, cloisters, old palaces and ordinary houses. The variety and ingenuity of their arches, windows and grilles are worth a small slideshow of photos in their own right.

In the middle of the divide stands the outrageous d'Este castle: half palace, half fortress, even down to its surrounding moat. Inside, under baroque sweetness lies a history of naked power. It was here, in 1425, in the marital bedchamber and the dungeons, that Niccolò d'Este had his second wife and her lover - his own son, Ugo - murdered for an alleged affair. This venting of medieval righteous anger is perhaps understandable until you learn that he himself boasted of sleeping with 800 women and that the chroniclers of the time talked of how, "left and right of the river Po, everywhere there are children by Niccolò".

Luckily, visitors to Ferrara can now find safer places to rest their heads. Writers, of course, travel on pathetic budgets, but one can still nose out a little style. Suite Duomo on Corso Porta Reno is slap-bang in the middle of town: if you ask nicely they will give you a room with a view of the cathedral facade and you can breakfast on a terrace that overlooks the grand piazza in front. On my second day I woke to find the market in full swing, as it would have been for centuries. Amazingly, the grand cathedral had shops built into its side, and while the majority of the cheap clothes on sale now may come from China, the vegetables, meats and cheeses still roll in from the surrounding countryside.

How you spend the rest of your days (and I would recommend at least a long weekend) will depend on whether your taste leans towards ostentatious art or

more humble secret architecture. By my third visit, the writer in me was already in a convent in my head, so I no longer had any time for the splendid decadence of the Palazzo Schifanoia - its name roughly translates as "avoiding boredom" - with its salon of frescoes by 15th-century Ferrarese masters depicting peasants and gods at work and at play (I leave you to guess which are doing what).

Instead, I was sticking my nose inside churches and cloisters. Casa Romeo is a beautifully restored 14th-century merchant's house that once abutted an old convent, its central courtyard silent and serene. An equally perfect and even sweeter example of medieval cloister architecture is to be found at the entrance to the cathedral museum, right in the middle of the city's most thriving modern thoroughfare. Opposite is a popular local wine bar where the quality of the wine is as high as the prices are low. Somewhere off that same street I found a great secondhand clothes shop (had I had one or two fewer glasses of wine I might have remembered the exact address, but at least it gives the visitor something to aim for), where I bought a leather jacket so fine I am considering being buried in it.

Which brings me to the churches. And the convents. Five hundred years ago, Ferrara, like all other Italian cities, was so nervous about female sexuality that as soon as respectable women reached the age of menstruation they were either married off or - more likely, given how expensive dowries were by this time - incarcerated in convents. "Christ is the only son-in-law who doesn't cause me any trouble," wrote the great Ferrarese Renaissance patron Isabella d'Este, after walling up two of her own daughters for safety.

But while no one can deny the appalling unfairness of the practice, it was not all terrible. Sisters, nieces, aunts and cousins within a family would all have been nuns - and, bearing in mind the forced marriages, abusive husbands, lack of birth control and death toll from childbirth outside the walls, convents could be sanctuaries as well as prisons. Those nuns with fine voices could use them daily (convent choirs were a source of great glory to a city like Ferrara); others played instruments and even in some cases composed music or wrote plays. The more you dig, the more a portrait emerges of small republics of women with their own dramatic ebb and flow of power.

Most Italian convents were disbanded after Napoleon invaded but among the glories of Ferrara two working ones still exist, both of them rich in history. Corpus Domini is famous both for its visionary 15th-century nun and for the tomb of the infamous Lucrezia Borgia, who married into the Ferrarese royal family in 1502 and produced a crop of heirs.

The other, Sant'Antonio in Polesine, on which I based my novel *Sacred Hearts*, is even more special. Originally a thriving Benedictine convent for noblewomen, it now sits serene and secluded at the edge of the city wall, home to just 17 elderly

nuns.

Like the nuns of Corpus Domini they are enclosed, but if you visit between certain hours and ring the bell, a sister will talk to you through the grille, then crack open the door and guide you to the inner chapel, the walls of which are filled with wonderful, delicate frescoes from the time of Giotto.

Later you can sit in the outer church and listen while those 17 nuns sing public vespers on the other side of the altar grille. Their ageing voices are cracked and desperately sad compared with the great choir that would have enthralled the city's dignitaries 500 years ago, but like so much in Ferrara, the experience is a reminder of the unexpected delights that this jewel of a city has to offer the more intrepid tourist.

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## Essentials

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Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) flies from Edinburgh, Birmingham and Stansted to Bologna, 35 miles from Ferrara. Suite Duomo (00 39 0532 793888; [suiteduomo.it](http://suiteduomo.it)) has doubles from €80. The Monastero di San Antonio in Polesine ([leabbazie.it/emilia\\_romagna/ferrara](http://leabbazie.it/emilia_romagna/ferrara)) is open from 3.15pm-5pm on weekdays. The Monastero di Corpus Domini is currently closed for restoration but check the website above for opening hours. Further tourist information from [ferraraterraeacqua.it](http://ferraraterraeacqua.it).

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