

**Captain Doug Beattie:** Those who have never been in Helmand give their view, but the soldiers are silent

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# Emilia-Romagna: Great food, stunning architecture – and some seriously flash cars

By Mary Novakovich

Saturday, 19 September 2009

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*Seeing red: a view from Bologna's 12th-century Torri degli Asinelli*

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## **Where is it?**

Emilia-Romagna is the broad region that borders Liguria, Lombardy and Tuscany in the north-west of Italy and cuts over to the Adriatic coast between the Veneto and Le Marche. This agricultural heartland marks Italy's transition from the chilly Alps of the north to the warmth of the Mediterranean south, and you can see this in the rich and varied cuisine and landscapes. The fertile plains of the river Po – known as the Pianura Padana – make up the northern half of the region, while the forest-covered Apennine mountains cover most of the south. Emilia-Romagna is one of Italy's most prosperous areas and home to some of the country's most appealing cities, including Bologna, Parma, Modena and Ferrara. Even Italians from other regions admit that Emilia-Romagna has the best food, especially its ham and cheese – more lyrically known as prosciutto di Parma and parmigiano reggiano.

## **Where do I start?**

Follow the Via Emilia – originally built by the Romans in 187 BC, which runs diagonally right across the region. These days this long, straight highway has been supplemented by the A1 and A14 motorways.

At the westernmost end is Piacenza, originally a Roman camp built on the banks of the Po with a pleasant medieval and Renaissance centre. Stray south of the Via Emilia to take in the thermal springs at Salsomaggiore Terme, and then carry on to elegant and affluent Parma. They take food seriously here, which is not surprising as it's the home of prosciutto di Parma and parmigiano reggiano. Parma also holds some historical treasures such as the Lombard-Romanesque Duomo on Piazza Duomo, which includes the Battistero, an octagonal 12th-century baptistry. The ruling Farnese family of the 16th century left its mark too, notably in the imposing Palazzo della Pilotta, which includes the Teatro Farnese, a wooden copy of Palladio's theatre in Vicenza.

A stroll through the streets to the main Piazza Garibaldi reveals pleasing architecture in the distinctive colour known as Parma yellow. Join the evening passeggiata along Via Cavour or have an aperitif at one of the trendy bars along Via Farini. Every October, the opera-loving city holds a month-long Verdi festival (00 39 0521 039393; [teatroregionparma.org/verdifest](http://teatroregionparma.org/verdifest)) devoted to the composer, who was born in the province. The rococo Teatro Regio, which looks like a smaller version of Milan's La Scala, becomes the focal point of the city.

Parma's Hotel Stendhal (00 39 0521 208057; [hotelstendhal.it](http://hotelstendhal.it)) is in an enviable position right near the Palazzo della Pilotta and has doubles from €119 per night including breakfast. Ristorante Cocchi (Via Gramsci 16A, [hoteldaniel.biz](http://hoteldaniel.biz)) is worth the 15-minute walk from Parma's centre. Try the selection of tortelli

with pumpkin or porcini followed by breast of veal with polenta.

About 45 minutes east along the Via Emilia is Modena, home of fat tenors and fast cars. The birthplace of Luciano Pavarotti and Enzo Ferrari feels rather like a more intimate version of Parma – which is strange, considering their populations are roughly the same size. Like Parma, Modena has a medieval and Renaissance centre, with most of its residents trundling along the cobblestone streets on battered old bicycles. The Unesco-listed Duomo is one of Italy's finest Romanesque cathedrals, and the agreeable atmosphere of the city invites gentle meandering along its porticoed 16th-century streets.

The covered market near Piazza Grande is particularly impressive. Here you can pick up a bottle of the authentic aceto balsamico – the balsamic vinegar that is aged for 12 years and bears no resemblance to the cheap versions sold in supermarkets.

### **More city life?**

The regional capital, Bologna, is one of Italy's most handsome cities, yet is often overlooked by the hordes of tourists rushing between Venice and Florence. This doesn't worry the Bolognese, though – indeed, it makes life more pleasant under the city's 40km of porticos that snake their way through most of the old town, making it the longest arcade in the world.

Europe's oldest university is here too, giving it a vibrancy suited to a city nicknamed La Dotta ("the learned one"). It's also known as the Red City (thanks to the colour of its architecture and political leanings) as well as La Grassa (the fat one), referring to its citizens' love of fine food. Its historic centre is easy to explore on foot, and there's almost an embarrassment of medieval and Renaissance architecture to admire including the city's two leaning towers: the 12th-century Torri degli Asinelli e Garisenda.

Bologna's Grand Hotel Baglioni (00 39 051 225445; [baglionihotels.com](http://baglionihotels.com)) is an elegant 18th-century palazzo in the city centre that, along with lavish baroque interiors and comfortable rooms, contains ruins of a Roman road beside the breakfast room. Doubles from around €250 including breakfast.

### **Where next?**

Head north off the Via Emilia and stop in Ferrara, one of Italy's finest walled cities. Here the powerful Este family presided in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, attracting the likes of Petrarch and Titian to its court at the moated Castello Estense (open 9.30am-5.30pm daily; basic admission of €7 rises to €11 if you want to see the special exhibitions; 00 39 0532 299233; [castelloestense.it](http://castelloestense.it)).

The family's many grand palaces are now joined by the more democratic vision of piazze filled with bicycles: Ferrara has one of the highest bike populations in Europe. But you can see enough on foot, including the Romanesque cathedral with its pink marble façade and the unexpected sight of a row of medieval arcaded shops along its side. Ferrara's former Jewish quarter is especially atmospheric, particularly along the Via della Volte, a series of vaulted alleyways.

Dolcemela in the old centre of Ferrara (00 39 0532 769624; [dolcemela.it](http://dolcemela.it)) is a cosy, family-run B&B in a converted 15th-century house with some stylish and thoughtful touches; room and breakfast cost €100.

### **Art for art's sake?**

The Via Emilia carries on to Ravenna, a pretty provincial place that happens to have some of the world's finest mosaics thanks to a previous incarnation as the capital of the Western Roman Empire and later a major city in the Byzantine era. The sixth-century Basilica di San Vitale holds the most impressive collection, followed closely by the sixth-century Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo. They currently open 9.30am-5.30pm daily (10am-5pm between November and February; 9am-7pm in the summer). A combined ticket of €8.50 gives admission to San Vitale, Sant'Apollinaire Nuovo, the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia and Battistero Neoniano; 00 39 0544 541688; [ravennamosaici.it](http://ravennamosaici.it)). But you don't have to be an aficionado to

appreciate the overall beauty of the town which, like most of Emilia-Romagna's cities, is closed to traffic in the centre and is dominated by beaten-up old bicycles. How very civilised. Have a coffee in the medieval Piazza del Popolo before heading around the corner to Dante's tomb which is on permanent display.

Ravenna's M Club (00 39 0544 37538; [m-club.it](http://m-club.it)) is, despite the name, a cool and comfortable hotel just inside the pedestrianised city centre. Doubles from €70 including breakfast. Ravenna has some excellent restaurants, including the Albergo Cappello (Via IV Novembre 41) in the ninth-century hotel of the same name.

### **Back to the land?**

Like its neighbour Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna has embraced the concept of agriturismo, or farm hotels, which specialise in serving home-grown and homemade food in pleasingly rustic surroundings. One of the most innovative is the Antica Corte Pallavicina (00 39 0524 936539; [acpallavicina.com](http://acpallavicina.com)) near the river Po at Polesine Parmense north of Parma. Chef/owner Massimo Spigaroli has turned this 14th-century castello into a sumptuous yet intimate hotel surrounded by an enormous kitchen garden and fields of grazing livestock. Massimo is also one of the region's producers of culatello, an especially flavoursome ham that is cured in only eight villages in the Pianura Padana. Its taste impressed Prince Charles so much that he now has a cut of it hanging in the cellar for the requisite three years. B&B from €140 per night.

To escape the plains for the greenery of the mountains, head about 35km south of Bologna to La Fenice (00 39 051 919272; [lafeniceagritur.it](http://lafeniceagritur.it)), run by genial brothers Remo and Paolo Giarandoni. This 16th-century collection of farmhouses has been in the family for five generations, and it is a supremely relaxing and friendly place to unwind. Have a swim or hire horses from the nearby riding centre before getting stuck into huge dinners created from the farm's own pigs and produce, as well as some of the best handmade pasta in the region. You can see why locals take every seat in the restaurant on Saturday evenings and Sunday lunchtimes. Double rooms including breakfast from €80.

### **What will I eat and drink?**

Many pasta dishes we take for granted were invented in Emilia-Romagna. Lasagne, for example, comes from Bologna, as do tortellini (meat-filled parcels meant to imitate Venus's navel) and tortelloni (filled with anything from ricotta and spinach to pumpkin). But mention "spag V C bol" to a Bolognese and watch the ensuing look of pain. The classic ragù meat sauce goes with tagliatelle, thank you very much, and not spaghetti. Bologna has hundreds of restaurants, but for a truly authentic Bolognese experience, visit the Biagi della Lanterna (Via Savenella 9A) for some of the best tagliatelle al ragù in the city.

Cold meats are an integral part of the local cuisine too, especially Parma ham and mortadella from Bologna, the pork sausage that somehow mutated into what Americans call baloney. Head to the coast for great seafood and to Romagna around Ravenna and Rimini for piadina, an unleavened bread used for sandwiches.

If you're a fan of Parmesan cheese, you can arrange a visit to a local dairy through the consortium of producers (00 39 0522 307741; [parmigiano-reggiano.it](http://parmigiano-reggiano.it)).

As for the local wines, try not to snigger when you see Lambrusco on the menu. It bears no resemblance to the sickly stuff sold in Britain. It's red, a bit fizzy and cuts through the rich food admirably. Malvasia is a moreish white sparkling wine that works even for hardened red-wine drinkers who can't always get their hands on the full-bodied sangiovese red wines of Romagna.

### **What about the coast?**

Emilia-Romagna's 110km share of the Adriatic coast throws up quite a few surprises. At the top is the sprawling Po delta national park with marshes, dunes, lagoons and nature reserves stretching for 600 sq km towards Venice. Birdwatchers gather to spot the thousands of migrating and breeding birds in the wetlands, including coots, terns and white egrets (00 39 0533 314003; [parcodeltapo.it](http://parcodeltapo.it)).

History lovers will wind along the canal banks to the Abbazia di Pomposa, about 10km inland from the coast, to explore the sixth-century Romanesque Benedictine abbey (00 39 0533 719152; pomposa.info), one of Italy's oldest monastic foundations. It opens 8.30am-7pm daily, admission €5 (€3 on Sundays and religious holidays). The rest of the population (armed with mosquito repellent) decamp en masse every summer to Lido di Volano, Lido di Pomposa and the other old-fashioned family beach resorts set among the pine groves of the delta.

About 5km inland is Comacchio, a delightful fishing village intersected by a series of canals and featuring a 17th-century triple humpbacked bridge, the Trepponti. Its annual Festival of the Eels held every October (00 39 0533 310161; comacchio.it) gives a hint as to how the village earns its livelihood and features prominently on the local restaurant menus. It's probably the most touristy part of this stretch of coast – there are even plastic ducks floating in the canals – but it's worth stopping for a stroll and lunch beside the water's edge.

For a more glamorous seaside experience, head south to Rimini, one of the party capitals of Italy's coast. The long sandy beach is lined with many of the city's 1,300 hotels, each filling its patch of sand with rows of colourful (and usually expensive) sun loungers and umbrellas. It's easy to feel part of a Fellini film, especially as the film director was from Rimini and even lived for a while in the majestic Grand Hotel on the seafront (00 39 0541 56000; grandhotelrimini.com) with its huge marble terrace and extensive beach facilities. Doubles start at €155 including breakfast. One of the most popular new restaurants in Rimini is Molo 22 (Via Ortigara 78; molo22.it), which serves delicious local seafood from its elegant perch over the water.

What you may not expect from this Adriatic resort, however, is the very charming old town filled with spacious squares and segments of preserved Roman roads. When the beach gets too crowded, have a drink in one of the tiny bars that crowd into the Pescheria Vecchia, the 17th-century arcaded old fish market.

### **Motor Valley: Home of speed**

Ferrari, Maserati, Ducati, Lamborghini – some of the most prestigious (and expensive) names in the motoring industry are clustered around Modena and Bologna.

The highlight of the so-called Motor Valley is the Galleria Ferrari (00 39 0536 943204; galleria.ferrari.com) at Maranello near Modena. Petrolheads from all over the world come here to admire the bright red Formula One racing cars on display in the mock racing pit, or to pretend they are Michael Schumacher in the racing simulator. The 125-S Ferrari from 1947, the first car to bear Enzo Ferrari's name, is on show along with several dozen shiny examples of Ferrari road cars created over the decades. It was quite a feat to gather such a collection: Enzo Ferrari was not known for holding on to his cars for posterity, preferring to recycle various bits to go into the next vehicle. As a result, many of the cars on display have been donated by private owners. Open daily 9.30am-6pm (7pm May-September), admission €13.

### **Travel essentials: Emilia-Romagna**

#### **Getting there**

The main airline is Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) which flies to Bologna from Birmingham, Edinburgh and Stansted; three times a week from Stansted to Rimini; and twice a week from Stansted to Parma. British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies three times a day from Gatwick to Bologna. By rail, the main route is from London St Pancras via Paris and Milan.

#### **Getting around**

The Via Emilia makes driving through the region a straightforward business, and rental companies such as Avis (08445 810 147; avis.co.uk), or hire-car brokers will offer a small hatchback starting at about £150 per week.

Getting into city centres is another story. The first problem is that the centro storico, or historic core, of many cities is off-limits to vehicles, except those with a special exemption. If you break the rules, the authorities will hound you for the fine. And when driving into a city is allowed, finding a legal parking spot is difficult. That's where bicycles come in handy, and every city will have bike hire information at the tourist offices.

Trains are an excellent way to get around (00 39 06 6847 5475; [trenitalia.com](http://trenitalia.com)), as Bologna is part of the high-speed network that runs from Milan to Rome, and all the major cities have good links to each other and the rest of Italy.

### More information

Emilia-Romagna Tourism ([visitemiliaromagna.com](http://visitemiliaromagna.com)). Italian State Tourist Board (020-7408 1254; [italiantouristboard.co.uk](http://italiantouristboard.co.uk)).

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